

Choreographing Customized Layoffs

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Regardless of whether organizations choose or are compelled to implement layoffs, hurtful impacts can ensue beyond the transaction itself for four distinct groups: the individuals being laid off, the remaining employees, the organization itself, and—let us not forget—those having to conduct the layoffs. This article identifies 13 deliverables or actions within the realm of compensation and benefits that employers could offer a la carte within reasonable parameters to those being laid off.

GROUPS IMPACTED

The four distinct groups impacted are:

1. **Laid-off employees.** Impacts that can ensue from being laid off include ambiguous marketability, financial stress, uncertain family security, reduced self-esteem, health issues, and the unanticipated need for an urgent job search. These impacts can combine to devastate and immobilize those affected.
2. **Employees not laid off.** For remaining employees, impacts often include fear of being part of a future layoff, anticipation of having to take on additional duties and responsibilities, loss of esprit de corps, grief from the loss of colleagues and workplace friendships, and survivor guilt.
3. **Organization.** For organizations, such

impacts may include negative press that could lead to an unfavorable public image, prompting the loss of client/investor esteem for leadership. The remaining employees may demonstrate a reduced level of trust in leadership resulting in undesirable turnover, potentially causing long-term damage to reputation and brand.

4. **Individuals communicating layoffs to employees impacted.** Regarding those who have to deliver the bad news, perhaps we can agree they bear a heavy burden—the weight of which persists long after the layoffs have been completed. I think they dread conducting the necessary notifications. I think the looming task wakes them up at night, and I think they very much wish they could somehow be of meaningful help to those being laid off.

PLANNING AND PRESENTING LAYOFFS

The likelihood and severity of these hurtful impacts can be lessened for all parties if the process is choreographed to do so. Instead of delivering the stereotypical one-size-fits-all severance package over which the employee has no control at all, consider providing an array of options from which they can choose. Allowing those who are to be laid off to build a departure package customized to their needs demonstrates respect, empathy, and benevolence—a humani-

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tarian approach rarely associated with layoffs. Though not all types of organizations will be able/ permitted to adopt this approach, merely reviewing the 13 suggestions may catalyze permutations that could gain traction.

Before providing a cornucopia of options that could be included in customized departure packages, we begin by vetting the decision-making process regarding the implementation of layoffs.

1. Engage legal counsel to ensure that each aspect of the layoff aligns with state and federal laws, paying attention to the impact on compensation and benefits issues as well as labor laws.
2. Consider all possible alternatives. Combining several of the below may reduce labor costs sufficient to negate the need for layoffs:
 - Offering extremely attractive early retirement packages, perhaps including severance, Social Security bridge payments, healthcare, wellness, and the like, to encourage voluntary departures.
 - Reducing work hours for all.
 - Salary cuts for all, with proportional or greater cuts made to C-level executive salaries.
 - Reduction or elimination of bonuses.
 - Offering permanent part-time work, which could include job-sharing.
 - Offering some employees to return as contractors subject to legal issues.
 - Reduced levels of benefits, such as life insurance, healthcare subsidies of premiums, and the like.
 - Reduction or elimination of paid time off (PTO).

- Furloughs.
- Hiring freezes.
- Cross-training for those working in the most vulnerable functions.
- Reassigning employees to functions that remain in high demand.
- Voluntary unpaid leave to help reduce the need for layoffs.
- Reduce overhead, whether by reducing direct costs (that is, energy-saving measures), having employees work from home, or subletting office space,
- Identifying functions/processes that are the highest revenue generators, and reorganize as needed to increase productivity.

3. Establish a cadre of individuals whose counsel will be essential in the decision-making and planning processes. Every member of the cadre must agree to maintain strict confidentiality throughout the decision-making and planning processes.
4. Determine whether layoffs are indeed unavoidable. If so, your first few steps will determine how your leadership and your organization are perceived by internal and external stakeholders and observers. Fully transparent communications are essential, but note that the sequencing of these communications is as important as the content.
5. Consider the following as appropriate measures, all of which can be turning points for deciding that the layoffs are not yet necessary due to the realization by management that the reality is not upon the company.

