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A STUDY ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF REDUNDANCY ON SURVIVORS

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NANDYAL

ABSTRACT

The challenging economic times facing many countries over the last few years has resulted in many changes as like making redundancies. Whilst this clearly has major impact on those being made redundant, there also impacts for those left behind. The impact on those remaining can also be traumatic and can further hinder a company's ability to survive if not managed effectively. 'Survivor Syndrome' describes the physical and psychological impact of redundancies on the remaining staff that who does not lose their jobs. Redundancies often come with survivor syndrome and form massive downsizing to just one or two employees; redundancies have a negative effect on the workforce. For the 'survivors' there needs to be strategies and measures in place to restore the work place back to its previous state or at least a state of optimum productivity and engagement.

KEYWORDS

Layoff, Productivity, Redundancy, Survivors, Survivor Syndrome.

APPROACH

This article is related to the survivors who feel insecure by the adoption of layoffs in the organization and the impact on productivity. When redundancy becomes necessary quite rightly the initial focus is on those being let go. Yet all too often little consideration is afforded to those who remain. Employees wonder if that's more to come and some will consider leaving before they're forced out. Those who are left have to cope with the range of emotions from guilt to survivor's envy to resentment, emotional contagion and uncertainty that can result from layoffs. The trouble with corporate restructuring or downsizing is not simply that firms are overdoing it, cutting staff to the point of 'corporate anorexia'. Nor is it simply those greedy companies are fattening their profits at the expense of laid-off employees. The fundamental problem with corporate restructuring as it is practised today – as non-going strategy even in profitable times, rather than as an emergency move – is that it is based on a flawed vision of that makes people and organizations work well. It creates an unhealthy culture in the workplace, and sooner or later we are all going to pay.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational change in the form of reorganizations, downsizing and mergers are a part of everyday life for today's business community. The ability of organizations to manage change quickly, positively and productively leads to competitive advantage. In these changing organizations, there are three categories of people, those who will not lose their jobs, those who may lose their jobs and those who will lose their jobs. The first two categories are referred to as "survivors". Excessive downsizing experiences create a new psycho-social problem: "survivor syndrome".

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To explore the concept of 'Survivor Syndrome'
- To study the present perception of survivors
- To identify the psychological impact on survivors
- To give suggestions for effective implementation of redundancy strategy

METHODOLOGY

The paper attempt to explore the concepts, obviously it's an exploratory research where earlier studies on the subject matter has been readdressed to give insight to phenomenon.

Research limitations: This is a conceptual study, and hence, there is no hypothesis tested as an empirical study. It does provide a good foundation for future research.

CONCEPT

This article will examine survivor syndrome, identify its causes and suggest remedies that lead to rebuilding employee commitment to the new organization. Downsizing refers to the planned elimination of positions or jobs. Downsizing may also occur when an organization reduces work (not just employees) and implements cost-containment strategies that streamline activities such as transaction processing, information systems, TQM and even re-engineering. The decision to downsize is usually a strategic one, undertaken to reduce the waste and inefficiency that builds up in an organization over time. It is expected to improve business development and repositioning for future growth and success.

In 1994, Cameron reported that more than 80 per cent of Fortune 500 companies had downsized in the previous five years and that 100 per cent were planning to do so in next five years. Virtually every sector has caught the downsizing fever, from federal governments to trade unions. The results of a survey just referred to, observed "more than half of the 1,468 firms that downsized indicated that productivity deteriorated from downsizing". In another survey of 1,005 firms that downsized between 1986 and 1991, it was found that only 46 per cent actually reduced expenses, only 32 per cent actually increased profits, and only 22 per cent actually increased productivity. According to a *Wall Street Journal* article published in 1994, "profits increased in less than half of 531 large companies two years after restructuring; only 37 percent of 500 companies who downsized since 1987 reported increased profits". There are many more recent surveys that have documented similar results. The basic and a priori strategic plans do not seem to correlate with the a *posteriori* results of studies indicating less than rousing success. The objectives are quite well-known before starting the process of downsizing, as well as the expected benefits to the organization such as:

- lower overheads;
- smoother communications;
- less bureaucracy;
- greater entrepreneurship;
- faster decision making; and
- increased productivity

One of the most common reasons why companies that downsize perform so poorly is that they often are successful at anticipating and preparing for the employees who are to be released, but they may not be prepared for the low morale and lower productivity experienced by the survivors of the downsizing. Furthermore, when the organization needs its people at their best, they happen to be at their worst. The employees are said to be experiencing what some human resource professionals are now calling "survivor syndrome" or "sickness" which will be the focus of this article. A downsizing plan must consider the economic and institutional environments (transition assistance, severance pay, advance notification, etc.), cost benefit (numbers of employees, exit dates,

severance pays, stay bonuses, relocations costs, etc.) legal determinants, human resources and ethical responsibility. These aspects are very important to obtain the expected results, and some omissions on the planning of downsizing may result in a failure.

