Saying Goodbye When a Co-Worker Has Been Laid Off

When a co-worker has been laid off, you may experience many different emotions. If you were very close, you may feel as though you are losing a member of your family. If you weren’t close, you may still regret the loss of a member of your team or feel sad you didn’t get to know the person better. No matter what kind of relationship you had, you’ll want to respond in a sensitive and an appropriate way when you hear that a co-worker will be leaving.

Understanding what your co-worker may be feeling

No two people respond in exactly the same way to being laid off. Instead of assuming you know how your co-worker feels, listen to what he or she says and respond appropriately. Your co-worker may feel

- sad
- angry
- numb
- confused
- embarrassed
- worried
- guilty
- relieved

Talking to someone who has been laid off

It can be difficult to know what to say to someone who has been laid off. Some people who have lost their jobs respond by withdrawing and saying they “don’t want to talk about it.” Others talk so much about the situation that you may tire of hearing what they have to say. Some people who lose a job become very emotional and outwardly sad. Others may avoid you altogether, because you are one of the “survivors” of the downsizing or layoff. Here are some suggestions when talking with someone who has been laid off:

- Respond promptly to the news. Avoiding your co-worker may make you appear insensitive, especially if the two of you had a close working relationship. If you aren’t sure what to say, just a simple acknowledgment of your feelings is enough.
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You might say, “I just heard the news. I don’t know what to say.” Or, “I’m really sorry.” You can always offer more support later.

- **Take your cues from the person.** If the person wants to talk, sit down and give him your full attention. If he doesn’t want to talk, offer to come back at a different time.

- **Here are some words to say that the person may find comforting:**
  - “I’ll miss you.”
  - “I’ve enjoyed working with you.”
  - “Is there any way I can help?”
  - “You helped me a lot when you . . .”
  - “I’ve really admired how you . . .”

- **Here are some words to avoid:**
  - “I know just how you feel.”
  - “I wish I’d been laid off instead of you.”
  - “You’re better off without this company.”

- **Be realistic if you offer to help.** Don’t make promises you may not be able to keep -- for example, “I’ll introduce you to a friend of mine who would be a great contact.” Your friend may not be able to meet your co-worker.

- **Don’t try to make your co-worker feel better by criticizing the company or management.**

- **If a laid-off co-worker is angry and acts in ways that make you feel uncomfortable, or if the person makes threats or threatens to harm himself or someone else, contact human resources (HR), your manager, or the program that provided this publication.**

**Saying goodbye**

Saying goodbye in a thoughtful way shows that you appreciated a co-worker’s efforts. Depending how close you were and the circumstances of the departure, you might want to do the following:

- **Have people in your department sign a card, write a poem, or create a “goodbye booklet” for your co-worker.**

- **Take your co-worker to lunch.**

- **Chop in with others to buy a going-away gift or bouquet of flowers.**

- **Organize a goodbye gathering, during lunch or after work.** Goodbye gatherings can ease the transition for those who are leaving as well as for those who are staying. Ask people who will be staying if they’d like to give speeches or make some sort of presentation to those who will be leaving. It is usually best to check with the
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departing employee or employees about this type of activity and it’s best not to make it a surprise. Some companies, for safety and security reasons, do not allow former employees back into the workplace. It is best to check with a member of management or HR before planning an event.

Keeping in touch with co-workers

How much you keep in touch with co-workers who are leaving will depend on your relationship with them. If you liked a co-worker a lot or were good friends, you’ll want to plan ways to stay in touch through calls, e-mails, or visits.

• Take your cues from your co-worker. Even if you had a close working relationship, your co-worker may find it very painful to talk to people from your company right after a layoff. Be understanding if he wants to keep some distance at first. He may want to wait until he has some perspective on the layoff.

• Send brief notes and cards. If your co-worker doesn’t want to get together right away, she may still appreciate hearing from you or receiving news about former co-workers. You might drop the person a note to say, “I just wanted to let you know I’m thinking about you and would love to get together.” Or, pass on interesting news or information such as that one of your co-workers has had a baby or just moved to a new town.

• Remember that your co-worker’s needs may change over time. Right after the layoff, the person may mostly need emotional support. If he stays unemployed for a while, he may need more practical assistance. If he’s having trouble finding work, for example, he might appreciate job leads or a cooked meal for his family for dinner. Ask what would be most helpful.

• Point out helpful community resources. Many community centers, YMCAs, and houses of worship have support groups for people who have lost their jobs. Dozens of support groups are available on the Internet. Let the person know about other resources that might be useful.

• Let the person know you have confidence in her. After losing a job, some people begin to lose confidence in themselves, especially after a long period of employment. You can help keep your co-worker’s spirits up by reminding her of her strengths. Talk about her past accomplishments, and let her know you have confidence that she’ll find a great opportunity soon.

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