



What to Say to a Laid-off Co-worker

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Businesses in America shed some 2.6 million jobs in 2008, so chances are good that you have recently had a close encounter with the painful process of downsizing. You may have lost your job. You may have kept your job while longtime co-workers (and friends) lost theirs. If you survived one round of layoffs, you may be wondering if you will survive the next.

For those who stay on when one or more co-workers have to leave, emotions can be complicated. They might feel relieved, guilty and anxious at the same time. They may also wonder what to say to a laid-off co-worker. What words—and actions—can really help?

Experts in workplace communication and psychology offer the following suggestions.

Listen first—with a sympathetic ear

You may have plenty of advice or encouragement to offer, but it's wise to wait a bit. "The appropriate first response is one of sympathy, a listening ear," says Kerry Patterson, a corporate trainer and co-author of *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*. "Encourage them to talk about their issues and concerns without cutting them off."

Rather than jumping in with quick answers or correcting false statements, Patterson advises active listening: "Paraphrase what they just said. Let them know that you're being careful to understand them and are aware of their specific concerns."

Offer specific help—and be ready to provide it

Saying, "Is there anything I can do?" is a start, but just a start. As communications consultant Jenny Schade, puts it, "If you're sincere about helping, then offering to help means more." And what you offer should be both relevant and deliverable.

Your co-worker will need help in landing a new job, and any useful contacts or knowledge of openings could be extremely valuable. If you have any, pass them along. You might also be able to help if you have worked on the hiring side of a business and can help polish a résumé or do some job-interview coaching. "When somebody's been laid off and they get help getting a new job, they never forget it," says Schade. But make sure you aren't overselling your abilities and raising false

hopes.

“Don’t offer empty promises just to make them feel better. Keep your integrity,” says Laurent Duperval, a Montreal-based communications trainer.

Be a realist but an optimist, too

“If people don’t know the future, why not try to think of it in a positive light?” asks Stuart Sidle, PhD, who directs the Industrial/Organizational Psychology Program at the University of New Haven. The case for optimism may not be obvious when one loses a job, but there’s nothing to be gained from assuming the worst possible outcomes. As Sidle notes, “Optimistic people have less stress.” They also are more inclined to action, since they believe that some good may come of it.

Patterson suggests one way to foster optimism without seeming to deny reality. When saying goodbye to a laid-off co-worker, he says, you might talk as if the absence will be temporary. Unless a return is completely out of the question and the company’s going to fold, that is. Economic slumps do come to an end, and job losses can turn out to be temporary. Patterson says he has consulted with firms where everyone came back after a layoff.

Stay in touch

Keeping social ties open after a layoff is important on both sides. “You want to stay in touch with colleagues who’ve departed because it’s the right thing to do,” says Schade, and because you may find yourself in the same situation some day.

Maintaining the work-based social network is good for the emotional health of those who’ve left, and it is a source of useful information for everyone involved. Laid-off workers might take some extra encouragement here. They and the co-workers “often feel embarrassed by their situation and end up walking away without any public recognition of their contributions of their departure,” says social psychologist Rachelle Canter. “Don’t let this happen to a trusted co-worker.”

Resource

Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High by Kerry Patterson. McGraw-Hill, 2002.

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