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Rebuilding Trust After Layoffs

By Michelle Johnston

The distance separating managers and their direct reports can be the biggest productivity and performance drain in an organization.

Layoffs can create a breach in trust, regardless of the strength of management/employee relationships. No matter how fastidiously leaders follow best practices, how clearly they communicate, how much regret they feel or show, it's impossible to completely avoid workers' primal "am I next?" reaction. These trust issues commonly manifest themselves in inefficiency, mistakes, missed deadlines and other behaviors atypical for a team.

For leaders, rebuilding trust begins with understanding how others perceive personal behavior, and how that behavior impacts the organization. Tools can help. Using constructs based on the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation model, for example, leaders may find a common perceptual gap between the impressions leaders intend to give their staff, and the impressions the staff members perceive. For a team observing actions through the lens of downsizing, unintended impressions can be particularly damaging.

For example, consider some behaviors leaders exhibit: cutting people off before they've finished their thoughts, not allowing time for questions, failing to seek others' perspectives, talking down to subordinates, making ambiguous statements and neglecting to validate others' opinions. These behaviors may not be indicative of a displeased boss, and they may even be understandable in light of today's leader's workload. But for employees fearing for their jobs, they can create impressions of marginalization and depersonalization, and heighten feelings of insecurity.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution, but the following improvements can help ensure actions leave the intended impressions and create a basis for trust:

Communicate thoroughly. A truncated email may not seem like a big deal, but it may not be interpreted well by someone fearing for his or her livelihood. Ambiguity breeds distrust, and clarity is the antidote. Think carefully before speaking, and consider how communications may lead to unintended interpretations. Listen to the team, and ensure they know they've been heard and understood.

Be present, and be inclusive. If people feel involved in decision making, they feel empowered and in control, which can relieve stress and build trust. It's equally important, however, for a leader to maintain a presence. Be sure to attend meetings, for instance. Failing to do so creates

impressions of elusiveness, which is the antithesis of trust. Leaders also can effectively reinforce positive behaviors by delegating important tasks, which demonstrates as well as expresses trust.