

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

WIELDING THE AXE: A PRIMER

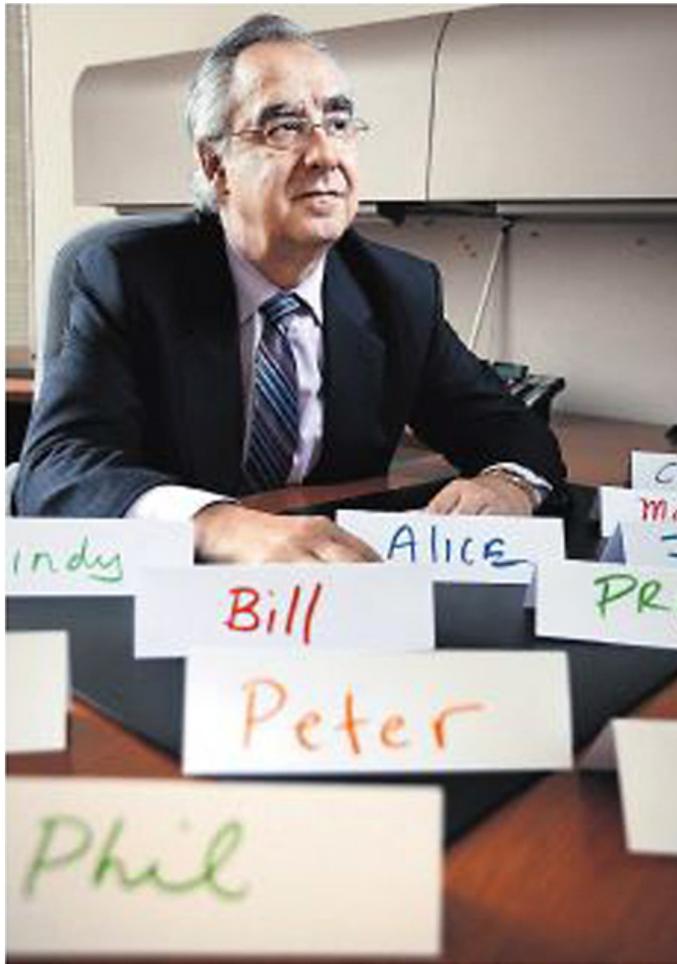
Killing them softly

As the economy falters, more jobs will be lost. Many managers are in for a rude awakening: Accustomed to years of growth, it will be the first time they have to pull the trigger. Here are tips on how to do the dirty deed

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Human resources adviser Bob Benwick recalls watching in amazement as a supervisor of a Vancouver hospital's cleaning staff ran screaming from the room after being told by a manager that her job was being outsourced.

Instead of taking the severance notice the manager tried to hand to her, the woman ran down the hall



HR advisor Bob Benwick: "When it comes to doing the dirty deed, often executives crumble and run into emotional trouble over it."

yelling: "If I don't see it, you can't fire me."

A few days later, unbeknownst to Mr. Benwick, the hospital manager decided to have a process server

deliver the notice. When he caught up to the woman's car at a stoplight and handed her the paper, she drove over his foot.

"That was a really wild, but totally inappropriate, way to tell someone they no longer had a job," recalls Mr. Benwick, chairman of Vancouver executive coaching company R.W. Benwick Associates Ltd.

It's the sort of disaster that can happen if managers aren't sensitive to the emotional impact of delivering the "you're fired" news, Mr. Benwick says.

He should know, after presiding over the firings of hundreds of people during a 20-year career as a personnel manager and adviser to executives on how to be humane when terminating employees.

"Executives can see themselves as very powerful and effective, but when it comes to doing the dirty deed, often they crumble and run into emotional trouble over it."

More and more managers are going to face the pain of pulling the trigger in the coming months, experts warn, as a softening economy leads companies to slash payrolls.

For many, it will be a rude awakening: After nearly two decades of economic expansion, many who have never faced the prospect of letting people go will be handed the axe and told to start cutting.

In Canada, job reductions in July were more severe than in any month since 1991, according to Statistics Canada. And it could grow bleaker in both Canada and the United States by the end of the year, projects Chicago-based outplacement consultancy Challenger Gray & Christmas, Inc.

"The four-month stretch we are now entering is typically the heaviest job-cutting period of the year, as employers scramble to meet annual earnings goals and make staffing adjustments based on the coming year's budget," says John Challenger, Challenger Gray's chief executive officer.

Nearly 40 per cent of Canadian companies are planning to slice jobs in the next six months, finds a survey of 234 companies by employment law firm Rubin Thomlinson LLP.

For managers who have to wield the axe, that's when the cold chill hits, Mr. Benwick says. "When you have to sit down and look at someone in their baby blues and say 'you are no longer here any more,' it's always an emotional, painful process for all concerned," he says. "Every time, it takes out a piece of my heart."

But since the deed has to be done, there are things managers can do to reduce their own and their employees' distress, the experts say.

"Even if the person is expecting it, they will be in shock," says Christine Thomlinson, a partner at Rubin Thomlinson, which held a conference for managers this month called Termination for Tough Times.

