

## **Now More than Ever** EAP's Critical Role During, and Following a Layoff

***By John C. Pompe & RaeAnn Thomas***

It's paradoxical to work in a field that thrives amidst misfortune and adverse events. However, the fact remains that, now more than ever, current economic conditions are providing EAPs with an opportunity to demonstrate their value in the workplace.

Successful EAPs are integrated into the businesses they serve. Support from the EAP should be one of the first things a human resources manager considers when faced with critical events such as layoffs. Unfortunately, EAPs are too often related to the role of responder rather than strategic partner. Too many HR professionals view EAPs merely as a referral source for those employees who don't cope well with major changes.

First, remember that HR's focus may shift heavily toward the "nuts and bolts" of workforce planning, personnel management, and employment laws. They may be in need of support and coaching from an EAP to address and manage the "people side" of these issues. Experts in HR processes may not feel comfortable with some of the challenging interpersonal demands and difficult conversations accompanying a layoff. It is important that HR professionals attend to the dignity and emotional well-being of the employee while they also deliver the necessary, often painful, information about compensation, benefits, and HR policies.

Second, in spite of the economic downturn, HR and management need to concentrate on business goals that still have to be met. As managers focus on reorganizing the company to remain competitive and stay afloat, they may focus less on "softer" people issues. As a result, even the most people-focused organizations risk becoming out-of-touch during tough times. Whereas "employee engagement" and "human capital" were once considered success factors, employees can become "cost-cutting opportunities" who should consider themselves "lucky to still have jobs."

However, underestimating or ignoring employee needs exposes a company to significant risk in areas such as decreased morale, productivity, and work quality...even *increased* risk of workplace violence.

### **Involving EAP from the Beginning**

There are few occasions in which the experience and expertise of an effective EAP are as beneficial as during the stressful time of a workforce reduction. Nearly every facet of EAP services are needed during the periods leading up to, during, and following a mass layoff.

Unfortunately, the “disconnect” that too often exists between HR and EAP) is apt to come into play. For instance, even if HR *does* involve the EAP, they may not be able to articulate their concerns into a request that leads to a *useful* intervention. Vague requests such as, “*please provide some information to help our leaders better deal with this situation,*” or, “*offer some tips on how to handle our employees during this tough time*” are all too common. Such interventions are bandages and do not address the root causes of the organization’s concerns.

It is our role as EA professionals and workplace consultants to seize this opportunity to both educate and offer relevant solutions. We must be cautious and not assume we know the nature of the workplace concern. It’s too easy to say, “*the economy is bad, everyone could benefit from training on basic stress management or money management.*” Taking such a simplistic, uninformed approach leaves the EA professional as no more than a “nice to have” who will probably do no harm, but probably not a lot of good, either.

Since economic recessions impact each individual and organization differently, the EAP’s role as an evaluator is crucial. We must position ourselves as offering more than “free counseling.” Coaching upper management and HR about people issues as part of the layoff process is a *necessity*, not an option. Remind management that employee concerns may, in fact, become worse without effective counseling – services that the EAP is ideally suited to provide.

While customized approaches will be needed, EAPs can serve as consultants to clarify relevant issues and help make decisions on areas such as:

- ✓ *Who* will be involved in the layoff discussions;
- ✓ The best *location* of layoff discussions in order to put employees more at ease, reduce the visibility of intense reactions, and mitigate workplace violence risks;
- ✓ The best *time* of day and day of the week to announce layoffs; and
- ✓ The proper *order* in which to call in employees about layoff notices. For instance, it can help to space out intense meetings with some “easier” ones, so that multiple emotional crises aren’t occurring back to back. An effective order or spacing also gives the EA professional a chance to review the big picture, suggest areas that were missed, and also to offer emotional support to the decision maker (who, by the way, is probably also hurting emotionally).

### **Managing Survivor Guilt**

EAPs should also be available to provide leadership support and training following the aftermath of job loss. Simply put, the stress of a layoff is not limited to those losing their jobs.

At first, surviving employees may experience a sense of relief that they’re still working. However, left unresolved, survivor guilt can develop into more serious

emotional or psychological reactions. Employees may be less productive. Over time, feelings may turn negative as employees are left to do more with less, manage a struggling organization, and fear for the future loss of their job. When fear is running rampant, it's difficult for any employee to have a good attitude and be focused on his/her work-related responsibilities.

Consequently, one of the most important aspects in resolving “survivor guilt” involves coaching managers on communicating with employees – on being visible and “checking in” with them regularly to see how they’re doing. Even good managers often stop talking, but morale suffers, and the rumor mill runs wild. This is NOT good! Conversely, honest, but not sugar-coated communication can boost morale and keep gossip from spreading.

The post-layoff period is also critical for managers and other leaders. Not only must they “right the ship” financially, they must acknowledge that they have a workforce that needs time to recover and yet still get back to the work at hand. The EAP can assist with these “follow-up” issues – which need to focus on the manager’s ability to rebuild work teams after layoffs by:

- ✓ Going over new duties;
- ✓ Re-establishing trust; and
- ✓ Focusing on the future.

## Summary

The consultative skills of EA professionals can be highly valuable in coaching leaders on proceeding during difficult times, while *also* providing support to individual employees. There has never been a better time to do both.

*John C. Pompe, Psy. D, SPHR, is Manager of Disability and Behavioral Health Programs with Caterpillar, Inc. He may be reached at [pompejc@cat.com](mailto:pompejc@cat.com). RaeAnn Thomas, a long-time contributor to EAR, is the Executive Director of Associated Employee Assistance Services (AEAS). She may be contacted at [raeann.thomas@ministryhealth.org](mailto:raeann.thomas@ministryhealth.org).*

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