

MERAKI HR

How to deal with Workplace Survivor Syndrome



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What is Survivor Syndrome?

We've all felt the impact of redundancies in one form or another over our careers, but what has been happening during the recent Coronavirus outbreak, is going to leave the people who may remain in your business in a difficult situation.

When a company decides it needs to cut costs, redundancies will often be top of the list of considerations. In our experience, its often not the fact that you are making the redundancies that's the problem – your employees are pretty clued up and will have seen the signs; the drop in business performance, a decline in sales or customers not spending money with you. It's how it's done that causes the problems and this is where some expert HR help and support can really help you.

How organisations handle the redundancy process and communications around it is key, not only to avoid unnecessary claims for unfair dismissal but also to give remaining staff confidence the organisation treats its employees fairly and with respect.

Research shows that when restructures and redundancies are announced, there can be an increase in performance, as individuals try to demonstrate their worth in the hope of retaining their jobs. This is short-lived, however, as worry and uncertainty soon take hold.

Getting your redundancy process right and supporting individuals who are leaving is also key to retaining your best employees. If you get it wrong, the staff you thought you would rely on who are remaining in the business, will quickly put their own exit strategy into action – leaving you without the people you need to help you run the business.

Now as the business owner or people manager, you might be thinking, “what's their problem, they've got a job, haven't they?” However, the people who have been spared the direct hit often find that being lucky never felt so bad. In fact “miserable” is how most downsizing survivors describe it – grinding through massive daily workloads while waiting anxiously for the next round of redundancies and wondering why it was their teammate or friend, and not themselves, who ended up out of work.

What these survivors are feeling is called “workplace survivor syndrome,” a term coined by organisational psychologists to describe the emotional, psychological and physical effects of employees who remain during company downsizing.

Is Workplace Survivor Syndrome real?

Multiple studies suggest that job cuts are just as hard on the people left behind as they are on those who were downsized. One study showed an increase in alcohol consumption, smoking and workplace injury among layoff survivors. Other studies report depression, plummeting productivity and poor morale among surviving staff.

Compounding the problem is a scarcity of support for the downsizing survivors. After all, shouldn't redundancy survivors just be grateful to be working? One research study reported that “guilt” was one of the top three words used by layoff survivors to describe their feelings. The other two were “anger” and “anxiety.”

It's tough to deal with redundancy, but it's really important that you don't forget your survivors, **so here are some of the strategies that have worked for us with our clients, that you could introduce in your business to help your survivors cope;**

- This is the most important one of all – if you are the business owner or the MD, give yourself some slack. Do your best each day, but don't burden yourself with the expectation that it's up to you to single-handedly save the company, you need the support of your management team and your employees, don't be afraid to ask them for their help.
- Make sure you are transparent about why job cuts were made and how job roles were chosen. If your employees understand the reasoning behind each decision you make, it can help alleviate the guilt of being spared.
- Avoid office gossip starting about further job cuts and who may go next. You can only do this if you tell people that “this is it – there will be no more cuts” but where that isn't possible you should be honest and state which teams might be impacted and start discussing it with those teams where it is a possibility, and ask them for their ideas, help and support to manage possible job cuts. Not being honest, and talks behind closed doors, instead of being honest about teams that may be impacted, only adds to stress and anxiety. Focus instead on being positive and productive about any changes that might be needed.
- Find opportunity within adversity. Taking on additional work can be a stressor for the people remaining, but it can also open up great opportunities for learning and developing new skills or experiences. Use company shakeups to give those that remain in the business the opportunity for professional growth and personal fulfilment.

- Suggest that your employees take some time out of the business and book a holiday or even just a day off to spend time with their family or friends. Get them to take a mental break from work, emails and their work phone. Putting physical distance between yourself and work, even for a day, is a great way to distance yourself emotionally and gain perspective.
- Allow your employees time to grieve for the loss of their colleagues. The emotional trauma of saying goodbye to long-time co-workers is very similar to losing a loved one.
- If you are lucky enough to have an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) in your business, then make sure you remind your employees of this and provide them with the contact details of the EAP. Their experienced consultants are specially trained to help you get through a rough time. Be sure to ask about programs and materials geared specifically toward coping with redundancies and redundancies.



We provide the perfect blend of practical and professional HR solutions that work for your business and for your bottom line.

Working with us will enable you to improve employee engagement, your culture, people processes and procedures, which in turn will help you to deliver your business goals. And we do it all with our special touch of meraki.

Your people are your greatest business asset. Knowing how to recruit, manage, develop and retain them is key to your success.

To find out how we can help you, please contact us on 01280-848415/07766-741738 or via our website: www.merakihr.com