

Rekindling confidence in 'survivors' - some practical examples of what's working

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There is increasing recognition of the psychological impact on employees of continuing to work in an organisation where co-workers have been made redundant. The Hub recently published an article on survivor syndrome, Give some love to employees who remain, which described the impact of survivor syndrome on employees and companies. A quick scan of the (British) newspapers shows that there is a greater awareness of the syndrome amongst the general public and of its consequences for emotional well-being, personal confidence and business performance.

So, organisations are beginning to realise that survivor syndrome exists and needs to be addressed. This still leaves the question: what can organisations do to support 'survivors' and help them emerge from the syndrome? This article looks at some real, practical examples of what organisations in both the private and public sector are doing.

1. Build resilience

Resilience is the ability we have to cope with stress and misfortune and the capability to adapt to new circumstances. There is much literature on the importance of resilience in organisations, teams and individuals. Resilient people are more likely to succeed both at work and in their personal lives. Although we can all identify people who are resilient and people who are not, the good news is that resilience is something that we can develop. In fact, although people won't want to hear it right now, most people will emerge from redundancy or difficult changes more resilient: they will come through the change and they will prove to themselves that they did, and they can, cope.

Resilient people:

1. Take a constructive but realistic view of change. They recognise that life isn't easy but they try to identify the opportunities in change
2. Engage with change rather than trying to prevent it
3. Have a view of what they want to achieve in life or at work
4. Are not set in their ways: they remain flexible
5. Have communication skills
6. Develop approaches to dealing with change - they don't see themselves as victims.
7. Ask for help.

Example: to help employees develop their resilience, one organisation that was recently faced with restructuring and downsizing, created a one-page 'personal planner' that could be used by individuals on their own or in teams. The aim of the planner was to cause employees to reflect. Questions included:

- What I like about where I work
- What I don't like
- What I want from work (in general)
- What is going to be hard about the changes
- How I plan to deal with those challenges
- How will I try to make the experience as positive as it can be?
- What I'd like to be different in the future

The purpose was to help employees plan and to identify what they might be able to control, to help make them develop some of the aspects of resilience in points 1-7 above.

It is well documented that survivor syndrome can cause stress, depression, increased cautiousness, and greater involvement in playing office politics with the aim of self-protection. As co-workers are made redundant employees experience a sense of loss of control. As human beings, for a sense of well-being, we need to feel that we have at least some control over our lives. Survivors often lose this sense of control and organisations need to help them rebuild it.

Example: in a pharmaceutical company, we asked managers to run sessions with their teams. Managers were asked to run meetings where employees could list all the things that were worrying them. Managers wrote the points on a flipchart and then asked the team to divide their worries into those they could control and those they couldn't. Managers told the team to 'park' the latter and focus on the former. Together they identified what they could address.

This is a very simple but effective idea as it helps employees to stop worrying about anything and everything and to focus on what they can control. This helps to take them out of 'victim-mode' and gives them some sense of empowerment - an important aspect of resilience.

2. Acknowledge and mark the 'endings'

Just as in our personal lives we need to mark endings such as leaving school or university, reaching the end of childhood through significant birthday parties or the end of a life, so we need to mark endings at work. Recognising the ending of something - the closure of a building, the disbandment of a team, the loss of co-workers and friends - helps people move on emotionally.

Examples: there are lots of examples of how teams have marked the end: one team organised a barbecue where people tossed old documents onto the fire and they said how satisfying that felt; many teams hold a 'wake'; some take photos of the team before it disbands and give everyone a copy; one team told me they had a poet amongst them who had written a poem about the team members and each member of the team got a framed copy of the poem before they went their separate ways.

Many survivors are angry because they have not had a chance to grieve their lost colleagues, friends and team in the ways described above. Sometimes this is because there are so many people leaving: in one organisation we found that some managers had not held a leaving party because so many people were going that they would be holding a party every week and this would become repetitive and demoralising. Others recognised this problem but said they would select one date at some point in the future, to which they would invite both leavers and survivors. But what of those survivors who were not offered any such opportunity to mark the end of the team?

Example: in one public sector organisation managers said how surprised they were at the behaviour of survivors who were joining their team. Some survivors quietly got on with their jobs but were withdrawn, others were angry and hostile. Through workshops that we ran, managers realised that they had to help these people let go of the past by talking about what the team had achieved, what they missed, what they'd like to continue etc. Survivors reported that these one-to-one sessions really helped them as they felt the manager had listened and taken a personal interest in them.

3. Support managers

Research shows that managers are the people who are most likely to be 'damaged' after a major change in an organisation: research conducted by Kets de Vries & Balazs reported that more depression exists among managers after a down-sizing than amongst other groups. This is because they are the ones dealing with the impact of redundancies but not necessarily involved in the decision-making. Research tells us time and time again that employees' relationships with their managers are an important factor in how they feel about the organisation and how engaged they feel.

Significant change of any kind is a time when organisations must support, and be seen to support, their managers. They must be equipped to handle the change. Organisations that manage change well support their managers.

