

Help! Save My Career!

by Donald Asher, America's Job Search Guru

(this article originally appeared in *USAirways Magazine*)

Dear Guru Don:

What's with telling managers how to fire people!?! (See last month's article, "How to Fire People.") It's an outrage that companies are laying off loyal employees while managers take fat bonuses for running their companies into the ground. You act like it's no big deal to get fired, like we should all just suck it up and take it like a good soldier. Why? For what greater good? I think you were missing the bigger picture in your article. Companies should not be laying off their workers, otherwise there will be no one to buy anybody's products and services. It's a vicious cycle, and your article doesn't help.

Sign me,

What Goes Around...

Dear What Goes –

I understand that you are frustrated with the current economy, but I think I *do* understand the bigger picture. Companies are going to lay off workers whether I write columns or not. My point was simply that there are better and worse ways to do it. Read the article again. It is good advice on how to conduct reductions in force in compliance with labor laws and in a way that is fair, equitable, safe, and considerate.

As hard as it may be to believe, those managers with "fat bonuses" also get laid off. They also suffer in a down economy. With a few high-profile exceptions, most of us are pretty much in the same boat. Once you're thrown overboard, you're going to get all wet whether your ticket says first class or steerage. So bosses are fired, too.

There are certainly bad and stupid ways to lay people off. I know of a nonprofit that had a \$50,000 budget shortage. When the top two officers started looking at the list of employees and deciding how to make up the shortfall, they noticed that one employee's salary was exactly \$50,000. So they fired him. That's sloppy management. That's the type of non-thinking that I was counseling against.

Nobody *wants* to lay off employees, and most managers are loath to do it. A friend of mine spent many years building the career center of a major state university into a thing of beauty. When the state passed a reactionary and poorly designed anti-tax law, the state university system was decimated. He was told to prepare plans to reduce his staff by 25%! He quit instead, heartbroken that a decade of work would be destroyed. At least that gave them one step toward a 25% RIF.

So have a little empathy for those bosses who have the unwelcome and unwanted chore of planning and directing staff reductions. It's an agonizing assignment.

As to your point about economics, you're right only if all employers act in a similar fashion and at the same time. If I keep and pay my workers while everyone else is shedding theirs, I will simply have greater losses compared to my competitors. As long as customers and future employees don't punish me for reducing staff, layoffs in a down-trending economy are perfectly rational.

By the way, I do think it is a big deal to get laid off. But I was writing from the perspective of the manager, a perspective not often covered. In addition to your critical letter, I got several thanking me for covering a difficult topic. You are right, though. Layoffs can be devastating. For more on this, read *The Disposable American: Layoffs and Their Consequences*, by Louis Uchitelle. On the other hand, many people bounce back from layoffs, get new jobs, start new businesses, pursue latent interests, and thrive. A layoff can be a catalyst for change, an opportunity to restructure one's life on new terms. More on this next month.

My best wishes for your continued success,

Donald Asher

Dear Guru Don –

Recently my IT workplace environment has taken a turn to the absurd. My boss earlier this year scheduled a team event to watch a movie over lunch. She sent out a meeting invite and scheduled time on my calendar. The movie was the uncut version of "Office Space." The basic story line revolved around three programmers who devise an application to embezzle money from their employer. The movie, if you have not seen it, includes a lot of foul language, plus some nudity, sexual innuendo with the boss, and rap music with the "N" word.

I found the movie to be very offensive and uncomfortable. I strongly had the urge to get up and walk out at several stages of the movie but did not due to her—my boss's—overbearing management style. I would not have been a "team player" if I had.

This type of activity goes directly against many of the values stated by the company—to be respectful, to accept/promote cultural diversity, etc. Recently, I approached my manager's manager and divulged this information. He did not appear to be surprised when informed of the movie. There has been no response from him at this time.

I am at a crossroad because I have lost all respect for her and the organization at this time. What direction would you suggest I take? Where do I go from here?

Sign me,

Not Amused

Dear Not Amused –

This is a classic case of the type that causes HR managers to lose sleep. One person's humor is another's offense. Many consider "Office Space" one of the top-ten funniest movies ever made about

the workplace. But that doesn't mean it should ever, ever be shown in a workplace! What was your boss thinking?!?

There is a time and a place for everything, and this movie should *not* be watched at work. I love the late, great George Carlin, too, but his "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television" should never be played on television. Duh!

So your boss is a clod. I'd like to know her rationale for believing this would be a bonding experience. This is eerily like another media product about working, the American version of "The Office," starring Steve Carell as the haplessly clueless Michael Scott. By the way, this is another show that should not be shown at work.

One more time for everybody: Don't tell ethnic or gender-based jokes at work. Don't engage in sexual innuendo at work. Don't use profanity at work. Don't mock any religion at work. Don't try to convert your coworkers to your religion. Don't mock any group, and that includes any race, gender, age, size of person, sexual orientation, persons from any particular country of origin, people with accents, people with more or less pigment in their skin, the differently abled, and people with illnesses or genetic disorders about which they can do nothing. Don't even make fun of people who dress funny, because they are not going to get it, and when you explain it to them, they are not going to like it.

The workplace is not a comedy club.

As to your situation, if this were an isolated incident, I would suggest you just get over it. You have already complained to your boss's boss. That is a big act, whether you know it or not. However, this seems to be the final straw for you. Before you leave, you should try to get the organization to live up to its ideals. In a perfect world, you could just sit down with your boss and talk it out, but I am inferring that's not a good idea. You can go to HR and file a formal complaint, and ask for a sit down with your boss *with an HR officer present* to explain how the movie affected you. As to being a team player, that is beside the point. You're apparently not on this team. There may be others who would love to complain as well, or you may be all alone in taking offense. It really doesn't matter.

In a nutshell, if you can't get over it and move on, make a formal complaint.

My best wishes for your continued success,

Donald Asher

Send your career emergency to don@donaldasher.com, and watch this space for Asher's response.

BIO: Donald Asher is a nationally known writer and speaker on careers and higher education. He is the author of eleven books, including *Cracking the Hidden Job Market; How to Get Any Job: Life Launch and Re-Launch for Everyone Under 30; Graduate Admissions Essays*, the best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process; *Asher's Bible of Executive Resumes; Cool Colleges for the Hyper-Intelligent, Self-Directed, Late Blooming, and Just Plain Different*; and *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why* (named Business Book of the Year 2008 by national career columnist Joyce Lain

Kennedy). Asher speaks over 100 days a year from coast to coast, to college and corporate audiences. He is eager to hear your career emergency.