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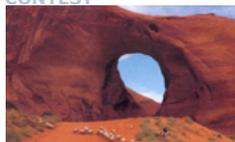
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Faith and you: Let laid-off colleagues know they're not forgotten

by Terry Pluto, Plain Dealer Columnist
Wednesday February 11, 2009, 11:28 AM

Ken called just as I was starting this column about what to say to a friend who has been laid off. He was returning my call from a few days earlier. I mentioned the story I was writing.

He laughed, because it beat crying over his own lost job.

He said he recently heard a sermon about Jonah being in the belly of the whale, feeling lost and forgotten by God, waiting for another chance. Ken mentioned that his church was starting a support group for those who have lost their jobs. He talked about the need to remind himself that his health was good, that he had a family who loved him.



TERRY PLUTO

But it still hurts deeply. He was good at his job. He was cut like so many others, just part of a heartless numbers game that seems to be terrorizing nearly every business.

Then Ken said, "Tell people to just keep calling. It means a lot to know that you're not forgotten."

So that's the message from someone on the front line: If you want to be a friend, call. Invite the person to lunch. Say you will be glad to be a reference, but don't overwhelm them with a million ideas about how to get a job. Resist the temptation to "fix" their situation.

"No matter what you say, it may sound stupid," said the Rev. Gary Chmura of Cleveland's Our Lady of Peace Catholic Church. "But say something anyway. Let the person know you care. Say you are sorry. Remember that losing a job can almost be as bad as a death in the family."

Ken agreed. He loved his job; the people there were like a second family. Now it's gone.

"In those situations, listen more than you talk," said the Rev. Keith Owen of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Lakewood. "You don't want to be trite, or sound like a silly cheerleader. But do be positive about the person."

As Ken talked, I asked God what I should say. I don't hear God's voice much, but clearly there was a whisper to tell Ken that he is a man of integrity. That he is a hard worker. That I appreciated working with him. That character does count for a lot, and that he has a lot of character.

It did sound sort of stupid coming from my lips, but Ken seemed to appreciate it.

"Don't just throw a Bible verse at someone who lost a job," said the Rev. Bob Combs of Norton's Grace Brethren Church. "I think we can tell them that they will grow from this, that the pain won't be wasted if we can stay open to God. But there is not a lot we can say."

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Some experts advise not to compare their situation to yours. But if you really did lose a job and found something that helped, you can share that.

Owen mentioned that at a point in his life, he took a morning paper route for the money and something to do. He was embarrassed to tell extended family about it, but he found some joy in having that job -- even if it wasn't anything close to what he was trained to do.

On a Public Relations Society of America blog, Jenny Schade of JRS Consulting wrote that it's OK to offer to help the laid-off person with his or her resume. You can mention connections you have that may help. But, she said, don't ask: "How many job interviews do you have lined up?" That question may just add to the stress.

Some other Web sites suggest giving people gift cards to Starbucks or their favorite restaurant so they can go out without feeling guilty.

If we do hear something that can help them, call immediately. If prayer gives them comfort, pray with them.

Whatever we do, don't ignore a friend who has been laid off. Silence is worse than anything we could possibly say.

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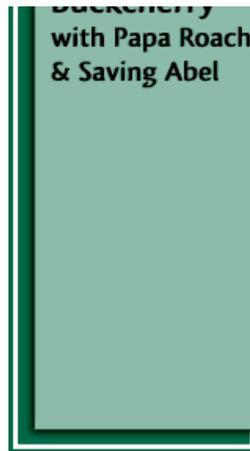
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