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Reflections of a Laid Off Worker

Our most poignant experiences come from walking in someone else's shoes. I spent many years in Corporate America, seeing co-workers fired, laid off, and disappear, some without a trace of ever having occupied a standard issue cubicle.

In December 2002, it was my turn. I became one of the names on the List, whispered but never completely spoken. I realized very quickly that I had become a half-ghost among my co-workers—many knew about my situation but were afraid to approach me for fear of upsetting me or being upset themselves.

While being laid off no longer has the stigma it once did, it still holds the feeling of shamefulness inside companies. Companies create this feeling by unconsciously sending messages to those on the List. Here are some of those messages:

- **"Best to be not seen and not heard."** I was given two weeks notice prior to my last day on the payroll. On the day of notification, I was encouraged to move directly into a job searching mode, with no further connection to the current workplace. The general reaction by the still-in-shock but soon-to-be-departing employee is to disappear during those two weeks and return to work on the last day to do the Ritual (more on that later). Why not encourage employees to honor their time and contributions to the company during those two weeks? After all, leaving as a part of a layoff should in no way diminish the relationships that were developed, the wonderful ideas that were contributed, the milestones that were achieved, the projects that were successful. Instead of retirement lunches, wouldn't it be great to see a "Parting Lunch" or a "Wishing You Well Lunch", no matter the circumstances of the departure? Or better yet, a journal that colleagues can write in to reminisce about what this individual contributed to the team, the project.
- **"You are no longer one of us and therefore no longer trustworthy."** After years of leaving work by myself, tired after a long day, briefcase in hand, I was literally walked to the front door on my last day. This is part of The Ritual of "checking out". Psychologically, this is the same as being treated like a shoplifter in a major department store where you've been a loyal customer for years. Sure, it's wise to see that employees don't steal anything on the way out, but in the end, what's really being lost by the company is goodwill. How I talk about my former employer to neighbors, friends, and future colleagues has a lot to do with how I was treated at the end. Letting each person leave, on their own, with dignity, is such a simple but powerful gesture.
- **"I'm uncomfortable with acknowledging your situation, so I assume that you are too."** I witnessed a colleague who was laid off last year, waiting for friends in the workplace to come by with condolences. No one came. No one sent email. No one called. He wondered, "Surely they must know, now that I've stopped attending the regular meetings...." What became a bad situation was made worse by this awkwardness. I started referring to this as the

Leper Syndrome. By breaking the code of silence and speaking from a place that says, "I liked working with you and you will be missed", we show not only courage but humanity.

What messages should companies give in a layoff situation, both for the laid off worker as well as the remaining workers? Here are two suggestions:

- **"You are valued as a human being, a colleague, and a friend."** What we give to our workplaces is much more than the tangible work that we produce. This gift to others does not disappear with the mandate to stop doing work for an employer.
- **"Layoffs are business decisions, not personal ones."** After all, no sane business person creates a layoff to carry out a personal vendetta.

If the day should come that YOU find your name on the List, how can you create a positive experience, without shame? Poorly planned layoff procedures don't have to ruin your day. By setting the tone of my departure, I was able to create a different response from colleagues. Here's what worked for me:

- **Be open about leaving.** No matter where I was at with the situation—shock, depression, sadness, relief, and finally, joy— I let others know that it's okay to talk about it. By not behaving as if I was shamed, I took the power out of the culture to make it shameful. Colleagues took their cue from how I behaved, not the other way around.
- **Make the remaining time your own.** Odd as it might seem, the time between being notified of a layoff and actually leaving a company can be wonderful. No longer did I have to worry about deadlines or meetings. And I was not yet into the task of finding a job. Instead, I spent time with colleagues and friends with a different agenda in mind—that of honoring our time together. I visited the company library, reading past issues of professional journals. I took advantage of the slew of classes available at the company on-site fitness center. To have access to such resources, and have it all on my own time was an unexpected joy.
- **Look for the story behind the events.** I was especially pointed in asking my supervisor how he was able to make sense of my layoff. By understanding his perspective, essentially the story he told to himself, it helped me to make sense of it as well. I didn't have to agree with the story. The key is to understand that we each have a story and that I had control of what story I told.
- **Gather your best work.** In going through old files, I stumbled across stuff that I'd be proud to show my harshest critic (which was often myself). There was the obvious benefit of building up a portfolio of work to show a future employer. But more importantly, seeing my accumulated work made me realize the depth and breadth of my contributions. And with that, I also began to see the ground that I had traveled to get to where I now stood, both personally and professionally.
- **Create a new version of The Ritual.** This new version can honor those who contributed to your successes in the workplace. It can help break the emotional connection with the Company in a way that gives dignity to the situation. I wrote a farewell letter to friends and colleagues, thanking them for all they had given me and telling them of my plans for the future. I talked about what this turn of events would mean for me not just as a worker, but as a whole person—time to strengthen family ties, space to create a new work/family balance, opportunity to design a new lifestyle as a self-employed consultant. I posted this farewell letter outside my cubicle for all to see. And on my last day, after leaving my employer, I burned the farewell

letter in a clay pot, outside under a full moon. As I literally watched my own words go up in smoke, I felt a mixture of relief, reverence, and sadness. I knew it was time to move on.

It's ironic. In an attempt to make a very impersonal business decision, most companies act in a way that cause the laid off worker to take it personally. Layoffs could be so much better—for both those departing and staying—in terms of recognizing and acknowledging our own humanity. After all, it may well be you that walks out the door the next time.

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