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## Mitigating Survivor Guilt

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During downsizing, it seems that most of a manager's energy, effort and attention is directed toward the employees losing their jobs and the process of communicating with them, arranging severance packages, benefits, outplacement services and the manner in which these employees leave. Managers who focus only on this side of the process are likely to neglect employees who remain. To prevent layoff survivor sickness, or to mitigate its impact, consider the following\*:

- Where possible, involve survivors in the decision-making process. Their attachments to the people, places and things that are disappearing are important factors. Survivors' perception of the equity or fairness of layoffs should be considered.
- A clear, open and direct layoff process may help reduce overall anxiety and uncertainty.
- You can't communicate too much! Survivors' need for information is well-documented. If you don't make it available to them, they may rely on gossip, rumors and speculation.
- Communicate on paper, by telephone and face-to-face. Issuing impersonal memos from behind closed office doors won't meet your employee's needs for information and may create more speculation and increased anxiety.
- There is no end to the kind of information survivors will need. Expect a range of requests from "the big picture" and strategic planning to the most minute, day-to-day details.
- Behave as though you were at a funeral. Even though you are under high stress, your sincerity and ability to empathize is needed. Your "people skills" can warm up what is often a cold, impersonal process.
- Take time to experience and to express your own feelings. Managing or controlling them may only add to your own stress, and create isolation from your employees and source of support.
- Acknowledge your feelings and those of others in your communication and interactions with your coworkers. Give up maintaining your image to become more human and accessible.
- Tell the truth about the layoff process and the changes taking place. Even if you don't have all the answers, people will appreciate your candor.
- Never say never. The uncertainty that employees feel is hard to cope with, and often your employees just want to know that "it's over." Resist giving easy reassurances, or the temptation to say what others want you to tell them.
- Facilitate the grieving process. Everyone experiences grief for what is lost. You can encourage this in your daily interactions by acknowledging your feelings. Publicly recognizing the losses and the grief you are all feeling can help. Rituals, on-site grief or transition groups, revitalization or team building experiences may also be helpful.
- Encourage the use of outside support systems. When most of an employee's needs are met from within the organization, creativity, productivity and commitment suffer during a layoff. A tree with a widespread and well-developed root system can withstand the storm.
- Take care of yourself so that you can take care of others. If you are experiencing layoff survivor sickness, you may not notice that others are suffering as well and you won't be able to respond.

If you'd like to find out more about how individuals and organizations cope with layoffs and change, contact your Employee Assistance Program. The EAP is a free, completely confidential service provided by your employer. Call:

**1-800-433-2320**

*\*David Noer, HEALING THE WOUNDS, OVERCOMING THE TRAUMA OF LAYOFFS AND REVITALIZING DOWNSIZED ORGANIZATIONS, Jorskey-Bass Publishers, 1993.*