

Coping with the Initial Shock

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Chapter outline

Coping with the Initial Shock

- The Initial Trauma
- The Grieving Process
- Why Me?
- How will the firm survive without my valuable input?
- Communicating the New Reality to Family and Friends

As nature abhors a vacuum, people abhor uncertainty. Despite the backdrop of:

- continuous and accelerating change
- the reality that jobs are not careers
- firms, factories, market demand and positions do not last forever

Most of us reduce levels of insecurity by believing that redundancy may never happen to us or it will not happen soon. We usually look for positive omens and rationalise that this means our positions are secure.

Likewise, most managers underplay the threat to employment mainly because they are hoping it will not happen; alternatively they do not want to face the competitive reality that they will have to deliver redundancies and then may actually find themselves in a redundancy situation. Many individuals avoid the ‘appalling vista’ of redundancy by denying the facts that they see at work every day! This means that when a redundancy is delivered, the individual is actually traumatised, even though they (*in the logical part of their minds*) may have known that this was coming.

The Initial Trauma

Our research and experience tells us that the process of being

told that we are in a redundant situation creates three elements of deep emotion and emotional responses:

- Grieving/Loss
- Why me?
- How will the firm survive without me?

We will treat each in turn.

1 Grieving or Loss. The individual is receiving seriously bad news and it is therefore natural that the grieving process comes into play. There has been much research on how humans cope with receiving bad news (*much of this in relation to terminal illnesses and palliative care*). However, similar principles apply when the bad news of redundancy arrives. The delivery of redundancy is a serious life change and affects:

- **Financial Security:** The loss of a permanent position also means the loss of a flow of income. This is very serious as income is essential to fund life and standard of living. At a minimum the individual is losing a secure source of a certain standard of living. This means that they may have to reduce their standard of living. If the individual does not handle this financial transition they could lose their car, home and have difficulty in educating and feeding their family. This

loss of financial security is very serious and frightening.

- **Personal Status:** An individual's perceived personal status is often tied up with their work position. This position power translates to other social settings. Usually when we meet people at social events and are making small-talk, questions such as 'where do you work and what position do you hold?' arise. This can affect our perception of ourselves and other's perceptions of our value and worth. So, in redundancy situations this source of power and status is withdrawn. We thus often feel a loss and a void.
- **Partnership Relationships:** If the individual is in a significant life partnership (married or equivalent) how they view themselves in the relationship and their partner's view of them is important. Their confidence is likely to be negatively affected by this change in perceived self-worth and their partner's view of this. This can have serious negative affects on their closest personal relationship and may even affect the more intimate elements of that relationship.
- **Their Social network:** Most individuals spend most of their waking hours with their work

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colleagues. There is a natural community at work and many people develop a full social network in the workplace. We know that constant change also affects the family, as many individuals now see the workplace social network as a source of security and comfort. In redundancy situations this social network and the relevant friendships are under threat and could be destroyed. This is a major loss for the individual and gives rise to grieving.

- **Expertise and Competence:** The individual has felt competent and skilled to handle their existing role. Now they may become immediately fearful about their ability to cope with new and different challenges. There is also a grieving process for a perceived loss of expertise and competence.

Each of these five factors can have a very serious impact on an individual. However, they now come bundled together. This

means that being made redundant ranks with the highest stress and trauma incidents in life such as death, serious illness, marital breakdown and moving house.

The Grieving Process

To help us with this we need to understand how we deal with receiving such bad news. This is called the grieving cycle. When we receive serious bad news such as a redundancy our reactions can be as follows:

Denial: At a basic level this could be reflected in the following thinking:

- This is not happening to me
- It is a stupid mistake
- They do not understand how critical my role is
- Let me talk to someone more senior to sort out this mess
- I will contact the union and have this stopped
- They can't do this to me

At a deeper level the individual may just go through the motions. Quietly accept the message and the relevant paperwork but actually operate in a state of shock.

You must give yourself time to deal with this and think it through. **BE VERY CAREFUL AND DO NOT DRIVE HOME IF YOU FEEL SHOCKED. TAKE TIME. EVEN GET A TAXI HOME.** Good employers will provide warm drinks in a private area and time

for you to get yourself together. If you are feeling unwell or in shock they will provide a taxi or the equivalent to take you home.

Beware of a weak manager responding with false platitudes and hope at this stage. Such behaviour is unprofessional and unhelpful.

Anger: Initially this is reflected in the following thinking:

- I won't let them do this
- I have given my life to this Company
- I will fight it all the way
- Who does that manager think he is?
- We/the Union will stop this
- I will do everything in my power to stop this
- I will hurt this company for making this bad decision

At a cognitive level the individual may go through the motions and project this anger at family or friends. This anger is natural. The most effective strategy is to understand and accept this anger and work it through. You need to take time and space for yourself to deal with this. *(Some individuals have suggested that long walks or even quiet reflection with a background of classical music can help.)*

Bargaining: This is reflected in the following thinking:

- I need this job so I will do

- anything you want to keep it
- I can be more flexible
- I can work harder or longer
- I would be happy with lower wages but I need this job
- I would take a lower graded job

These thoughts are natural. You will be more successful if you focus your bargaining on tailoring your outplacement/career package to best position yourself for the future. Many firms are more than willing to support individual skills training and educational support if you quickly negotiate these extra supports on a personal (*one-to-one*) level. It is time to look out for yourself!