To help employees get over their panic, it is important to be as businesslike, direct and cool-headed as possible, she says. "Treat every termination meeting as though you are delivering the message to your best friend. If you handle the meeting with respect and put yourself in the place of the person receiving the difficult message, you will naturally be sensitive and respected by the employee."

The goal of a manager should be to convey information concisely and keep the meeting from getting sidetracked by the emotions of the moment, Ms. Thomlinson advises. To do that requires preparation and practice.

“Even the most poised manager can stumble over words in a meeting that is so uncomfortable. If you haven’t done a termination meeting before, script it and go through it with someone,” she suggests.

It is important to have a “party line” that summarizes the reason for the firing, Ms. Thomlinson says. “Be prepared to answer the question ‘why me?’ because most employees will ask, and it is amazing how unprepared employers are to answer.”

What you say must be consistent, so keep it simple, she adds. “If it is a cutback because of the poor economy and you start discussing performance issues, the mixed messages will cause resentment, and the person will feel that everything he or she was told could not be trusted.”

Whatever the reason, it isn’t necessary to dwell on it, because the meeting should be a presentation of facts, and not a discussion of other options, says Mark Toombs, Calgary-based president of management consultant Toombs Inc., which advises companies on employment terminations.

“It comes down to the [fact that the] decision has been made and the reality is this is a fait accompli, so let’s keep this to the point and look ahead and not back.”

But being businesslike doesn’t mean you can’t express your emotions. In fact, if you don’t, you’ll appear heartless, Mr. Toombs says. “If the manager is genuinely sorry to see the person leaving, then it is perfectly normal and helpful to express that he or she is sad to have to deliver the news.”

If tears come to your eyes, that’s all right, he says. But this is not a time for a reminiscing sob session or second-guessing, he says.

Don’t get into any debate, Mr. Toombs advises. “If the person is asking ‘why me’ and ‘why now’ during the meeting, just say ‘this is not the time to talk about that.’ “

For a manager who has never delivered such news, he recommends writing down the points that have to be made and memorizing them. But it is vital never to read from a script, which delivers a frigid and uncaring message, he says.

The decision will affect the individual’s family, so express your concern for their future. Suggest that you want to help them get on their feet and on with their lives, he says.

“But you need to be careful about the amount of support you promise, because the employee may interpret that too deeply and, if you don’t support them as much as they thought they should be supported after they leave the company, it can leave a bad feeling on both sides,” Mr. Toombs warns.

So, keep it basic. The best way to deliver the bad news, he says, is to say something like: “We have had to make a difficult decision and, unfortunately, that means you will no longer be an employee.”

The person needs to know the news within the first two minutes of the discussion. The whole meeting should last no more than 10 minutes, preferably with someone else from HR or a specialist in career transition in the room with you, who will take over when the meeting is finished to guide the person through the paperwork.

Mr. Benwick suggests ending with reassurance, such as: “I want to wish you the best and if you ever need a reference don’t hesitate to call” - as long as you really mean it.

He also advises offering to pay for a consultation with a labour lawyer of their choice as part of the severance package to help employees feel that the compensation being offered is fair.

“Ultimately, if people feel they have been treated with respect and fairness, they will recover from the shock of being let go much more quickly,” Mr. Benwick says.

“The objective should always be to have them know you respect and appreciate what they have done for the organization,” he adds.

“If you treat them as you would want yourself treated, even through their tears they will say: ‘I appreciate how you handled this decision.’ “

Delivering the message

Managers can deliver the firing message respectfully and with as little emotional fallout as possible by following a practised approach. Here are tips from experts Bob Benwick and Christine Thomlinson:

Meet face-to-face

Even if it is a large downsizing, each employee should be given the news in person and, preferably, in a private meeting lasting no more than 10 minutes. E-mails or memos are too impersonal.

Lay it out in writing

The notice of termination, severance offer, and details of what happens to benefits, stock options, pension and the like should be ready to hand to the employee as the meeting begins.

State the ‘party line’

With the help of management, develop a summary of the reason for the firing; make it concise and consistent.

Close off debate

The termination talk is not a negotiation, it is a presentation of facts. Listen to the employee’s concerns but don’t jump in with answers or rebuttal.

Promise support

Offer to help their job search by, for example, paying for outplacement services or counselling. And tell them they can count on getting a good reference.

Keep it positive

Thank them for their contribution and don’t rehash past issues.

Share the pain

Don’t tell the person that, over the long run, everything will be fine. When someone has just lost his or her job and is feeling distraught; it’s sympathy that’s wanted, not a lecture.

Get a release

Give employees a chance to review the terms of severance and seek the advice of a lawyer, if they choose. Once they are in accordance, have them sign an agreement waiving future legal claims as a condition of acceptance of the terms.

Practice

If you haven't run a termination meeting before, script it and rehearse it with a colleague or coach. Even the most poised manager can stumble over words in such a tense meeting.

Time it right.

Before the start of the work day or late in the day may be less embarrassing for the employee than having to clean out a desk and walk out at noon.

Plan the exit.

Think about how employees are going to collect personal effects and leave the building - even get home if they are losing the use of a company car.

Be reasonable

Even if someone has to be out of the building that day, allow him or her to come back later to pick up personal effects left behind.

Don't cower

Convene a town hall meeting with remaining staff to explain what happened, offer reassurance and allow them to vent.