

Organizational Change: Managing Downsizing-Related Conversations

By Sharone Bar-David, LLB MSW

You already know that organizational restructuring is not the most pleasant thing to go through. As a manager, you already have or will be at some point required to discuss such sensitive issues as 'voluntary' early retirement, job redeployment or other changes that directly impact on a person's employment circumstances. These conversations can be quite challenging for managers, especially those who have not previously experienced this type of task.

Understanding why the conversations are 'difficult' and learning how to manage them effectively is a pivotal skill for you to possess.

What Makes These Conversations Difficult?

You might find that the most difficult part of the conversation has to do with your own reactions, thoughts, discomfort and anxiety. You might find yourself dreading the mere thought of having to go through the conversation. Or you might find yourself feeling highly uncomfortable during the conversation itself. These responses are normal and to be expected, especially when you are new to these experiences. Here are some potential sources for these feelings:

- **Mixed feelings about the change.** You might have questions in your own mind about the direction of the change, the way it is handled or your role within it. You might be experiencing a sense of internal dissonance that adds a layer of discomfort.
- **Difficulty separating from the departing person.** The attachments you formed with the person in question might be meaningful to you. Some folks may have been your colleagues for many years. It is difficult to say goodbye to a team member or friend - and to your shared memories.
- **Perceived lack of skills.** You might feel that you lack the necessary skill to navigate the conversation competently and handle whatever comes your way during the discussion.
- **General discomfort with this type of conversation.** An overall sense of discomfort with conversations that have a strong overt or covert emotional component may be at play for you.

- **The other person's response.** A conversation can become difficult as a result of the other person's manner of handling it. You might encounter a wide range of responses – some will be delighted to be leaving, others will be emotional, angry, blaming or bitter. Some will handle their feelings with more restraint; others will show them more openly. Regardless, each difficult conversation will have a strong emotional dimension. In some cases the feelings will leak into the conversation; in other cases they might burst into it.

What Can You Do To Manage the Conversation Effectively?

If you are a manager faced with this situation (or if you are an HR professional supporting managers in their roles), here are some practical tips for managing these conversations productively:

- **Pause for self-examination.** If you're feeling uncomfortable or anxious about an upcoming conversation, stop and examine your own thoughts and feelings. These might be the true source of your unease. The more you are aware of your own reactions and underlying feelings, the better you will be able to navigate the conversation.
- **Express your own feelings.** It's okay to include an expression of personal feelings in your actual conversation. "I am sad to see you leave" or "This conversation is difficult for me because I know this is not something that you want" or, "This is not a conversation I would ever have wanted to have with you" are appropriate types of self-expression. Sharing your sentiments (appropriately) will help both you and the other person feel that you are bringing your 'whole self' into the conversation.
- **Allow for the other person's expression of feelings.** Do not try to block the other person from expressing his or her feelings, no matter how intense that expression might be. The more you allow for the expression of feelings, the more the person will feel understood and the easier it will be for them – and you – to move forward.

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- ***Listen with both ears.*** Sometimes the best you can do is to offer an understanding ear. Don't rush the process. Listen to what the person is trying to express – it is respectful and supports the person's sense of dignity (and yours too). There is an old saying that fits well here: you were given two ears and one mouth - use them in that proportion.
 - ***Communicate the information clearly.*** Make sure that the information is conveyed clearly and concisely. The person you'll be talking to is likely to be experiencing a physiological stress response, which will compromise their ability to understand you correctly or think with their full capacity. The clearer you are in your communication, the better.
 - ***Ensure that the person understood the information.*** Given the physiological response the person might be experiencing, you will need to ensure they understood the information you are conveying and the choices facing them. Make sure to pause regularly and check for comprehension in a respectful and sensitive way.
 - ***Seek support before or after the conversation.*** In preparing for the conversation or debriefing it after it is finished, you might need the support of a trusted colleague, your own manager, an HR specialist, or a family member. Don't hesitate to access the resources available to you - they will give you strength and sage advice.
 - ***Make sure to take good care of yourself.*** The impact of downsizing and restructuring can be emotionally and physically intense for managers. The conversations with employees whose lives will be altered as a result of the conversations are going to add to that stress. Make sure you take good for yourself and keep up any habits that help you maintain your stress resiliency!

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