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THE ART OF FIRING

The Soft Things are the Hardest.

Facing the need to give notice to a large number of employees is a difficult task for any organisation. A situation of mass redundancy is liable to cause distress and sometimes also a wish to moralise. The process of giving notice is easily considered dirty work, and that may cause a reluctance to look at it rationally - as a process that can be carried out in a satisfactory or a less satisfactory way. Large-scale redundancy should be studied objectively from the point of view of all parties concerned, not with alarm and moralising. It should be carried out systematically, not impulsively. Subconscious repression of difficult matters can be replaced by a conscious awareness and understanding of them.

This article aims to define the conditions that enable an organisation to carry out the process of redundancy in an optimal way from the point of view of all parties concerned. The purpose is to cause as little suffering as possible for those who will have to leave and to give them support in recovering and finding re-employment. The organisation itself should be left with a suitable number of competent employees and suffer a minimal loss of image. The employees who stay should find it possible to comprehend and accept the new situation and be motivated for constructive future action. I shall deal with the process of redundancy, focusing on the normal situation in today's world when a large number of employees are given notice and the organisation continues its operations with a smaller staff.

My task as a consultant to an organisation, or as the writer of this article, is not to question the organisation's motives in reducing its staff. A difficult solution of this kind is normally the result of careful consideration. I shall focus on the functional ways to carry out a large-scale redundancy from the planning stage to the post mortem. I want to share with readers what the client organisations and my work as a psychologist have taught me about the art of firing.

The Meaning of the Process of Giving Notice to the Different Parties Concerned.

An employee who is given notice often finds himself involved in a dramatic change in his/her personal life, a crisis containing both threat and potential. A constructive solution of this crisis will affect the person's chances of finding new employment as well as his whole future life. Normally it seems to take about 12 months to regain one's balance, although there are individual differences. Even if being made redundant is a tough experience in most cases, one must bear in mind that sometimes it can give a push that will result in a better organised life.

A large-scale redundancy programme is an enormous challenge for the employer organisation. How to select the competent people? How to help those who are given notice to exit out of the organisation? How to find a balance between giving up the old system and building up a new one? For the managers who carry it out the process is a true lesson in humanity and management, and success in it will give a competence greater than any training or managerial task could give.

As representatives of social control the media are understandably interested in mass redundancies. That makes the situation a kind of personnel policy display, where the organisation shows its values and ethical principles in practice. This creates pressure within the organisation to consider how the situation appears to the public. It is important to give out the right information, but it is even more important to act with inner integrity, humanity and profit consciousness. More and more organisations are now aware of this.

A large-scale redundancy programme requires much energy within the organisation, and the resources may easily be focused on internal matters only. Clients and other external relationships may be forgotten. How long can an organisation afford to concentrate on its internal affairs only? Can the stress be alleviated by dividing the tasks between the managers and by the timing of the procedures? These are questions of crucial interest in a situation of mass redundancy.

General Conditions of the Process of Redundancy.

The whole process of giving notice should be carefully planned and there must be control and follow-up throughout the process. There is always a risk of chaos when managing a changing situation with many emotions involved. That makes order and control extremely important.

When there is less work available due to production and economic reasons, the management must state the rules used to select those who will stay. The grounds for decisions concerning individuals and employee groups must be made available to all and open for discussion in order to be understandable. Criteria based on performance or the closing down/continuation of some sectors are normally considered fairest. The employee's prospects of development in the future is an important criterion of selection for the employer, though the employees may have doubts about the justification of such a criterion or the reliability of the evaluation.

The whole organisation must be informed of all the different steps and phases of the process, cooperation procedure, accepted selection methods (e.g. interviews, psychological tests, the superior's estimate of previous work performance) and other relevant factors. Information provides better prejudgment and less fear of the future.

Superiors need peace of mind regarding the process and their own role in carrying it out. This facilitates rational and disciplined action by the rules agreed upon, and also their ability to empathise with, listen to, and understand other people. Normally it requires special training for superiors to carry out the process of giving notice. A chance to discuss matters with colleagues and one's own superior makes it easier to accept the situation and one's own role in it. A mere order to act in a certain way is not enough here. A superior needs the implicit support and trust of the top management, even if he otherwise makes independent decisions and carries out the

process on his own.

Face to face discussions when giving notice (and also eventual unofficial announcements to individual employees) should be held with acceptance and understanding for the employee's emotional reactions. It is very important that the person to face the employee's reaction is that employee's superior. He is also the right person to answer any questions on the grounds for the decision. The discussion will be difficult for both parties involved, but definitely more so for the person who is losing his job. At least some balance may be gained if the employer is represented by one person only. That also gives the employee more freedom to react spontaneously.

The employee who is given notice has the right to hear the reason for it, so that he can realistically assess his own situation. Secrecy may give rise to paranoid conceptions and delay the recovery. However, discretion must be observed. In optimal cases the organisation gives support to its former employee in e.g. seeking new employment. The treatment of those who leave affects both them and the working motivation of those who stay.

Superiors must have the ability to help the new teams that will reshape after the process, to deal with the change on an emotional level, and on a rational level to comprehend what really happened. If the management openly takes full responsibility for the process, there will be no need for feelings of guilt among the employees. There may still be grief and disappointment. To understand and to accept these feelings is a way to create a basis for a new working community. A new working motivation will be found in time.

The organisation should recognize that to carry out the process of redundancy in full (making decisions, informing, and facing the anguish of the personnel) is a severe source of stress also for the superiors. Therefore, even their debriefing must be seen to.

The Role of the Person Giving Notice.

