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Stopping Survivor Guilt

As a senior manager in an era of massive layoffs, it's your job to stave off survivor guilt before it lowers the morale and productivity of remaining employees

By [Rebecca Reisner](#)

The subject of survivor guilt—the despair employees feel when co-workers fall victim to downsizing—comes up during every recession, but 2009 promises a uniquely virulent strain of the affliction.

"The layoffs are just starting," says Shafiq Lokhandwala, chief executive officer of NuView Systems, a maker of human resources software. "I think we have only seen about 25% of what's coming." According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in December alone the U.S. lost 524,000 jobs, for a total of 11.1 million unemployed Americans. With the exceptions of health care and education, the recession has hurt every type of industry.

In addition to the impact of their sheer volume, the current layoffs present less hope and more complications for folks cut loose by their employers. "In the past layoffs, there was the feeling laid-off people would get similar jobs to the ones they lost," says Sheryl Spanier, a Manhattan career coach. "Today whole types of jobs are going to be eliminated." So if you lived through the 1987 stock market disaster and 2001 dot-com bust, that was just a warm-up exercise in the survivor guilt arena.

FROM GUILT TO RESENTMENT

Members of the Baby Boom generation on your staff may be particularly vulnerable to the anxieties surrounding layoffs. "Younger people are more comfortable with the idea of people moving around and changing jobs a lot," says Roy Cohen, a career counselor and executive coach based in New York City. "But baby boomers have the idea that you're supposed to stay in the same place."

So why do surviving employees, with their newly enlarged workloads, spend their time feeling guilty about layoffs they had no hand in perpetrating? "It's not a rational reaction, but it's only human to think 'Why them? Why not me?'" says Spanier. "They feel sympathetic toward the people who lost their jobs and worry about their well-being, their economic situation." Wikipedia defines survivor guilt in general as "a mental condition that occurs when a person perceives himself or herself to have done wrong by surviving a traumatic event."

As an adjunct to the sympathy they feel for laid-off co-workers, employees go through three self-centered stages, says Jason Zickerman, president of the Alternative Board, an executive consulting firm based in Denver.

1. Whew! I made the cut.
2. I have to do all this work.
3. They don't appreciate me.

"You'll see changes in personality. Outgoing people now being silent. Work isn't as good, and absenteeism rises," he advised. "There's anxiety and pressure, the beginning of depression in the case of some. For employees, layoffs are not in their control, and whenever someone else is holding the puppet strings, it's stressful."

Soon, the business itself can feel the effects of survivor's guilt on its bottom line. Fortunately, business consultants say, survivor's guilt is highly responsive to treatment if senior management acts early and often.

REACH OUT

Organizations that offer terminated workers continuing assistance in the form of outplacement counseling, job referrals, and assistance with Cobra red tape are already off to a good start. "If you take care of the laid off, they won't be complaining about stuff to people who still work there," Lokhandwala says.

"The No. 1 way to prevent guilt is communication," says Zickerman. Some corporations make the mistake of not letting their good deeds for laid-off workers be known. Whether via blog, e-mail, or memo, HR should publicize its continuing assistance, so surviving employees know their old friends are still cared about.

Senior managers and their reports also should keep communicating informally with their old work buddies after the lay-off. Spanier suggests starting immediately with an e-mail simply saying, "I'm thinking about you."

"One reason survivors don't call laid-off friends is that they feel bad they have no job to offer them," Spanier said. "It's O.K. to call just to say hello. People who are laid off tell me the most hurtful thing is how their old co-workers didn't say a thing to them about it afterward."

In situations where it's not necessarily good-bye forever as far as the jobs once held by laid-off employees, you can mitigate survivor guilt. "Make it clear to your reports you care about these people and you will hire them back if you can," Zickerman says.

And when laid-off workers land jobs with other employers, you should spread the good news, according to Suzanne Bates, author of *Motivate Like a CEO: Communicate Your Strategic Vision and Inspire People to Act!* (January, McGraw-Hill, 2009) (*BusinessWeek* is a unit of The McGraw-Hill Companies ([MGH](#))). "Not necessarily by e-mail, but in conversation you might bring it up," she says.

MANAGING INCREASED WORKLOADS

As much as people genuinely may care about their ex-colleagues and feel great empathy for them, don't be surprised if you see some anger surface, too. "Resentment is the other side of guilt," points out Spanier. What starts as sympathy for others turns into disgruntlement over employees' own harried work lives, a perceived lack of appreciation, and fear they'll end up tossed aside forever as their former colleagues were.

Of course, regardless of what happens to their former colleagues, employees are likely to end up with a bigger workload and fewer people to help them with it. "My work has increased by one to two hours a day," says Jackie Carter (who asked that his real name not be used), a vice-president at a construction firm that recently had layoffs "We ran a tight group—conference calls and exchange of ideas and sending e-mails saying, 'Hey, have you ever dealt with this?' And now those people aren't here."

If the layoffs result in more work for those remaining, senior management needs to acknowledge it right up front. "Seek out survivors and ask them, 'What can we take off your plate?'" Zickerman says. "Let them remove work that isn't top priority or critical."

Some corporations hold employee focus groups and informal "town meetings" to let people express their doubts and concerns about their new responsibilities and the direction of the business. "You want to engage the survivors," says Bates. "Walk around, talk to people, listen to them, and ask them to come up with solutions. If anything, you want to over-communicate with your employees in times like these."

PUT YOURSELF ON THE LINE

You also need to convey that you, as a senior executive, found the lay-offs painful to make and that you're in the trenches yourself, contending with a bigger work load just as your reports are. This is no time for prima donna behavior from senior managers. "Tell people, 'Yes, we've been through a difficult time and we may have more, so here's what I'm going to do—I'm giving up my bonus,'" says Spanier.

By making such efforts, you'll ultimately convey to surviving employees that the layoffs were part of a master plan that will realign resources to make the business stronger, and you need their efforts to succeed at it. "It's critically important that management or owners understand this is no time to not show leadership," Zickerman says. "If they don't understand that their leadership is needed, maybe they're the ones who should have been laid off."

Finally, with so much bad news swirling about in the recession economy, you should make use of social media to let your people know about any good news regarding your company, says Bates. Winning a small contract, receiving praise or good publicity from trade publications, or increasing sales in any sector of your business should be made public knowledge to everyone at your organization. "Even just getting to the next level of a prospective deal is something to celebrate," says Zickerman. "Send out an e-mail thanking employees for helping the business get to this point."

That way you'll get employees thinking about the here and now instead of the good old days with their now-departed colleagues. "Tell them you're preparing for growth," says Bates, "and you're counting on them to get there."

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