

# Survivor syndrome

**D**ownsizing is a difficult process and the tasks undertaken to make redundancies are complex. However, the challenge does not stop when this process has ended and the exiting employees have left the organisation.

A redundancy exercise is likely to have an impact on everyone associated with it, including employees remaining with the organisation who will be at risk of developing survivor syndrome.<sup>1</sup>

Survivor syndrome is an emotional reaction to redundancies experienced by those who remain with the organisation. The survivors may experience all or some of the following emotions after a redundancy process:

- **Relief:** This is an immediate response to the fact that they were not made redundant.
- **Guilt:** Employees may feel guilty that their friends were made redundant and they were not and they may start questioning whether they deserve to retain their roles.
- **Envy:** They may be envious of the redundancy payment distributed to others.
- **Resentment:** Retained employees will usually be expected to undertake additional work with no additional benefit.<sup>2</sup>

These emotions, if not effectively dealt with, can have a negative impact on the morale of the organisation. When morale is negatively impacted, it will tend to represent itself in the following ways:

- **Loss of productivity:** Employees may have



Redundancies can impact heavily on the remaining employees – the survivors.



**Bree Bignell** offers practical tips on handling 'survivor syndrome'.

trouble concentrating on work and may lack motivation. Employees may constantly engage in discussions regarding the future (of both their role and the organisation). Employees may also spend work time looking for alternative jobs.<sup>3</sup>

- **Increased absenteeism:** Employees may try to distance themselves from the environment by taking leave.<sup>4</sup>

- **Reduced loyalty to the organisation:** Employees may view redundancies as a break in the psychological contract of trust they have with the organisation. They may respond by reducing their loyalty and commitment to the organisation.<sup>5</sup>

- **Increased turnover:** Employees may:
  - Leave before they are retrenched
  - Leave in protest against the redundancies that have been made
  - Leave as they no longer enjoy working for the organisation.<sup>6</sup>

Organisations need to be aware of the enduring impacts downsizing can have and implementation processes to ensure cost savings they are achieving by reducing salary expenditure are not negated by issues associated with survivor syndrome.<sup>7</sup>

## Overcoming survivor syndrome

Survivor syndrome can be minimised and potentially avoided altogether with careful communication and planning. Organisations are encouraged to engage in the following behaviours to help reduce the impact of survivor syndrome.

### Communication<sup>8</sup>

Organisations need to provide information regularly and honestly. A culture should be adopted in which questions about the future of the individual and the organisation can be asked openly. Organisations must regularly explain the business rationale for reducing the workforce and what the organisation wants to achieve from the reduction. >>

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**Leader visibility and accessibility<sup>9</sup>**

Leaders must be visible and accessible throughout the process. If leaders (from the CEO/managing partner down to supervisors) attempt to be invisible and inaccessible at this time, it will reinforce fears there is more bad news to come, paralysing productivity.

**Counselling**

Many outplacement providers include counselling sessions for survivors as part of their service. The sessions provide survivors with an opportunity to release any negative emotions they may have whilst also concentrating on how to accept change and move forward.<sup>10</sup>

Managers can utilise LawCare to obtain immediate assistance in dealing with staff interpersonal issues (through the Manager Support Program). Managers should also encourage their employees to access LawCare.<sup>11</sup>

**Seek input<sup>12</sup>**

Where appropriate, seek input from the remaining employees on how they wish work to be redistributed or rearranged. By seeking employee input, the organisation is undertaking the first step to obtain employee buy-in and employees will be more likely to commit to the changes made.

**Job security<sup>13</sup>**

Organisations should inform employees once the redundancy process is complete. This enables remaining employees to feel secure in their roles and assists them to move forward.

**Emphasise the positives<sup>14</sup>**

Accentuate the WIIFM (what's in it for me) from the employee's perspective, focusing on what will be gained rather than what has been

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lost in terms of employees. Examples may include the potential to acquire new skills and take on additional responsibility.

**Celebrate quick wins<sup>15</sup>**

Recognise all achievements, particularly the small achievements initially. Success stories should be publicly recognised and celebrated. This actively demonstrates that the organisation values the employees and can lead to increased employee engagement.

**Identify stress<sup>16</sup>**

Educate managers on how to identify employee stress. Managers must be alert to fatigue and work overload. Managers should use the redundancy process to look at how work can be performed more efficiently to ultimately assist employees to perform their role more effectively.

**Training<sup>17</sup>**

Review training needs, particularly for those who are taking on a new role or additional duties.

Redundancy processes are stressful for all stakeholders. An effective organisation will place the focus on the openness and fairness of the process for those who are leaving. An even more effective organisation will place a similar focus on responding to and managing the changing needs and opinions of the remaining employees. Managing survivor syndrome is imperative for those organisations wanting realise benefits from the redundancies. ■

**Notes**

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