



Management Assistance Program

EXITING THE WORKPLACE:

A Holistic Approach in Dealing with Employees who are Considering Leaving the Organization

GOALS:

The goal of this module is to provide organizations, managers and employees with guidance for handling exits from the workplace with sensitivity and professionalism. The underlying goal of this module is to offer advice on working with organizations and employees to resolve issues before they result in a negative departure.

The specific goals are to help organizations, managers, and employees:

- Identify five potential exits from the workplace.
- Understand the importance of retaining employees.
- Recognize the emotional and psychological issues involved in each exit from the workplace.
- Obtain guidance for exiting the workplace with sensitivity and professionalism.

OVERVIEW:

Despite the fact that employees exit the workplace everyday both voluntarily and involuntarily, any exit from work involves a great deal of emotion and difficulty for the employees, managers and organizations. It has been well documented that the death of a loved one, the ending of a marriage or long term relationship, and the loss of one's job have an equal or similar impact on one's emotions. And, it is also well known that high turnover rates and poor employee retention can damage an organization's reputation, and decrease morale and productivity.

Therefore, it is extremely valuable for employers to take the necessary steps to keep employees on board, and for employees to work with the organization before quitting or resigning.

OBJECTIVES:

This module will identify and detail five potential exits from the workplace including layoffs, firing or termination for cause, retiring, quitting and resigning.

1. Lay Offs

Job loss and the subsequent transition impact the employee and his or her family greatly. When layoffs occur for whatever reason (lack of funding, reorganization, or acquisition) it sparks a great deal of anger, frustration, anxiety, and sadness. Supervisors are in a key position to help their employees deal more effectively with job loss, and should take steps to help employees with this difficult transition.

- Managers can help employees by facilitating the coping process through open, consistent and empathetic communication. Remember, employees do not need your sympathy; they need your help in dealing with the feelings of loss they are experiencing.
- Human Resources or the department heads should also communicate with supervisors about the loss of their coworkers as they will also feel the impact of the layoff. In many cases supervisors may feel increased uncertainty, survivor guilt, or overwhelming feelings resulting from new or different work responsibilities.
- Management and Employee Assistance Programs can provide counseling to employees who have been or will be laid off. These programs usually have counseling services that deal with anger management, depression, change management, and stress management.

A supervisor is usually in the difficult position of notifying an employee that he or she will be laid off. In many instances, the supervisor conducts a notification meeting where he or she reveals to the employee that they have been laid off due to the various circumstances. Since these meetings tend to be emotionally charged, the University California at San Francisco's "Layoff Guide for Managers" provides suggestions for the supervisor or the notifier conducting the meeting so emotions are managed effectively¹:

- Be compassionate and show sincere understanding, but maintain focus on the message being communicated.

¹ "Communicating to Employees. Notifying the Employee of Layoff." [Layoff Guide for Managers](http://ucsfhr.ucsf.edu/index.php/layoff/article/communicating-to-employees/). University California San Francisco. Accessed 29 Nov. 2006. Available at: <http://ucsfhr.ucsf.edu/index.php/layoff/article/communicating-to-employees/>

- Clearly state why the layoffs are necessary without being rude or curt.
- Listen carefully to the employee's response, but be sure to keep the meetings on point.
- Communicate to the employee that you support the layoff decision, and do not blame the decision on higher authority.
- Provide the employee with clear guidance and available resources.

Devote time and energy to the "survivors"

In any layoff situation there are "survivors," or employees who have not been laid off. Managers should invest time and energy into the survivors; this will help aid recovery, fuel productivity and boost morale. In the article, "Downsizing Survivors: Motivating Employees Who Remain after Layoffs," Susan Heathfield states that as a manager, "cut yourself and your employees some slack as you all say goodbye to the past, and commit to the future."² It is important to recognize that the people who remain are experiencing the loss of their coworkers, and need time to cope with their feelings of anger, sadness and denial. People may even endure "survivor guilt" where they feel guilty that they have been chosen to remain after the downsizing effort.

As a manager, it is also necessary to reassure the people who report to you of their value to you and the organization. It might be helpful to meet with each employee individually to listen to their concerns about the layoffs, and discuss their new responsibilities. Heathfield also mentions in her article that the survivors feel like victims because they subsequently may have more work to do, different jobs to learn, and broader responsibilities. These new responsibilities can cause additional anxiety if employees are worried about their ability to step up to the new challenges. She recommends that managers take the time to have career development talks with their employees and offer additional resources and training if needed. Help your employees feel confident and motivated to grow and prosper in the new work environment.

It is important to note that managers carry much of the weight of handling the turnovers and emotions, so it is equally important that employees are respectful of the manager's added pressure and responsibilities.

