

VIEWPOINT

OUR PERSPECTIVE. YOUR PEOPLE.

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Righting the Right-Size

By: April Howe, Career Solutions Practice Leader

The last few years have been tough for many Canadian organizations. Falling revenues and shrinking profits forced leaders to make difficult decisions about how best to reduce costs, boost productivity and ensure sustainability over the long term. In Canada and around the world, layoffs have been an unfortunate but necessary strategy to remain competitive.

Lay-offs are a traumatic experience for individuals and organizations. So traumatic, that once complete, managers are often determined to refocus on the nuts and bolts of business as quickly as possible. It's understandable. After all, it's human nature to put unpleasant experiences behind us and turn our focus to the future.

But when it comes to effectively transitioning your organization through a downsizing, getting back to business without taking stock, and putting focus on the people who remain can hurt even more than the downsizing itself.

Even where leaders have adhered to best practices when downsizing, it can take months, sometimes years, to stop the bleeding. Falling productivity, lowered quality, sagging morale and workplace conflict are common after-effects. Those who remain after a downsizing often experience fear, insecurity, frustration and anger – all of which can lead to reduced risk taking and curbed creativity. These factors can negate any gains organizations may have realized through downsizing in the first place. By not taking the time to recognize such feelings and support those who remain, the process of rejuvenating an organization can take far longer – if it happens at all.

After a downsizing:



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Taking the time to heal in order to grow isn't just a good idea for organizations – it's a law of nature. For more than a decade, I trained as a body-builder. And when it came to building muscle and seeing results, I quickly learned that rest was every bit as important as the actual workouts. Lifting weights broke apart my muscle fibers. It was during the rest periods that my muscles actually healed and grew. The lesson: if you don't allow for the healing, you don't make the gains.

I often think of this analogy when I watch some of the organizations I work with steer their people through a downsizing with competent hands and steady vision. There are some great employers in Atlantic Canada who take this difficult experience and use it to demonstrate respect and compassion for their employees, revitalize their organization and spark a new spirit of competitiveness. Here are some of their secrets:

Take stock

Smart organizations understand that people are their prime asset. After a downsizing, these organizations take the time to refocus the lens on their people, take stock of mood and morale and check in with people. While looking inward might not feel like something that's going to impact profit, it does. Engaged workers make successful organizations.

Communicate

The companies I work with who have had the most success in the aftermath of a downsizing are committed to openness and transparency with their employees. They keep the communications channels open, and share as much information as they can as quickly as they are able. Given the common concern of whether more layoffs are expected, they also communicate a clear vision for the future.

Involve

Effective organizations involve their employees as much as they can. They hold strategic planning sessions where they talk about the future of the company, brainstorm strategies to boost productivity, and involve employees in decision making where possible.

Many organizations and teams perform well during the good times. It's how we handle life's most challenging circumstances that set individuals and organizations apart. By taking stock, communicating with and involving employees, you are giving them an opportunity to show their true colours. I'm willing to bet you'll like what you see.

April Howe is the Career Solutions Practice Leader at KBRs. April has worked as a Coach and Consultant for 10 years and is an expert in delivering focused career direction to both professionals and executives.