Depression: This is reflected in the following thinking:

- It is over
- All that investment was wasted
- I shall lose my friends
- I am older and options are limited

- This is a bad place to be
- I don't see a way forward
- My hopes and dreams are gone

You should face and accept these thoughts. The next task is to work through them and see that you are more than a hired hand/position. Those around you must understand that to move forward you must be given the room and space to go through this. Comments like '**cheer up**' and '**move on**' will not help. However, if you find yourself unable to get out of this frame of mind you should seek professional help. Redundancy can be a trigger for clinical depression and you won't be able to work through that alone.

Acceptance: This is the final phase of the grieving process. However, in Churchill's words it is '**not the beginning of the end, but the end of the beginning**'. Acceptance is where you neutrally accept that this has happened. You didn't want to be hit by

Panel 2.1

Redundancy and Wellness – Key Tips:

- Exercise
- Read - Widely
- Re-visit that old hobby
- Get involved in community
- Involve yourself in activities such as re-organising your personal records/garden/sheds etc.
- Focus on skills and their development

redundancy, but it is reality. It has hurt. It means things have changed forever and some things are gone forever. However, fact is fact and you are ready to move on.

Why Me?

Many who find themselves redundant talk about the reality of the grieving process. All highlight that it is an emotional strain and the process is not linear. There is, however, in the context of redundancy a second key emotion which arises and causes stress and pain. This is the issue of ‘*Why me?*’ When a firm is not completely shutting down, those who are made redundant question whether it is something personal about them that has led to the decision. This can greatly affect their personal confidence. Many describe this as being like the feeling of being last to be picked for a football team when playing football in the schoolyard or being the last person asked to dance. This affects dignity and confidence.

In most jurisdictions it is a legal requirement that selection for redundancy is fair. This suggests that there should be some objective criteria. It is not personal and the basis of fair selection is that it is the position and not the person that is redundant. It is unfortunate. We have seen scenarios where an individual has been recently promoted, has traded up to a

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larger house and then finds that their new position has been taken out in a management de-layering and this results in their redundancy. They feel cheated.

However, if there are eight individuals in the existing structure and the new structure only needs five people at the same level the issue of fair selection becomes more complex. The two favoured options for handling this are:

- Last in, First Out (*LIFO*)
- Competency Analysis (*Firm picks those who will stay based on the balanced competencies required to compete into the future*)

It is a basic tenet of redundancy that it is not a reflection on previous performance. However, the organisation has the right to look at the skills and competencies it requires for the future, which should have been developed from sound principles such as specialist competency frameworks and rigorous job profiling. The organisation should

then choose a balanced team based on competence that will best allow it to survive and compete into the future.

It is critical for your future well-being that your employer explains clearly the criteria used and that secondly you do not take this personally. It is unpleasant but do you really want to be put into a role that might not fit your skills and competencies. In most jurisdictions if selection has not been fairly handled the individual may have a legal claim against the organisation. There is a cost in making a legal challenge in terms of negative emotion, focus, energy and the opportunity of losing time that could be spent moving on with your career and life.

How will the firm survive without my valuable input?

In redundancy situations highly committed and loyal employees will comment that the new structure won't work. They will also ask their manager 'how are you now going to handle customer x, process y and report z etc?' This is understandable but once a redundancy decision has been communicated, those issues are not the individual's problem. Management have the right to decide how to organise and structure the work. Whether the new scenario is effective and efficient is an issue for them, not for you. Employees who are let

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go should be careful that they do not waste valuable time watching problems emerge in their old firm. Your mission now is to accept that this has happened and position yourself for a different and hopefully better new life.

Communicating the New Reality to Family and Friends

Gossip spreads fast - particularly, when it is bad news. Others will quickly hear rumours of job cuts and redundancy. If it is a large scale redundancy it may even be covered by local or national media. Your responsibility is to get yourself together. Assemble your thoughts and give yourself some space.

Your first obligation is to your close family and friends and it is best to sit them down and deliver the message that:

- The Economic position/ competitive realities for your organisation have changed
- Your organisation is re-structuring
- As part of this re-structuring your position is not required

- Your position is redundant
- Your finish date and the relevant details of the package (*if appropriate*)
- The Career Planning and Outplacement Support that is being provided
- You need to take some time to work out the best way forward

It is not a time for false declarations that there is 'no problem', 'nothing to worry about' or fast movements. Take some time. Listen to your family and career planning professionals and plot the best way forward for you and your family. It is a difficult time for you but you must also protect yourself at this time and be assertive in dealing with loved ones. You do not have all the answers. You need time. You need the group to pull together during this time of uncertainty whilst you carefully plot the best way forward.

Try to empathise with your close family members and reassure them. They will be worried about the financial future, community status and particularly about how you are feeling and how will you cope. This is natural. They also will have some grieving to do. They are now in an uncertain place. Understand this and be kind and caring. Do not panic and make false promises or make quick career damaging decisions.

Summary of Chapter 2

- Uncertainty as regards security in the workplace usually precedes redundancy
- The bad news of redundancy will always be a shock and lead to some level of personal grieving
- There is a grieving process that consists of a number of key stages that are natural and to be expected. The individual is likely to experience:
 - Denial
 - Anger
 - Bargaining
 - Depression
 - Acceptance
- It is critical that the individual looks after his/her personal wellness
- Selection for redundancy must be fair
- The individual must communicate and empathise with his/her closest family and friends.