Pre-Announcement Preparations

1. Develop a statement for the media that

begins with the President/CEO taking responsibility for making the decision to implement layoffs. The announcement should also include what alternatives were considered, why the layoffs were necessary, and how the organization is supporting those laid off through the customizable departure packages. Be prepared for hostile media and negative press. Anticipate what their skilled sleuthing may have uncovered and acknowledge any contribution the C-Suite may have made that led to the need for layoffs. The media statement should also include a sincere, specific "thank you" to all employees for all their efforts over the years, along with heartfelt recognition of the scope and depth of the emotional toll on all concerned. An overview of the path forward should also be prepared for the media.

2. Why focus on the media announcement prior to focusing on internal communications? Because leaks are not uncommon. If even one leak occurs, it could replicate exponentially. Employees could feasibly learn about the impending layoff via the morning news. You will want to be ready in advance just in case. Insulate the organization from misinformed and untimely press, and then continue with the sequenced next steps to complete the preannouncement preparations.
3. Develop the announcement to be delivered in an all-hands meeting.
4. Decide which employees are to conduct which layoffs.
5. Determine when the announcement is to be made, and the timeline for the layoffs.
6. Establish specific criteria that will determine who is to be laid off.

7. Create the a la carte menu of compensation and benefits options to be offered to those being laid off, including parameters, and explain its use to those who will be conducting the layoffs.
8. Require that those being laid off are to be informed in private, one-to-one conversations during work hours, whether in person or virtually.
9. To avoid rumors and misinformation, produce a script to be followed by everyone conducting a layoff. The script should reveal what alternatives were considered, why the layoffs are necessary, and the criteria used to determine who would be laid off.
10. Those conducting the layoffs must be prepared to express appreciation for specific aspects of the work provided by the individual being laid off and must offer a reference or a letter of recommendation if desired.

Delivering the Internal Announcement

1. The President/CEO should make the announcement. Both audio and video should be captured and provided to those in other locations.
2. The announcement should include what alternatives were considered, why the layoffs must occur, and how individuals will be notified.
3. The a la carte menu should be described in detail and emailed to each employee.
4. Explain that requests for future Q&A sessions will be welcomed.
5. A Q&A session should conclude the announcement

Customizable Departure Package Preparation

Element One: Monetary Support Beyond Severance

1. Pay out reasonably anticipated bonuses in full.
2. Pay for three to six months of living expenses, including as many of the following as possible: childcare, rental/mortgage payments, car and insurance payments, tuition assistance, and other bill payments.
3. Continue to make contributions to retirement plans.
4. Continue health care for six to 12 months, including ongoing access to the employee assistance program (EAP) for mental health counseling, therapy, and support groups.

Element Two: Transition Support

1. Ensure exit interviews take place and that the process provides current and specific guidance regarding effective job searches, including a list of links to job boards, work platforms, career fairs, and networking events.
2. If home office equipment was provided during COVID, allow those laid off to retain it.
3. Provide a list of online resources for staying in touch and/or for finding revenue-generating opportunities via, for example, Polywork, WhatsApp/Telegram, Task Rabbit, Udemy, Upwork, Fiver, EdX, LinkedIn Learning, and more.
4. Cover the cost of outplacement assistance, such as career coaching, resume creation, interview preparation, and financial consulting.

5. Pay for the cost of certifications, reskilling, and/or upskilling.

Element Three: Stewardship

1. Create and maintain a repository of those laid off, including their knowledge, skills, and abilities. Require hiring managers to review the index to determine whether a rehire would be appropriate for any open roles.
2. Identify and offer opportunities such as part-time consulting, contracting, project work, ad hoc freelance work, and/or developing standard operating procedures (SOPs) and other documentation for essential knowledge transfer.
3. Letters of reference/recommendations from relevant C-level executives and managers should be provided. These must be substantive and specific, referring to employee accomplishments and contributions.
4. Endorsements by managers, supervisors, and peers should be offered and posted to LinkedIn and similar platforms.

I realize that readers may well be doubting my business acumen—perhaps even my sanity. After all, the a la carte approach exhorts that employers provide substantially more compensation and benefits than are conventionally attendant to layoffs. But consider this. Even if every single one of the 13 suggestions were provided to someone who is being laid off, the grand total would still fall well short of the individual's fully loaded salary. Additionally, many of the suggestions are tax-deductible. Others can be achieved via collaboration with community colleges, and still others might be accomplished by inviting retirees to mentor some of those laid off.