Example: in one government department we facilitated workshops that were designed to be both practical and cathartic - a place where managers could share their feelings openly and frankly amongst their peers and also share ideas on how to support survivors. We kept the workshop short (2.5 hours) so that managers could fit the workshop into a working day. Content of the workshop included:

1. What issues are you facing?
2. The impact of change and how to support your team
3. Engaging people in difficult times - helping people let go of the past, managing people in 'limbo', setting up new teams
4. Addressing the challenges you're facing
5. Where to access further information
6. Ongoing support

93% of managers said the workshop had allowed them to discuss issues relevant to them and 89% thought the workshop was a good use of their time and would recommend it to others. Some managers valued the workshops because it was a place where they could talk openly and frankly, others appreciated the opportunity to learn about practical ideas that would help get their teams through the change. All recognised the fact that their organisation was trying to help them and this recognition will prove valuable in the longer term.

In a healthcare company and a bank, we ran workshops focused on a specific subject so that managers could select the workshops most relevant to their needs. Many managers said they were building their own support networks such as setting up lunch together once a month.

4. Involve people

Survivors, having seen their co-workers leave, often feel insecure about their own future and their role in the organisation. A key task for managers is to think where and how they can involve survivors. Involving employees in making decisions and planning gives back a sense of control and gives people something new on which to focus.

Example: A consultancy held meetings with its employees to identify what it needed to do post-redundancies to weather the recession. Employees identified key tasks (re-connecting with former clients, identifying where costs could be cut further etc) and then created small taskforces (4-5 members in each) to focus on each task.

For many survivors, the workload increases as they take on the work of their absent co-workers. This is an opportunity for managers to work with the team to agree how as a group they will handle the workload. Many managers instinctively involve their team in the decision-making, but it is worth reminding managers that involving survivors not only means that a better decision will probably be made but this is also a good means to re-build commitment and confidence.

Example: redundancies in one team meant that they lost their first-aider and the person responsible for health & safety, two of the survivors volunteered to take on these new roles and this meant they were acquiring new skills and knowledge.

Example: one manager recognised that following the loss of employees, this was an opportunity for the team to think about how they would like to work in future. This was a time to think about what old ways of working they wanted to discard. Using cartoons of what it felt like to be engaged or not engaged, the team talked about what habits and working practices they found useful and constructive and what got in the way. They used this as an opportunity to change the way they worked together.

Helping people to focus on those more unfortunate than themselves is an approach some organisations have used over recent months. Budgets are very limited right now but raising money for charity is not costly and it helps to build bonds between survivors and involve employees in a constructive activity.

Example: one financial services firm said it had had great success involving its employees in raising money for a chosen charity. Each local office could decide where the money would go and many chose a local charity that meant something to them.

5. Let people vent - but keep it under control

Research tells us that it is essential that employees can 'vent' their views and concerns at work and this becomes all the more important during and after redundancies. Listening is one of the most important actions that managers can offer. However, many managers report that dealing with constant worries of employees can be time-consuming and emotionally-exhausting.

Example: one office said they offered a 'venting session' for survivors, but just once a week. Keeping it to just once a week meant that there was a time for survivors to express their feelings but during the rest of the week, their focus was on their work. Creating the discipline of having a vent just once a week also meant that survivors had to control their feelings; this ability to control one's feelings, and not be overwhelmed by them, is an important part of resilience and emotional intelligence.

6. Ring the changes

When employees have left, there is a constant and immediate reminder every time they walk into their place of work and see the empty desks or workstations. One of the tasks for organisations is to think about the physical working environment and the impact it will have on survivors.

Example: a consultancy that went through downsizing quickly 'closed ' one of its floors so that survivors could sit together on one floor and create a more energetic 'buzz'.

Example: a design company said they repainted their offices - a visual and symbolic statement that they were 'moving on'.

Example: several managers in a public sector organisation said they changed the seating plan so that members of two downsized, but merging, teams were integrated. Managers reported that it proved unpopular in the short term, but positive in the longer term.

Example: managers who were receiving survivors into their teams, created a buddying system. Survivors said this worked really well as it gave them someone they could talk to on an informal basis and to whom they could ask the 'daft' question without feeling embarrassed.

7. Keep leaders in touch with how people feel

Leaders often go through change and down-sizing first. This means that their communication can often be out of touch. Over the many years that we have worked with organisations going through significant change, we have noticed the tendency for some leaders to hit the wrong note as they focus exclusively on the future while others are still mourning the past. As one client put it, 'We are like a train going through a tunnel. The leaders are at the head of the train and they have emerged into daylight and are clear about their future. They have forgotten that we are back in the tunnel, in the dark, and uncertain about our future.' There are examples of leaders who are trying to get it right:

Example: after the collapse of Lehman Brothers, one of the investment banks is holding regular town hall meetings so that survivors can talk to the CEO and in particular the Chief Economist (who never used to be in such demand) so that they have a better understanding of what the future looks like and how decisions are made.

Example: we introduced the sales leader of a pharmaceutical firm to the change curve. He was hugely relieved to see that all the emotions he had been going through, and particularly the longing to back to the way things used to be, were 'normal'. He used the change curve with his salesforce as it allowed him to talk about his emotional response to the change and to empathize with what others were experiencing. He also looked at the upswing in the curve to re-assure them that these are difficult times, but they will come through them.

Survivor syndrome and its symptoms are well documented. Left unaddressed, it causes emotional damage to individuals and is detrimental to business performance. This article has described some of the very practical interventions organisations in both the public and private sector are using to help re-engage survivors. Some - such as helping employees to identify what they can and cannot control and focusing on the former - are very simple and can be implemented immediately by any manager or team leader. Others - such as a workshop for managers - require a greater organisational commitment but are well worth the investment: research shows that those managers and their teams that are equipped to manage the change will emerge more resilient and more likely to thrive.

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