

# WOMEN'S BUSINESS<sup>®</sup>

BOSTON

Covering Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Rhode Island

March 2004

THE PROFESSIONAL AND BUSINESS WOMAN'S JOURNAL

## WORK FORCE

### Revitalize Post-Downsize With New Emphasis



Debora Jackson

Has your company experienced downsizing that resulted in a reduction of your work force? If so, you are not alone. Companies have resorted to downsizing in response to a weakened economy and uncertain business conditions.

Perhaps much of your focus was on those who were downsized, with little attention given to those who remained.

Companies wanting to revitalize after downsizing should place new emphasis on remaining employees. Seven strategies can be used to provide this renewed emphasis, sparking revitalization in your organization.

The first strategy is the development of a communications plan. The key is to leverage every opportunity to explain to your employees why downsizing was necessary and what is being done to avoid such options in the future. To that end, you may want to increase the visibility and availability of senior leadership within the workplace through small group meetings and informal conversations. Even when there are no promises for the future, employees want to see and know that their leaders remain at the helm and are committed to the task at hand. This reduces anxiety and increases morale among the employees.

In developing the plan, consider tailoring communications to correspond with the stages of grieving and loss that many employees will experience. Initial messages need to be sensitive to the shock of the downsizing events. Post shock, employees may move to a posture of bargaining with comments such as, "If we were in such a tenuous position, why did we make certain decisions? The communications plan should anticipate such challenges without becoming defensive. Similarly, the plan should also be crafted around anger, another stage of grief, rec-

ognizing that some employees will be angry over what has happened. As employees begin to cope with the downsizing, messages need to target the sadness that may arise.

The second strategy for sparking revitalization after downsizing is the development of an employee support plan. Because people are different, they will need different methods of support after downsizing. Some employees will need a brief separation from the organization. Others might want to talk about what has occurred. Some will simply want to get back to work after the initial shock wears off. Still others will find themselves reassessing their career and the company. Companies should be prepared for each of these responses and be present with the employee in ways that are affirming to the employee's needs.

Offering career planning is a key support service to provide. The goal is to help employees articulate their own desires and needs with regard to their career. This focus on personal growth and development is energizing for employees. Once employees are able to articulate their career goals, they are able to take renewed interest in where the company is going in hopes that their desires will align with the company's goals.

The ability to acknowledge feelings is a crucial step in moving forward. The next strategy for revitalization is acknowledgement, a process that encourages employees to examine their own feelings regarding the downsizing events and provides a safe place for those feelings to be discussed. Holding a wake is one acknowledgement method. The wake allows employees to mourn the downsizing event while celebrating past accomplishments. Another option is to conduct facilitated conversations, during which employees have the opportunity to discuss their feelings, separating behaviors and operating norms that need to end from those that will positively contribute to the organization as it looks to the future.

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The period of time following downsizing is often characterized by malaise and unproductiveness. Certainly this is understandable; however, this is where the organization's leadership provides forward momentum. Reestablishment, the fourth strategy for revitalizing after downsizing, provides this impetus. In reestablishment, the leadership and employees work together to identify the immediate, high-priority tasks that must get done. This helps the organization provide coverage for critical work while re-engaging the work force. People bring their best efforts to the job when they are interested in the work and feel as though they can add value. By asking employees their opinions on what is critical to accomplish, managers give employees the opportunity to add value. Furthermore, companies rebuild the credibility and trust that erodes during downsizing by demonstrating the desire to focus on what is important rather than attempting to do everything with a reduced staff.

The fifth strategy is the development of the plan to guide the organization. The organizational plan provides hope for employees as it demonstrates a focus on the future. While employees want to see a plan, they do not want one that is etched in stone with no room for input. Thus, a process whereby management provides the structure for the organizational plan, allowing for employee input and feedback, is very effective.

At this juncture, managers and employees should work together to align employee career goals with the organizational plan. In this sixth strategy, role and organizational alignment, both the organiza-

tion and the employee benefit, as alignment provides the tangible evidence of employee value-added to the organization. It can also help to uncover instances where there is no longer a fit between the employee's goals and those of the organization's. In these instances, the manager and employee can develop plans to realign the employee's objectives or help the employee transition out of the organization.

The seventh and final strategy for revitalization after downsizing is establishing metrics to measure success against organizational goals. This strategy allows the organization to measure how it is functioning against stated goals to ensure expected performance. To make measurement possible, the organization

should determine the metrics associated with its desired performance. Metrics can be gathered through employee satisfaction or customer surveys. Organizations may also solicit employee feedback to establish key indicators, tracking their performance against these metrics.

By utilizing these seven strategies for revitalization after downsizing, your company will be equipped to re-engage your employees and be better positioned to achieve your objectives. And certainly this is the real strategy after downsizing.

*Debora Jackson is the principal and founder of the Renewal Group, Auburndale, and revitalizes companies in transition by: assessing organizational health, developing renewal plans tailored to meet organizational needs, delivering services designed to re-engage the work force and establishing metrics that allow companies to measure the results.*

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