Sacking is Hard. Managers Make it Harder.

By Dinesh Weerakkody.



Most Sri Lankan managers who have survived the traumas of industry overcapacity and restructuring, the onslaught of foreign talent, and the growing sophistication of customers and technologies will agree that getting rid of employees is one of the

most difficult executive actions a manager has to take in his career – often because they are totally clueless about how to rise to the occasion and be a positive influence on the departing employee. It is perhaps the most unpleasant task of a manager's career. Having to tell employees that they no longer have a job. That can cause nervousness, guilt and fear, which is understandable. Often CEOs use ill-prepared managers to give the message. As a result they fluff the interview. Failing to give the individual relevant information, appearing offhand or insensitive or making promises that cannot be kept are common mistakes that top managers make. Some managers abrogate responsibility altogether. "You'd be shocked at how poorly this is managed," says Ahamed Ali, Chief Executive of Cornucopia consulting in Bangalore, which advises top Indian companies on human resources issues. I have heard reports of employees learning in emails that they're being laid off. That is poor management. As the slowdown continues to put many out of work, Consultants, are still to provide a guide to handle redundancy interviews. A step-by-step guide is long overdue that covers everything from the details managers need to know about to severance packages, benefits and outplacement deals to handling employees' reactions. Mishandling the task can cause more than temporary distress for the employee, says Ahamed Ali, who has more than 25 years' experience in human resources consultancy. Research following the mass redundancies of the early 2000s found damage to the morale of remaining employees lasted longer if they felt their departing colleagues had been treated rudely or unfairly. Legal action is another danger. If managers start offering different people different packages, you end up with inequities that can become the basis for legal suits.

Treated with Dignity

In any redundancy situation employees should be treated with dignity, even when they are escorted straight out of the building, a policy still common in many companies. Some US technology companies have recently sent employees to off-site locations to tell them their jobs are axed and they cannot return to their offices. Such policies would simply load more guilt on to individual managers.

The best thing is to tell an employee that's the deal and they're not being singled out. Fridays are apparently the best time to deliver the bad news, giving people the weekend to prepare for the reality of a working day without any work to go to. The venue for the meeting should be private and the conversation uninterrupted. Managers are advised to rehearse their remarks but never to read from a script – to start with the reason for the cuts, to make clear this does not reflect on the employees work, and to express empathy for the difficulties it will cause.

Ahamed Ali, a former HR Asia Pacific Area Vice President of GlaxoSmithKline who took a leadership role in the merger of Glaxo Wellcome and SmithKline Beecham, says, “The employee’s reaction may be the most difficult part.” The management should ‘be prepared for a cloud of uncertainty to settle over the company, because employees start wondering about the future of the firm and they get braced for more surprises. The most common responses are: accepting, argumentative, angry, confused, upset. Therefore, overwhelmed. Managers need professional advice on how to cope with the trauma. For example, an often-angry employee would say: “This is a sell out or oh yeah, like they’re going to save money on my salary. Why not lay off one of the fat cats who make 10 times what I do?” Another, overwhelmed by the news, asks “How am I going to find another job? There is nobody else who hires people in my position.” For an employee in the middle of a personal crisis, this can be the crushing blow. The ones managers should worry about most are the people who are overwhelmed or distraught. You know that some employees will be hot heads and argue and blame everybody around them. But there are always a few employees who are ready to take the package and go.

Professional Tips

Before you embark on a challenging mission of telling an employee to go, check whether key messages have sunk in. Then should you be flexible and make exceptions whenever you can? There may be cases where an exception can be made, but it is always better to check first rather than making a promise that you can’t keep. Then should you tell the employee: “I know how you feel.” No, because you don’t. Should you be subtle with the news to spare their feelings? No. Unless you make yourself very clear, they may not understand that they are losing their job. Much of the advice seems like common sense. So why are managers often ill-prepared for the task? For one thing it may happen only once in their careers and many HR Departments do not have the capability to advise their teams. Most CEOs do not have the required skills and competencies to handle employee separation because it is not anticipated when managers are recruited and receiving training. It may seem negative and defensive to suggest that an early task should be learning best practice in giving people the marching orders.

Mass job cuts also put the whole organization under strain, leaving senior managers unable to devote time to emotional needs of those who are departing. The worst thing that managers do is to be unnecessarily terse and cut off employees’ questions or reactions. It is all about being open and honest, listening, recognizing that the messages are going to be unwelcome and being empathetic without taking

all the trauma on yourself. In the final analysis there may be no one good way to deliver the message to a departing employee, but there are certainly many bad ways to do it! @