

Workplace Relationships - Losing Your Best Friend

We are a nation of workaholics. Spending 50 plus hours a week at work is not uncommon and many workers spend more time with their coworkers than they do their families. It is no wonder why workplace relationships are so pivotal in our lives.

These are the people we see everyday and the people we share so many experiences with. The highs and lows of the work world are attached with a multitude of emotions and we share them all with our coworkers. No one better understands that dimension of our lives better than the people we sit across the isles of cubicles from that make up our world.

The problem is that companies are merging, downsizing, and relocating in record numbers. In addition, employees are transferring and changing jobs in equally record numbers. So what happens when these strong and vital relationships are broken? The consequences vary with the duration and quality of the relationship but the emotional aftermath can be devastating and demoralizing.

The importance of the group dynamic is a well known concept and it goes hand in hand with the team building that every good manager attempts to do with their workforce. A good, solid team is the cornerstone of high morale and productivity. American companies spend millions of dollars in team building retreats, programs, and consultants. When the team is threatened employers stand to lose dollars in absenteeism, turnover, and productivity. But that is exactly what happens with the group dynamic is changed due to resignation, termination, or transfer.

The termination of an employee has far reaching implications not only for the employee but for the employees left behind. When a manager fires a well liked and long term worker, that worker's colleagues experience anger, resentment, and disorientation that, while usually temporary, disrupts the workplace. It takes a while for the group to regain equilibrium. But when there are multiple terminations, such as when downsizing, the employees who survive the workforce reduction may see their entire perception of their employer change.

Workers report higher degrees of dissatisfaction and stress following major downsizing or location changes. This dissatisfaction and stress translates in to dollars when correlated with productivity and absenteeism. Many companies find that savings anticipated by downsizing are reduced when they calculate the loss of productivity among the remaining employees. But in the real world, reductions in the workforce are often unavoidable. Are there things a manager can do to minimize these aftereffects? Yes, there are!

A good manager can minimize damages to their team by being honest and above board with all employees. Without sacrificing employee confidentiality, managers should give their team as much notice and information as possible. Hushed voices behind closed doors only feed the rumor mill and increase tension and stress. For many employees, what they know is not nearly as fearful as what they suspect. Secrecy can cause a systemic breakdown as fear and uncertainty spread throughout the workforce. Managers need to share information before the grapevine gets wind of impending terminations. Employees affected should be given as much notice as possible. This may fly in the face of traditional "Friday afternoon pink slips" but giving employee's notice can save a great deal in associated costs.

Give terminated employee's time to say good-bye and give closure to remaining employees. Then, in the aftermath, be sensitive to workers feelings of loss and disorientation. Because the team is now different, team building needs to start anew. Many workers' complaints will pass once routine is reestablished and time passes. What managers need to avoid is the anger and resentment that can change the way workers view their employer. Managers need to reaffirm their commitment to remaining employees and express acknowledgement of their feelings. While the reality of workforce reduction needs to be addressed, so do the feelings that accompany them.

Managers need to change their perception that workers are numbers on a balance sheet and look at them as living, breathing personalities that bond and form relationships. Honoring these relationships with truth, honesty, and sensitivity can lessen the trauma that change frequently brings. It can also lessen the ancillary costs that changes in the team dynamic bring.

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