

Why Timing Matters When Laying Off Employees



Every day across the country hundreds and sometimes thousands of employees are let go from their jobs. In the past few years in one fell swoop Blackberry laid off 5000 employees, Target Canada laid off 15,000 and in Alberta as many as 100,000 jobs have been lost in the past year. These job losses, whether a result of restructuring, downsizing or terminations for cause, seem to be occurring more frequently, quickly and repeatedly. And while they are becoming more common that does not make them easy for the recipient to hear or the organization to deliver.

Whether a job loss is tied to a mass layoff or an individual layoff most people take the news hard. The loss is not only felt by the employees losing their jobs but by the people who remain including the people who made the decisions and those who will communicate the information. Those touched by job loss commonly experience feelings of fear, sadness, disappointment, denial, anger and more.

Because these feelings can have a detrimental impact on many people it is important to consider all the elements that go into the decisions and the actions taken.

As an organization once you have made the decision to let go of an employee it is important to consider how to navigate the process of informing your employee of the loss of his/her job.

Picking the Best Time To Tell Employees They Are Losing Their Jobs

There are many factors to consider when informing your employee(s) about the loss of their job. You will need to consider how to tell them, who will tell them, where they will be told and when they will be told. Each of these elements should be considered generally and with specific consideration for each individual.

One element to consider that is sometimes overlooked is the matter of timing, but timing can matter. There are several timing elements to consider as you prepare to tell an employee about a job loss.

Time of year – While you may not always be able to adjust the general timing of the layoff too much, in terms of the time of year, if you are not cognizant of the time of year you may cause more hardship than is necessary.

Take the time to be aware of important events such as historical, religious, cultural, company and personal dates of significance. You probably want to avoid laying off a parent on the first or last day of the school year, a First Nations/Indigenous employee the day before Louis Riel Day, a union member the day before Labour Day or any employee on their birthday.

You may not be able to adjust your layoff notice by too many days, but a quick check of a calendar and an employee's personnel file might help you select or avoid breaking the news on the 'wrong' day.

Time of the week – Understanding your employee's work schedule and personal situation can be small considerations you can make to ease the sting of the bad news. You may consider that laying someone off on a Friday is the right thing to do, as the person is able to complete a full week of work and has the weekend to digest the news. However, laying off someone on a Friday may mean the person is alone on the weekend without access to support services and is not able to immediately apply for employment insurance.

Letting someone go mid-week may, in many situations, be the best option to consider.

Time of Day – There is much debate around the best time of day to tell an employee of a layoff or a termination. Frequently employees are told at the end of a shift when the layoff is not a result of cause or at the beginning of a shift when a layoff is really a termination for cause or is an actual termination for cause, even when this is not spelled out as such.

With regards to time of day there are many elements to consider, so much so that you may feel there are too many variables to consider. However by spending just a few minutes reflecting on the situation you may find a small consideration you can show your employee.

Employees who work shifts – Some organizations choose to lay off employees at either the beginning or end of a shift. Depending on the time of day there are pros and cons to both of these options. During a day shift the laid off employee may have to navigate rush hour traffic or head straight home to pick up children from school immediately upon learning of a layoff. An evening or weekend shift worker may have challenges with transportation or accessing services if laid off at night or on a weekend. If you have employees who work evening, weekend or night shifts consider whether or not you should bring that employee in off shift to break the news.

Walking out employees – If your organization has a policy to walk an employee out immediately upon layoff or termination, walking an employee out through the workplace during a shift and not allowing the employee to return to a workspace or say goodbye to colleagues can bring unnecessary negativity to the process. If you do need to lay off an employee at the beginning or during a shift consider an alternative location to break the news.

Generally announcing a layoff or termination to an employee in the morning or at noon can be a good time for many people.

Activities in the workplace – Be conscious of the events or activities that may be going on within the workplace at the time of the layoff announcement. If your organization or the employee's team has planned an event such as a company celebration, a charity event, a team outing or even a birthday celebration, informing an employee during the same day as a celebration could be bad form. Take only a few moments again to consider how best to time your news, especially if you are going to let the employee continue to work through a notice period.

News and announcements – Before speaking to your employee(s) about a layoff check your organization's website for news or announcements and/or check with marketing and senior leadership to see if there are any announcements or press releases upcoming. Laying off an employee the same day your organization's executive team bonuses are announced, a larger new contract or your organization receives an award as a great company to work for and so on may cause unnecessary resentment or even bad publicity especially if you are laying off multiple employees.

Considering the issue of timing when informing an employee or employees of a layoff or termination may seem a minor element amid the bigger issue of the layoff. And while at times bad timing may be unavoidable, by considering even the small element of timing you are showing consideration. When delivering bad news showing consideration benefits not only the person receiving the bad news but also the person delivering it.