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How to Communicate Change to Employees in Tough Times

"If you don't give people information, they'll make up something to fill the void."

-- Carla O'Dell, Ph.D., President, American Productivity & Quality Center

With increasing layoffs and declining sales impacting the workplace, many employers are faced with the unenviable task of communicating difficult but necessary changes. Increased benefit cost sharing, cutbacks, layoffs and changes in job status are tough to communicate in the best of times. But given the current economic gloom and doom, sensitive employee communications can become an even more dangerous minefield for employers to navigate.

In these times, even positive changes can arouse employees' fears and suspicions. What is extremely important is that employers DO communicate often and honestly to decrease anxiety and keep rumors at bay and productivity up. What are some effective strategies employers can adopt when communicating change to employees in tough times?

What to consider in your strategy to communicate change:

- **Starting the message from the top** – Instead of relying on expected communications from human resources or supervisors, change communication needs to be perceived as a business decision that starts at the top level. Strongly consider having CEO or top management deliver initial change and key message communication.
- **Tailoring your communication** – Consider the tone, key messages and format of your communication. Stick with choices that employees are familiar with and that ring true to your organization's culture and objectives. In some cases, you may need to tailor communications for specific groups of employees.
- **Relieving employee anxiety with a personal approach** – Many employers have found that face-to-face communication by management goes a long way toward employee acceptance and understanding of the objectives of change – especially with employees that remain after layoffs occur.



What are the essential components of successful change communication?

- **Explain the reasons** – Don't be afraid to reveal the decision history and business reasons for the change. Employees appreciate being treated as business partners.
- **Describe the impact of what would or would not occur** – Employees need to have a good understanding of what would happen if the change didn't take place in order to accept the changes as necessary.
- **Explain the differences** – Be clear about what will be different – fear of the unknown is a powerful catalyst for rumors and suspicions.
- **Clarify what is NOT changing** – In explaining what will be different, many employers neglect to reinforce what is not changing – an equally important factor in allaying employee fears and calming the waters.
- **Acknowledge the impact on staff and the organization** – Showing empathy for what employees are feeling is entirely appropriate when done sincerely. To reinforce the message, make sure to also acknowledge the impact on the organization as a whole.
- **Give details about what to expect** – With each and every communication, spell out the change process and explain timelines. Again, when people know what to expect and when, they are less likely to speculate and develop anxiety.
- **Emphasize the positive and thank them** – To keep morale up, it's necessary to profile wins and successes, whether in the past or in recent times. People like to hear that hope exists and challenges have been overcome. Lastly, be sure to thank them for their efforts, loyalty and patience.

With over 17 years of experience working with employers to develop employee communications, BeneCom Associates can offer you real insight into how to **develop a successful strategy to communicate change to your employees.**

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