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Helping you align your people with your vision



How to Let Them Go: Advice from Atticus

By Libby Wagner, Founder of Professional Leadership Results

Okay, I have a confession to make—I was terminated. Not fired or let go or not renewed. Not RIFed or pink-slipped. Terminated. In the midst of an organizational restructure, I got tossed out with the rest of the superfluous positions, the additional managerial poundage put on in leaner times. This had never happened to me before, and no matter how much I believed that it couldn't be helped and was for all the right reasons and had nothing to do with my job performance, I also thought it was about me.

I knew things were precarious when our new governor announced that she was going to 'trim the fat' off government. This meant over 1000 management jobs were on the chopping block. Then my boss called me in to say, "I'm not saying that you're losing your job, but I want you to know what's going on in the organization." I had only been there a year; I had no seniority. Thank goodness for her willingness to be honest with me, otherwise, a few months later, when her boss chose to leave me a voicemail to tell me he'd decided to cut my job, I might have been devastated rather than just mildly hysterical.

I thought this was a terrible way to learn about my subsequent termination, so I confronted him about it the following Monday. "I'm confused," I said, "I can't think of any reason why, especially based on our past experiences as colleagues, you might choose to leave me a voicemail to tell me my job is being cut. Can you help me understand why you made this decision?" He said he wanted to give me as much notice as possible. I said that while I appreciated those three extra days, I would've more appreciated an opportunity to speak to him in person.

This was pretty much it—a couple of weeks later, I sent him an e-mail to find out when he planned to do this. His reply: "I'm not sure. Let me get back to you on this." Finally, I called him again to confirm my last day. "I've never been terminated before," I said, "is there anything special I'm supposed to do or sign?" His reply: "No, I don't think so." You get the picture? Honestly, I actually felt sorry for the guy rather than sort of indignant that I was having to fish around for details of my demise. I

kept thinking I might offer him some tips on how to do this so that both of us could feel a little bit better about the final outcome—although I wasn't convinced he was concerned about me in the least. And yet, I knew he wasn't a bad guy, though he had, no doubt, missed the session on "how to let someone go and still have some class."

Here's what I might have offered:

- 1. Be honest and sincere.** Things happen. Organizations restructure and change and grow. Sometimes, jobs end, but everyone I know will tell you they'd rather have the hard truth than spend anxious moments trying to figure out what's going on and how they'll be affected. Even if you can't share all the information, share what you can and own it. Be real. People know when you're not.
- 2. Show empathy.** One of the greatest investments to make in another human being is empathy. This is a sincere demonstration that you understand what they are feeling and why they're feeling this way. Even if you don't know how they feel because you've never been in the same situation, *listen*. Reflect without judgment or pity. Remember this is an individual person—one size does not fit all. Be willing to listen to this person sitting across from you.
- 3. Be helpful.** Be willing to talk about options, whether within or outside your organization. Ask them how you might be helpful, and follow-up. Offer connections, resources or contacts. Ask them what they've considered and what options they might have. Even the smallest effort will communicate that you care about them as a human being, and that they are not just a number or a job to be cut in tough budget times.
- 4. Wear those shoes.** Remember Atticus Finch? In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, he tells his daughter Scout that she needs to consider how she might feel wearing the other person's shoes, then she can make decisions and form opinions. Have you been here before? If not, what would you appreciate in this situation? If this person were a member of your family or someone for whom you cared deeply, how would you treat them? How would you demonstrate your humanity and humility? I'm thinking a voicemail might not be your choice to hear about your termination.
- 5. Remember the relationship.** It is, ultimately, about relationships. You never know when your paths may cross again. You may never know how you might be connected to this person in another way. Additionally, how do you want to be remembered—"that's the guy who fired me" or "that's the guy who was kind and respectful in difficult times"? ❖

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