2. Firing or termination for cause

Firing an employee is an extremely difficult situation for both the employee and the manager who is responsible for terminating the employee. Terminations can occur for a variety of reasons; the job was just not a good

² Heathfield, Susan M. "Downsizing Survivors: Motivating Employees Who Remain after Layoffs". [About.com](http://humanresources.about.com/od/layoffsdownsizing/a/downsizing2.htm). Accessed: 29 Nov. 2006. Available at: <http://humanresources.about.com/od/layoffsdownsizing/a/downsizing2.htm>

fit, the employee is not performing to expectations or meeting company goals, the employee has broken a company rule or policy, etc. Regardless of the reason, steps should be taken to solve the problem before resorting to termination. For example, if an employee is not performing well, the manager should meet with the employee to discuss possible strategies for improving their performance. Perhaps the employee is merely overworked, or needs additional training to do his or her job more effectively.

On other occasions, the job is just not a good fit for the employee, but he or she could possibly be placed in a different position within organization. If an employee breaks the law or a company policy, termination might be inevitable. However, depending on company policy, a warning system could be put into place that allows the employee to go on probation or receive a warning before being fired.

Managers who are responsible for firing their employee should be kind and courteous, and conscious of the employee's feelings. The items listed below should be kept in mind when faced with the task of terminating an employee³.

- Before taking any action, ask yourself, "How would I feel if my boss came to me today and said you're fired?"
- Be sensitive to the employee's feelings. They will most likely experience sadness, anger and/ or denial after you break the news to them.
- Make sure the person maintains his or her self esteem – this is one of the most basic and important needs that all people have.
- Give your reasons for termination clearly and succinctly.
- Arguing and apologizing are inappropriate; if the employee is being terminated, it is evident that he or she did not fulfill their obligations.
- Be consistent and treat every employee in the same way.

Senior management should be aware of the manager's feelings about terminating an employee. On many occasions managers feel guilty that they did not help the employee enough, or provide adequate leadership for the employee. In addition, a manager may feel extreme discomfort carrying out the exit interview. A human resources manager or department head can provide guidance and advice for the manager to help them get through the process, and give them enough confidence to carry out the termination.

³ Selden, Bob. "Employee Termination - Does it have to be painful, for them and you?" [National Learning Institute](http://www.nationallearninginstitute.com). 2006. Available at: <http://www.employer-employee.com/Nopainfiring.html>

3. Retirement

Retiring from the workplace should be considered a celebration; you have just finished a period of your life, and you are ready to move onto the next. According to Webster's dictionary, retirement means, "the withdrawal from one's position or occupation or from active working life."⁴ The American Psychological Association (APA) believes that this definition implies that you're leaving something, but for many retirees, retirement really means heading towards something brand new, depending on how well they prepare psychologically for retirement.

In order to make the transition into retirement as smooth as possible, it is important to make sure that you are financially set for the future, and clarify any issues regarding your retirement package with your employer. Making sure you are psychologically ready to retire, and taking the appropriate steps to prepare emotionally for retirement is equally-significant. Major life changes, even when they are positive, can cause stress. According to the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), things that can make retirement stressful include changes in income and financial status, daily routine, marriage or other family relationships and friendships, roles and identity and health.⁵ For men and women who define themselves by their careers, leaving that identity behind is challenging.⁶ Depression is not uncommon for people who retire, therefore developing a positive attitude towards change and seeking out hobbies and activities to undertake once you stop working will help you prepare emotionally for retirement.

To ease the transition, many psychologists recommend leaving the workforce gradually by working part time or doing consulting work. For instance, if you are an educator you could reduce your teaching load, or become an adjunct professor.

The article, "Retiring, Don't Worry, Be Happy" on the AARP web site, recommends taking the following steps to reduce stress and make retirement something to look forward to:

- **Make a wish list** – Write down a list of all the things you wanted to do but never had time for (i.e. traveling, going back to school, etc). Then set goals and steps for achieving them.

⁴ "Getting Ready for Retirement." American Psychological Association Online. Adapted from the APA Monitor. Nov. 2004. Available at < <http://www.apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=70>>

⁵ "Retiring, Don't Worry, Be Happy." AARP online. Accessed Nov. 29, 2006. Available at: http://www.aarp.org/health/staying_healthy/stress/a2004-10-08-retiring-happy.html

⁶ Preparing for Retirement: More than Just Money in the Bank." American Psychological Association Online. Accessed 29 Nov. 2006. Available at <http://www.apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=137>

- **Experiment** – Don't be afraid to try different things, if one thing doesn't work for you, try something else.
- **Establish or maintain friendships** –Maintaining friendships or having someone to talk to, reduces stress. Make an effort to get together and stay in touch with friends.
- **Exercise** – Physical activity is an excellent way to relieve stress and will help you feel better physically and mentally. Participate in an activity you enjoy like walking, playing tennis, or joining a health club.
- **Be involved in an activity** - Take classes at the public library, community center, or nearby college. Volunteer to work with children or for an organization whose cause you believe in. Being involved will give you a new sense of purpose and identity, and help you stay connected with others.
- **Get a Pet** – Owning or caring for a pet is another way to reduce stress. Pets also make for great companions, and dogs give you a great incentive to go for a walk.
- **Find your muse** – Discover your passion and pursue it. Perhaps you wanted to be a painter or musician, it's not too late! Retirement is a great time to try it out.

