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## Taking Care of HR





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## HR Supports the Business in Tough Times, But Who Supports HR?

In the 1979 movie *Superman*, intrepid reporter Lois Lane is hurled from a careening helicopter to certain death at the foot of the Daily Planet building. But halfway down, she's caught by a mysterious figure in blue and red. As the flying man carries her to safety, he assures her, "Don't worry miss. I've got you."

"You've got *me*?" she replies, in disbelief. "Who's got *you*?"



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Human resource professionals can relate to Lois in the current economic climate. As companies outsource staff and do more with less, HR managers are thrust into the unwinnable position of delivering life-changing news to employees who are being let go. Some HR managers are administering layoffs for the first time of their career while others have been here before. Regardless, all agree the anxiety and at times, depression that ensues for those involved can interfere with the need to conduct the termination event in an efficient, focused (and dignified) manner. To handle the complexities involved, preparation is key.

Unfortunately, HR staffs typically lack the resources to manage the emotional side of downsizing, and they often have no one to turn to for guidance. HR's role may be to support business strategy but many are driven to the profession to also help people. Consequently, such professionals may find it particularly difficult to deliver harsh, life-changing news. A support and preparatory program is therefore well-advised.

To successfully deal with employee emotions during a downsizing event, HR professionals need to attend to both their personal well-being and the business issues of the event itself. By preparing scripts and practicing communications as well as over-rehearsing the logistics of the day in advance, the event can go as smoothly as possible. Critical to this preparation is affording HR professionals the advance opportunity to "vent" their own feelings toward what is happening and why. This sharing of the personal aspect of the event (with a third party facilitator present) reduces the chances that an HR professional unintentionally "leaks" the wrong message to the downsized employee.

With a shaky economy that shows no immediate sign of recovery, U.S. businesses continue to trim their employee populations. August saw the jobless rate spike to 6.1 percent, with 84,000 cut from payroll jobs, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. While mass layoff activity decreased slightly, the bureau noted that employers still took 1,512 mass layoff actions in July, involving a total of 151,171 workers. From January to July 2008 the number of mass layoff events totaled 10,700. Initial unemployment claims recently totaled 1,100,810, the highest in a January-July period since 2003.



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The reality is that mass layoffs will continue into the near future. With that in mind, it's important to prepare *now* for a downsizing event. While seasoned HR professionals may be veterans in dealing with such events, they need to prepare as meticulously as mid-level and new team members. Anxiety, frustration and other raw emotions are typical human responses to downsizing and can bubble to the surface when not addressed ahead of time.

Three fundamental points should be factored into all preparations:

**1. Understand the perception of the affected employee.** Layoffs are professionally and personally devastating, as well as unexpected. Recipients are threatened and may rapidly try to "connect the dots" to sort out what is happening, infer the cause, and zero in on who made the decision. Anger is a reality and will eventually materialize.

A big risk for HR managers is to be so consumed with the tasks at hand that they lose sight of the person's humanity. Equally dangerous is *over*-empathizing with employees and inadvertently igniting their anger. The goal is to balance the human issues with the business issues while managing the downsizing event.

**2. Manage yourself to manage others.** HR professionals need to process their emotions ahead of time, even as they prepare logistics for the layoff event. While separate concerns, these personal and business issues are critically important in reducing an organization's business and litigation risk.

Corporate Counseling Associates (CCA) urges HR teams to meet ahead of time and discuss the downsizing event. This enables the team to understand the company's business situation and why the layoffs are taking place . . . as well as afford the opportunity to "process" the emotional aspect of the business event at both the personal and professional level so that this does not bleed into communications on the day of the event.

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Next, professionals need to understand their role and craft organizational messages with the company's legal department. HR's role is to send a responsible, clear message; it's critical to learn what must be said, practice it, say it aloud and practice re-stating it. Layoffs are a business decision. HR must provide employees with critical information they need to "stabilize" themselves and truly understand the situation so they can begin problem solving as soon as possible.

During layoff meetings, stay on track and stick to the facts. Don't over-identify with an individual. Engaging in "loose" conversation runs the risk of revealing personal feelings about the situation: you owe it to the downsized employee to avoid your own interpretations.

That said, don't try to distance yourself from the event entirely; you are part of it. It's fine to demonstrate that you understand the individual's difficult situation . . . but be clear that the



termination is triggered solely by “business necessity.” Legal counsel will likely script this response. Learn about available resources in advance, including the specifics of the severance package and the availability of counselors, so you can be ready to discuss and offer guidance

Above all, focus on giving the recipient a sense of dignity and respect. Often it is advantageous to have counselors on-site, not only for outplacement, but rather counselors that bring training as clinicians and psychologists working in business settings.

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**3. Manage Logistics and Be Prepared.** Layoffs are difficult for all involved, but they are most devastating to the recipients. In helping organizations develop and carry out communication strategies, CCA has seen first-hand the value of planning and delivering messages properly. The following tips and observations are a result of this experience:

- HR executives reduce risk by practicing self-care before and during layoff meetings (sleep, eat well, take breaks during the event, go for a walk or seek an on-site counselor if necessary).
- HR teams need to understand in advance how the day will proceed, and the policies and procedures regarding handling any extreme employee reactions (access to security).
- Many unexpected outbursts can be “de-escalated” by acknowledging and re-stating how the person feels. The process of restating an emotion is dignifying to the recipient—it shows you are listening, caring and empathic.
- Follow the acknowledgment of the person’s emotion with action steps and information such as details of the severance package. In addition, a list of resources or contacts available to them should be provided. Offering these next steps affords the individual a sense of control—**this is the root cause of extreme behavioral reactions – the loss of control**—so give the employee a perception of control of the event (via next steps and severance) in a direct, clear manner.
- Don’t try to talk employees out of being angry. Acknowledge the anger and offer next steps. This restores a sense of control, de-escalating conflict and moving the person into a problem-solving mode.
- Reduce intense emotions by allowing the individual to speak, letting them express themselves without interruption. Don’t counter-attack: often a verbal response is not necessary. Maintain eye contact and nod to show you are listening.
- When an employee makes a threat or demands to speak with a higher authority, be sure to know your security procedures. Know how to contact security and never confront violence with violence, either verbal or physical. Refusals to sign paperwork should simply be acknowledged as a fact and then left alone.



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- Repeat that you are sorry this is happening, while being careful not to respond to any interpretive reaction. A chief pitfall occurs when an executive who already harbors resentment about the downsizing inadvertently admits their own concerns to a layoff recipient . . . essentially allying themselves with the employee. Offer employees further communications should they have questions or concerns. Make sure they know who to contact and how.

The bottom line is that HR people are only human, too—they want to take care of employees (and themselves)

Many HR departments turn to an employee assistance program, which can serve as a vital strategic partner. For example, CCA regularly helps organizations plan, design and structure their downsizing events while also supporting HR teams, layoff recipients, and workers who “survive” the layoffs. “Helping our clients navigate through these harsh and critical times helps them remain focused on the future, ready to successfully move forward,” says Cory Logan, Director of Client Services at CCA.

The bottom line is that HR people are only human, too—they want to take care of employees (and themselves). By following the above guidelines, HR executives can most effectively serve a workforce in their time of greatest need.

## About Corporate Counseling Associates

Corporate Counseling Associates (CCA) started in 1984 with a passion for “growing healthy companies.”

CCA’s integrated service offerings include:

- EAP & Work/Life;
- Risk Mitigation;
- Learning and Organization Development; and
- Human Capital Consulting.

For more information, call (212) 686-6827 or visit [www.corporatecounseling.com](http://www.corporatecounseling.com).