- That downsizing has not been effectively planned, managed, and implemented.
- That downsizing has caused resentment and resistance in surviving employees.

Examining the critical aspects of human capital and strategic competitiveness, this hypothesis is founded on the fact that, during periods of merger mania and downsizing, attention is diverted from other important issues. While managers must continue to make short-term operational decisions, other long-term commitments may be postponed. Also, because investments in human capital do not bring immediate returns, this condition may result in lower investment in human capital.

Downsizing creates important effects inside and outside an organizational environment. In fact, downsizing results in breaking the organization into several or many groups. A group of employees leaves; sometimes, a group may receive advance layoff notification and a group stays. Confusion is high because employees who lose their jobs may not really understand why, since it was not their fault. The decision is often not related to their performance, while the ones who stay have done nothing more or special to keep their positions. Previous research reveals that organizations often enjoy an initial increase in productivity because employees work harder and more competitively in an attempt to keep their jobs. This initial increased productivity is short-lived and is followed by a strong in the organization. This survivor syndrome is defined by some human resource professionals as being the "mixed bag of behaviours and emotions often exhibited by remaining employees following an organizational downsizing.

Downsizing has become an organizational fact of life, and many surveys have confirmed that the survivors are often ignored before, during and after the corporate streamlining. The employees that lose their jobs during an organizational downsizing go through an emotionally wrenching experience. Yet the co-workers who remain with their employers have similar reactions. Today's survivors can be tomorrow's disgruntled, unproductive workers or tomorrow's team players, enthusiastic about being part of a community at work that values their contributions. Organizations have under-estimated the negative effects of downsizing and do not take into account the difficulties of motivating a surviving workforce emotionally damaged by watching others lose their jobs. Yet, motivating survivors to achieve greater productivity is essential for company success and employee job security.

PRE-DISPOSING FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO LAYOFF SURVIVOR SYNDROME INCLUDE:

- Ineffective organizational communication before, during and after the layoff
- Loss of co-workers (support, companionship, sharing work)
- Perceived unfairness and inequity in conducting the layoff
- Unrealistic workloads
- Lack of contact and attention from management
- Loss of trust in the organization and its leaders
- Lack of recognition of the special challenges faced by layoff survivors
- Employees' perception that their work is not valued by the company

JOB INSECURITY: Survivors wonder how long they will be able to keep their jobs, and they worry that they are not prepared to find work elsewhere, or that there are no comparable outside jobs. This will influence their work behaviours and attitudes on a daily basis.

UNFAIRNES: Doubts arise about the wisdom of the layoff choices made by the managers, as well as the competence with which management has guided the organization. Most organizations downsized for the first time, therefore the exercise was not planned, managed and implemented effectively. Employees have felt that the process was not fair.

DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, FATIGUE: The process is demoralizing and stressful for the managers who must lay off employees, as well as for employees who lose friends and colleagues. No one is prepared, including the managers having the difficult task of announcing the new structure. One poll of 1,142 companies that downsized, conducted by the American Management Association, revealed that nearly half were "badly" or "not well" prepared for the dismantling, and had not anticipated the kinds of problems that developed subsequently. More than half reported that they had begun downsizing with no policies or programmes. High on the list of anxieties were often unspoken questions like: "Will I be the next to go – even though it looks now as if I'm staying?"

REDUCED RISK TAKING AND MOTIVATION: Many survivors are afraid to take advantage of an employment opportunity, accept a new work assignment, or discuss a work related problem for fear that they expose themselves to criticism or poor performance appraisals and, therefore, become the target of the future layoff. They try to fit very well into their actual position of being "safe".

DISTRUST AND BETRAYAL: Some employees no longer sense the organization's future or their place as an integral member of the organization. Employees do not see why they should be concerned about their employer, since this employer was not really concerned for their colleagues.

LACK OF RECIPROCAL COMMITMENT: Some employees feel the organization has abandoned them. It has not treated them with the dignity and respect to which they believe they are entitled. The kind win-win situation (employee-employer) developed over the years was totally cancelled.

DISSATISFACTION WITH PLANNING AND COMMUNICATION: Lack of communication and adequate preparation of employees for layoffs causes survivors to view the entire process with suspicion. Only 44 per cent of companies that downsized in the last five years shared details of their plans with employees, and even fewer (34 per cent) told survivors how they would fit into the company's new strategy, according to a 1992 survey of 1,020 directors of human resources.

DISSATISFACTION WITH THE LAYOFF PROCESS: Layoffs that are handled insensitively or in a humiliating fashion create permanent resentment amongst employees.