4. Quitting

Employees often quit because they do not feel valued, the workload is too overwhelming, they do not get along with their immediate boss or coworkers, the job is not what they expected it to be, there are little growth or advancement opportunities, or the job is not a good fit for them. Before making the decision to quit or resign, it is important for employees to take steps to try and work with their organization and their manager to resolve the issues that are making them want to leave the organization. If the job is not a good fit, do some research and see if there is another opportunity within the organization that would be better suited for you. If you find yourself overworked and stressed out, talk to your manager about reducing your work load or hiring another person to help you. If you do not feel like you have an opportunity to grow or you feel undervalued, take the time to discuss these issues with your manager instead of immediately giving up.

In addition, employees may desire an increase in salary and choose to leave the company for a higher paying position with another organization. While it may be a bit uncomfortable, it is professional to talk to your manager about

this issue first before quitting or resigning. As a manager, you can evaluate the situation accordingly to see if an increase in salary is in the budget or if the industry standard warrants an increase. Again, this depends on many factors including the employee's position and merit, the budget, company policies etc. It may be worth it to the organization to give the employee a raise instead of losing the employee to another company, but in other cases, an increase in salary may not be possible.

If your efforts to resolve the issues with your manager are to no avail or you feel strongly about moving to another organization, it is important to quit your job as professionally as possible, and be respectful of those who have helped you. The items listed below are suggestions for employees who decide that they want to quit from the article, "The Right Way to Quit your Job", by Alexandra Levit ⁷:

- **Tell your supervisor first** – Inform your supervisor first because you want him or her to hear the news from you, not someone else in your department. It may be extremely difficult for your supervisor to hear that you have decided to quit because they may feel as if they failed you.
- **Do not burn your bridges; be modest and do not insult anyone** – While you may be extremely excited about your new position, bragging or talking incessantly about your new job, and airing your grievances could potentially upset or offend the people you worked with.
- **Stay on top of your responsibilities** – Since you worked hard while you were on the job, why not stay on top of your responsibilities until the last minute of your last day. This will enable you to leave the company with a lasting impression of your professionalism and hard work.
- **Organize your files** – Make it easy for your colleagues to find materials so that they can transition your workload seamlessly. This is a way of saying thank you to those people who helped you.
- **Do an exit interview with your employer if it is required.** An exit interview is an opportunity for the employer to obtain information from the employee, and for the employee to share his or her thoughts about the company.

⁷ Levit, Alexandra. "The Right Way to Quit Your Job." Excerpt from, [They Don't Teach Corporate in College: A Twenty-Something's Guide to the Business World](http://www.chicagjobresource.com/career_resign5.htm). Available at http://www.chicagjobresource.com/career_resign5.htm

On some occasions when an employee quits or resigns, it can uproot the morale and productivity of the entire department or organization. It is important for management to communicate to the employees that the vacated position will be reevaluated and filled as soon as possible. They should share with the employees that while the change may be difficult this loss does not mean the department should fall apart, and each person should carry on each day as they usually do.

5. Resigning

Due to the similar nature of quitting and resigning, refer to the items in Objective 4 for information on resigning from an organization. The one difference between quitting and resigning might be the mutual understanding of the benefits to both the individual and the organization implied with the concept of resigning. The term quitting might have more of the negative stigma of having failed whereas resigning might imply having completed a phase in one's employment level and moving to the another level. Managers might encourage employees to consider a resignation as a choice versus a failing.

SUMMARY: Tips for Exiting the Workplace

- Layoffs are extremely emotional and stressful for the organization, especially for the employees who are being laid off. It is important to remember that employees do not need your sympathy; they need your help dealing with the feelings of loss they are experiencing.
- If possible, utilize or employ an employee assistance program where employees who are being laid off can receive counseling to help cope with their feelings.
- Devote time and energy to the “survivors” of a layoff. This will help aid recovery, fuel productivity, and boost morale.
- Managers who are responsible for firing their employee should be kind, courteous, and conscious of the employee’s feelings.
- When faced with the task of firing employees remember to be consistent and treat every employee in the same way.
- Retirement is a celebration for your hard work. Do not feel guilty about leaving however difficult it is for the company to replace you.
- Make sure you are psychologically prepared for retirement. Start planning and researching activities that will keep you active in retirement.
- Ease into retirement by reducing your hours, working only part-time or just doing consulting work for your organization.
- When quitting or resigning from your job, do not burn your bridges behind you. Treat all your co-workers with respect and do not speak negatively about anyone.
- Before your final day on the job, organize your files to make sure the transition of your work load is seamless, and train your replacement if possible. This will show your coworkers and manager that you appreciated all the help they gave you and it is a respectful way to leave your employment.