

# Ask The Expert: How Do Effective Leaders Handle Change?

*By Mark Hannum*



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**Question:** I am an HR manager in a mid-sized health care company. We have recently gone through many changes within the company in response to the changing market including several layoffs. As a leader, how do I strike a balance between managing myself as a leader and responding to the symptoms of anxiety in the group? What are some practices you can recommend to be an effective leader during these tough times and how do you create believability in your employees?

**Response:** Survivor syndrome is what you are referring to in your email. It's the guilt and sometimes the shame associated with not being chosen in a RIF or a layoff. It's sometimes worse when you are the leader of a group or team that has been heavily impacted. When a group of people works together for a long period of time they come to understand each other and even share an intimacy with each other that can be family-like. Having to part with these people triggers feelings of loss and sadness. Worse yet, some companies RIF employees without giving them a chance to say goodbye to their coworkers...or allowing coworkers to say goodbye to them. This gives the people who remain behind a feeling of not having resolved their relationship with others. And more confusion and sadness sets in.

I'm glad that you've asked the question the way that you did. As a leader of a group of people experiencing a RIF, it is possible for you to help avoid some of these issues. If you happen to know that a RIF is coming, you can have a meeting with your team to discuss the potential issues with them prior to it happening. If you are not allowed to divulge the RIF, then have regular meetings to discuss possibilities and how you individually and collectively could prepare for them. Discuss feelings and lead the way. It's important to discuss things like resilience and the phases people go through in times of change: endings, transitions, and beginnings. It's important to establish and maintain the organization's values during times like these, and your personal commitment and role-modeling of those values will go a long way to helping everyone, including yourself.

Times like these are difficult for everyone, and one of the most important things you can do is to be clear and unwavering in your language and in your statements. During stress, all of us have a tendency to mitigate. We waver and become noncommittal in our language. We say, for example, "we might have a layoff in the near term." When in fact, the decision has been made to lay people off next week. It would be better to say, "our financials make it imperative that we reduce the number of employees. I can't say when it will occur, but it's a certainty given our present circumstances." Stress can force us to use language to hedge our bets, or to use language to give a people a sense of false hope, or to use language that would move the blame to a higher level of leadership...for example, "it wasn't my decision, but we are going to RIF some folks in the near future." You need to be clear, candid, and strong in your language. Eliminate passive voice. Eliminate mitigations. But don't go overboard and become a dictator, that won't work either.

Breaking bad news or a tough message to a group or an individual is a tough job in any profession. Imagine being a physician and having to explain to someone that they have a terminal illness. When we are terminating someone's employment they at least get to live, move on, and potentially find even better employment. For some people, getting RIF'd is a blessing that will motivate them to do bigger and better things. Keep that in mind. Also, try to put yourself in their shoes, what would you want if you were being terminated? Most people want a very few things:

1. They want to be looked in the eye when they are told. Make sure that you look someone in the eye when you deliver bad news.
2. They want to be treated like a human being. This is important because its coded language for what they expect from you, and they expect you to show some emotion. Don't be a robot...it might help you to get through the experience...but it doesn't really help...it merely postpones your reaction.
3. Most people who are terminated want to know "why them?" Why not the guy one cubicle over? All you can say is what the company permits you to say, and every company handles these issues just a bit differently.
4. Be very clear in your language and don't contradict your message with your body language. The receiver will pick up both messages and will listen to the message that gives them the resolution for them. Keep these messages short, human, and candid. Notice how physicians break bad news...no small talk...they simply and clearly state bad news. It's a good model to follow. And by the way, most physicians don't do it the way you see on TV. They put an arm around their patient. They hold a hand. Some even cry with their patients.

Another great practice is to learn how to break bad news to a group. Remember that bad news must be accompanied by a sense of hope and optimism. So you must have a plan that people can have confidence in. Never break bad news without some careful consideration of how you will change the circumstances that created the bad news and give people a solid plan. Your telling people a story when you tell them bad news. Tell them a second story...one of vision and optimism. Tell them a third story as well, tell them a personal story about similar circumstances when you were on their end of the message and how it all eventually worked out for the better. As hard as it might be, the best thing you can do for yourself and for everyone else, is to remain optimistic. Remember the Stockdale Paradox, a prisoner of war during VietNam, Stockdale dealt with the brutal reality of his captor's tortures, yet kept his attitude and his men optimistic that there would come a day that they would walk out of that POW camp. We have nowhere near the horrors that he dealt with, yet we often succumb to cynicism and blame. This is a choice and its a choice you can make.

Believe it or not, dealing with the people who are being RIF'd fairly and humanly will help you with the survivors. They look at your treatment of the terminated employees as a bellwether of how they may be treated some day. Knowing that a layoff will be handled with dignity, respect, and community will go a long way to keeping survivors engaged and motivated. Of course, that motivation will be short-lived if you don't have a plan of action for dealing with the workload. Dumping the work of the RIF'd employees onto the shoulders of the surviving without a plan will quickly add up to chaos and disillusionment. You cannot simply increase everyone's workload. If you do, then you will find your employees resume's on the world wide web in short order. If they are successful, you will quickly be drifting into a vicious cycle that may end with your management wondering if you are cut out for your leadership or management position.

Of course, the survivors will go through their own ups and downs, so will you. If you need a few minutes to compose yourself, take them. If you need to talk to someone, find them. If you need to vent, chances are a good friend will let you vent if you put them on notice that you need a supporting shoulder for a few minutes. Going through all these oscillations is normal for you

and for them. But as a leader, you must recognize that you are being watched very carefully. People are looking up to you to see how they should deal. Recognize the human need to go through transitions and give people the time they need and the support they need. I guarantee you, they will never forget it. I know they won't because I facilitate the workshops where people talk about their leaders and how they dealt with adversity. And when a participant in a workshop stands up and talks about a leader who remained optimistic, dealt with issues and workload, treated people with respect, dignity, and gave them a sense of community; you can look around the room at the remaining participants and see the look of envy. We all need great leaders. It's your choice to be one!



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