LACK OF STRATEGIC DIRECTION: The concentration on short-term cash problems leads employees to suspect the validity of the long-term strategy of the organization. Most companies communicate their longterm plan and, in a few weeks, priorities change dramatically. Management energy is absorbed and all aspects of corporate culture are diversified.

LACK OF MANAGEMENT CREDIBILITY: Some employees believe management is no longer capable of addressing the core business concerns of the organization.

SHORT-TERM PROFIT ORIENTATION: Some survivors fear that management will institute further layoffs if profits do not reach acceptable levels in the near future.

SENSE OF PERMANENT CHANGE: There is an overall sense that working for the organization will never be as good as it once was. Managers who remain after downsizing are working in a different environment and they must adapt themselves to this new organization that is not as friendly as before. They are now managing more people and jobs, and have to work longer hours because their job descriptions and the expected outcomes have not changed. They must establish a new network, since some of their contacts are gone or have been moved. Some managers will adapt, many are not willing or able to work under these conditions. Furthermore, surviving employees become narrow-minded, self-absorbed and risk-averse. Morale sinks, productivity drops and survivors distrust management there is also the impact of survivors' guilt. This guilty feeling is experienced by the supervisors who do the laying off, as well as by the surviving workers. These workers contemplate why their colleagues were laid off instead of themselves.

PRE-DISPOSING FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO LAYOFF SURVIVOR SYNDROME INCLUDE:

- Ineffective organizational communication before, during and after the layoff
- Loss of co-workers (support, companionship, sharing work)
- Perceived unfairness and inequity in conducting the layoff
- Unrealistic workloads
- Lack of contact and attention from management
- Loss of trust in the organization and its leaders
- Lack of recognition of the special challenges faced by layoff survivors
- Employees' perception that their work is not valued by the company

THERE ARE SEVERAL POINTS THAT ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERS SHOULD BEAR IN MIND:

- When planning a layoff or restructuring, don't forget to include the survivors and anticipate their special needs.
- Remember that fear of losing one's job is not a positive source of motivation.
- Don't expect the survivors to express gratitude about keeping their jobs by working harder and better.
- Seek ways to offset the effects of increased workload on the remaining employees by redefining responsibilities and streamlining tasks.
- How the layoff is carried out affects those who stay. Downsizing should be conducted with fairness, respect, and effective communication.
- Managers should be empowered and trained to effectively lead their employees into the new, unknown territory of the post-layoff organization.
- Be alert to possible signs of Layoff Survivor Syndrome, such as increasing absenteeism, sick leave, tardiness, and tension among workers.

'SURVIVOR SYNDROME' – REVIEW

'Survivor syndrome' – which describes the physical and psychological impact of redundancies on the remaining staff who didn't lose their jobs – has affected many employers in the current economic climate, according to a survey by *Personnel Today's* sister publication *IRS Employment Review*.

The survey of 116 employers – covering a combined workforce of almost 425,000 people – showed that survivor syndrome can limit the potential financial savings of redundancies by reducing the performance and attendance of the remaining employees, and increasing staff turnover.

Employers that had been through one redundancy programme were affected by an average of 3.4 different negative responses from remaining staff, while those that had been through more than one experienced an average of 4.2. These included lower morale (67%), reduced motivation (53%), higher rates of sickness absence (65% of employers reported increased stress levels among the remaining employees), and retention problems (17%).

However, the findings revealed that there were ways to limit the impact of survivor syndrome on organisations, namely through effective communication processes. Some 85.7% of respondents said they "strive to communicate meaningfully with all employees during a redundancy programme".

The respondents attempted to retain their survivors by consulting them on the implications of the redundancy programme for them (81.2%), providing them with practical support (56.4%), involving them in change programmes (48.5%) and undertaking employee engagement exercises (24.7%).

The most effective communication methods were found to be general staff meetings and briefings by line managers. Top tips included being open and honest, providing regular feedback and encouraging staff to voice their concerns.

Of the employers surveyed, 84.5% had made redundancies over the past three years. Most of this group (92%) had experienced job losses in the year to February/March 2009.

Survivor syndrome is likely to become even more prevalent as job cuts continue. Some 70.5% of respondents anticipate further redundancies in the coming year. And they expect to lose 45% more employees in the coming 12 months than they made redundant in the previous three years.

CONCLUSION

If an organisation is about to make redundancies, particularly on a large scale, it is likely that employees in the new 'slimmed down' organisation will suffer some effects of survivor syndrome. However, the impact of the syndrome can be greatly reduced by taking proactive steps to understand and address its root causes. Effective survivor management can give organisations a real opportunity to improve the commitment and engagement of the remaining workforce, thus securing the health of the business in the long term.

- Provide training to the employees
- Fair pays to them
- Decentralisation of authority
- Providing perks
- Involving them in decision making and planning

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