The overarching theme among the above three elements is that the cookie-cutter-approach to

severance packages should yield to tailored packages. Those being laid off should be provided with a list of all available types of support, from which they could, for example, within established parameters, select their top six priorities or perhaps even come up with some permutation of the available options.

Another approach to choreographing customizable layoffs could be structured around an individual's values. Here are six examples.

1. For those whose primary value is learning, customizable options might include education assistance to executive programs such as those provided by Wharton, Harvard, and others. They may prefer subscriptions to topically specific publications, paid certification opportunities, or even tickets to relevant events/speakers that align with their interests.
2. If one's primary value is money, paid investment counseling or tax preparation may appeal, as might an increase in severance cash or permission to keep their company car permanently.
3. For those who value experiences, they may want to be personally introduced to event planners for resorts, meeting planning for organizations, or to those involved in stage productions.
4. Others value people over self. Their priorities may include educational assistance to learn how to serve as mediator, interventionist, coach, or mentor.
5. A customizable layoff package for one who values influence and renown might include: opportunities to speak or teach; to compete, be published, or to have a letter of reference that features his/her expertise.
6. For those who value a particular code or

system for living, a customizable layoff package might include working with veterans or law enforcement, or helping to unify and strengthen other mission-based groups.

Post-Layoff Priorities

Easing the Impacts for Remaining Talent

1. Meeting in mass with the remaining employees is essential. Detail the path forward to recovery and describe the generosity of the severance packages. Regularly invite and respond to their questions and concerns.
2. On an ongoing basis, keep remaining employees informed and involved in restoring the organization to health. Invite their feedback frequently and be diligent to recognize and express appreciation for their efforts.
3. Ensure supervisors check in with their direct reports often to offer support, elicit their opinions, and reinforce their contribution to the mission and vision of the organization.
4. Rebuild trust through frequent Q&A sessions, implementing a "Breakfast with the CEO" rotation, communicating organizational goals, inviting their ideas about operational efficiencies, and inviting their critiques.
5. Demonstrate meaningful empathy by, for example, offering a paid wellness day once per quarter, gym memberships or health clubs, or a personal trainer.

Easing the Impacts for the Organization

Organizations that choose to conspicuously display respect, empathy, and benevolence in implementing layoffs can recover and revitalize more quickly. For example:

1. Organizational brand and reputation are fa-

- vorably cemented by treating those being laid off with respect, empathy, and benevolence.
2. Rather than losing the attention of top talent in future recruitment efforts, the likelihood that they will apply is heightened.
 3. While morale often plummets among the survivors of a layoff, firms that conduct reductions in staff as recommended here stimulate loyalty, fostering retention.
 4. Clients, vendors, partners, and investors—even competitors—are attentive to how layoffs are conducted. When done well, regard for the leadership of the firm is solidified.
 5. As the organization restabilizes, successful rehiring becomes the norm rather than the exception.

Easing Impacts for Front-Line Employees who Delivered the News to Individuals:

1. Remind them that the layoffs were not their decision, but the decision of management.
2. Engage them in refreshing organizational values, to include, for example, compassion.

3. As much as possible, encourage that work be done in teams rather than by solitary individuals.
4. Offer to retain the coach, mentor, or well-being consultant of their choosing.
5. Emphasize the importance of preventing burnout by maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

CONCLUSION

Layoffs are a reality that can impact anyone, regardless of position or tenure, and none of us are immune to the potential consequences. Whether we are directly affected or not, it is vital that we recognize our shared responsibility to support those who are grappling with the emotional, financial, and psychological toll of a layoff. It is not just the company's responsibility, but a collective one, to extend empathy and solidarity to those facing such a challenging transition. By offering a network of support, whether through compassionate communication, access to resources, or simply being a source of encouragement, we can help ease the burden for those laid off and ensure that no one faces this hardship alone. In doing so, we contribute not only to the well-being of individuals but also to a culture of care and mutual respect that strengthens the fabric of the workplace for everyone.