

Help! Save My Career!

by Donald Asher, America's Job Search Guru

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Dear Guru Don:

I hear layoffs are coming in my department. How can I insulate myself against this career tsunami? I'm not the best worker in the department, but I'm not the worst, either. You've written in the past that workers can be deluded about their chances of being fired or laid off. I don't think I'm delusional. I think I'm a realist. I like my job. I get along with most people most of the time. I wish my educational credentials were a little stronger, but I do have a college degree. My last review was solid. What can I do to protect myself?

Sign me,

Can't Swim Steve

Dear Can't Swim "Steve":

You are not alone. The layoff tsunami is definitely going around. Here is my three-point plan to protect yourself against layoff:

First, and I could not make this more plain: *Do not piss off your boss!* Superiors provide layoff lists to *their* superiors, and so on up the chain of command. It is better to be incompetent than to have a reputation as a "difficult" person. "Difficult" people are always on the top of the layoff lists. So pay attention to boss management.

Second, if you can, get involved in a core business activity, the central revenue chain for your organization. People working on special projects and peripheral lines of business will go first. People in staff positions go next. People in the revenue chain go last. Think of the organization as a human body. The revenue chain is the beating heart. It's the last to go. Get as close to the central function of your department as you can.

Third, start looking for a new home in the organization. Do this *quietly*. People who are ruffed can often find a new assignment somewhere in the vast reaches of an organization. It may involve a move, or an unpleasant assignment, but I think any job is a good thing to have right now. So prepare that internal resume, and start looking around.

I once interviewed a woman who survived the shutdown of the West Coast operations of a major corporation. They consolidated all functions into corporate HQ back east. She was the very last person. She had a desk in the middle of a see-through floor of a Silicon Valley high rise, surrounded by acres of empty carpet. She was a secretary, but she survived wave after wave of layoffs. How? She managed the administration of the transfers, and she managed the facilities. So, if all else fails,

one way to ride the last wave is to be in charge of layoffs, which brings us to our next reader's query: How to fire people.

My best wishes for your continued success,

Donald Asher

Dear Guru Don:

Help! I have to fire some people and I am absolutely dreading it. It's not their fault. The company is downsizing, and that's just the way it is. I may get fired myself. But first, I have to fire people who are my friends, who have children to support, and mortgages to pay. I am not even sure I can do it. I just got into management myself three years ago, and in some ways, I wish I hadn't done it. What is your advice? What is the right way to fire people?

Can't Sleep "Sara"

Dear Can't Sleep "Sara":

To quote Bill Clinton, I feel your pain. This is the worst part of a manager's job, but at the same time, it is a critical part of a manager's job. You can't be a landlord unless you can evict people, and you can't be a boss unless you can fire people. If you can't fire people, you will eventually get run over by subordinates who discover this about you. In fact, there is a management theory that you should fire someone once in awhile just to keep the rest of the team on its toes. I don't ascribe to this theory, but I do understand it.

There is a right way to fire people. First of all, you have to decide whom to fire, and what your rationale for selecting those people is going to be. If you have a team of 10 people, and you need to lay off three, which three will you pick? You can pick names out of a hat or go in alphabetical order, but my recommendation is to pick the three that are not essential, or the three that are the weakest contributors, or some combination of these factors. You can use seniority as a tie breaker. There are some concerns about this process, however, and I would want you to have legal review of your process before you start firing anybody. Your H.R. department and your house counsel should green light your efforts before you act.

Henry Lederman, a shareholder with Littler Mendelson, P.C., based in San Francisco and one of the premiere employment law firms in the country, has this advice: "What we tell our clients, if they're considering firing someone, is to make a decision based solely on performance. What absolutely cannot be done is any type of consideration of a person's ethnicity, age, gender, disability status, color of skin, or religion. These cannot be considered."

You've said that your staff does not deserve to be laid off, but you still have to make decisions about who is most deserving of retention, and you have to make that decision in a way that is defensible. Mr. Lederman warns that employees who are fired for performance issues need to know they were

not performing to expectations; they need to be warned; they need to understand the warning; and they need to have had some time to bring their performance in line with expectations, so be careful.

Next, design your firing process with the dignity of the employee in mind. For example, you might decide to fire people at the end of the day, after others have left the building, so that there is no perper walk past colleagues.

Explain the business rationale to the terminated employees. Let them know why the contraction was necessary. Be ready to face tough questions about how they were selected. Depending on the laws in your state, you may not have to tell them much, but have your plan in place before you start.

Never fire people alone. Have two people representing management in the room at all times, so there is a witness to the process. It is sometimes a good idea to have one person take notes while the other does the talking. Ask H.R. for help on this.

Fire people in groups if you can, if they have similar circumstances. This reduces the feeling that they were singled out. This is especially important if the layoffs are financially motivated, and personal performance had little to do with the people being terminated.

Fire people all at once, rather than in dribs and drabs. Get the pain over with.

Firing on a Friday is minimally disruptive, *but*, if you think the fired employees are going to foment a rebellion among the ones retained, it may be better to lay them off on a Monday, when the remaining employees will be inaccessible for most of the week.

Decide in advance how much security is an issue. It is humiliating to have a security officer stand next to you while you put your kids' pictures in a box, but on the other hand, sabotage and theft can be a risk. So you have to balance these concerns. IT should terminate their Internet, intranet, and email access by the close of the day. You should obviously get back any laptops, cell phones, keys, ID and access cards that belong to the company.

Offer to send the person home in a cab if they become overly upset. Offer to pack their private effects for them and send them home later if they prefer, or offer to let them come back at a time of their choosing to gather their things.

It's a tough job, but it's part of being the boss.

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.