THE NEAREST SUPERIOR

I have a mission:
 To select and to reject.
 To find the right competence
 For the challenge of tomorrow.
 If competence were one thing
 And people another
 Life would be much easier.
 (PH 1995)

Giving notice, when not due to crime of negligence, is one of the most difficult situations a superior must face. On the other hand, it is a job that can be done well - or poorly. In order to control and carry out the process of redundancy, the superior has to accept the situation and his role in it. That requires a clear awareness of the organisation's expectations.

When part of the work force is given notice, the real question is that a part of it will be selected to

stay. Those who cannot be selected will have to go. Every superior concerned must have an adequate knowledge of labour legislation, selection principles, and personnel selection in general.

The superior must also master the psychological aspect, how to tell bad news, how to face a reaction of disappointment, how to help a person in crisis. The superior does not need to be a psychologist, or a psychiatrist, but the process of giving notice and the immediate after-care requires skills of listening and attending. In order to be able to listen to another person and his anguish, one has to be at peace with the world. So the circle closes, the superior must weigh the matter in his mind until he accepts what he is doing - and decides to do it well.

Giving notice may be stressful in an imperceptible way. It can be as dangerous as charcoal fumes, odourless but lethal. There is a lot of anguish in a large organisation in the redundancy process. The disappointment and anger of the employees will be directed towards the superiors as representatives of the organisation. One cannot bear a grudge against an impersonal abstract organisation. Being an object of negative feelings can be very stressful, especially when the superiors are already overworked in the process. If the superiors do not take care of their health, illness and exhaustion will result. It is not a matter of insufficient managerial skills or competence. The decisive factors to ensure the superior's tenacity are the support of the organisation (superiors, management groups, colleagues) and the possibility of analysing the difficult situations in the process: the actual discussions where notice is given, the support given to the employees who will have to go, and lead taken to reshape the working community. Debriefing postmortems are an effective way to alleviate the pressure and to analyse the matter more clearly in one's mind.

Discussion on Giving Notice

The actual discussion is preceded by a decision about who will stay and who will have to go. In optimal cases this decision is a result of careful consideration, reached in accordance with the selection principles agreed upon. Even if the decision is based on production and economic grounds, there are other decisions to be made as well. Should some units or branches be closed down or should an equal reduction of personnel be carried out in all the sections of the organisation?

Making decisions is not always easy. When a unit or branch is closed down and everyone is given notice, individual reasons are not needed, and the situation is somewhat less difficult from the psychological point of view.

If individual selection is used, the statement of grounds is more difficult. The employee has the right to know the real reason. But how does one state as constructively as possible why the person concerned was not selected? There is a parallel case when a person applying for a position from outside the organisation, is turned down. The difference is that being given notice causes not only disappointment for a lost opportunity, but is also a concrete loss, and in some cases accompanied by a sense of rejection - with no such intention from the employer's side.

A well thought-out decision and careful preparation, however, makes the discussion with the employee somewhat easier. When the superior acts according to the rules and principles agreed

upon and has a clear conscience, there is no need for feelings of guilt, and he will be able to openly explain the logic by which the decision was reached. If one tries to come up with reasons after the decision, it is very hard to find the real, rational reason why someone was selected or not -or, indeed, there may not be any rational reason. That is why the importance of careful consideration and preparation cannot be overemphasized.

In a nutshell, one might say that after careful preparation the superior himself needs to have face to face discussion with the employee who is being given notice in a quiet place with enough time to talk things over, and opportunity for the employee to calm down after the discussion. The superior's attitude should be respectful, matter-of-fact, human and honest. The situation should be made as easy as possible- under the circumstances, for the employee who is given notice. The best way is to go straight to the point and communicate the decision and the grounds for it. Afterwards one should listen to the employee and react appropriately using common sense.

As immediate after-care, it may be important that the superior or someone else stays with the employee until he/she has calmed down. On the other hand, some people prefer to be alone when times get rough. It is better to calm down at work than for example, to drive in an unstable state of mind or to go back home with no one to listen to how you feel. Many people want to go back to their duties very soon. One can find comfort in work that feels important. Others prefer to take a day or two off to think things over.

Some may want to take sick leave for the rest of their employment. However in some cases a long sick leave may delay the return to an normal rhythm of life, make the normal grieving process more difficult, bar the separation from one's former job during the period of notice and prolong the finding of new solutions in life. If the employee who is about to leave has a chance to prepare for his departure without any sense of humiliation and go on working within his capacity, he may have enough mental strength to leave with his head up, through the front door instead of sneaking out the back door in shame. Many qualified employees are unable to find a new position in today's world. They have the right to be proud of their careers. Each one of them deserves a farewell of warmth and respect.

The Role of Those Who Stay.

TIME OF INSECURITY

When some of us will have to go
and one weeps while the other laughs,
and the only plentiful thing
is insecurity,
how should we share at least that
as sisters and brothers,
keeping our dignity
supporting one another?
(PH 1995)

The old wisdom of front-line soldiers and trade unions, "Don't leave your brother/sister", is still

valid today. If the superiors in the organisation have done their part well, made well thought-out decisions and carry their responsibility, remaining colleagues are spared from feelings of guilt and do not feel isolated from those who have to go.

Naturally everybody in his own mind will take a position on the justification of the decisions. To some extent the process of giving notice affects all members of the working community. Open discussion on the feelings aroused by the process is a worthy principle. Whether all together or individually, the main thing is that those who stay and those who leave do communicate.

It is very important for those who go, to be able to hear that their colleagues are not unconcerned about it. A warm farewell from the colleagues means a lot for those who leave. The remaining period of working together may be significant for both parties. It is very important to dare to grieve, to say goodbye and to miss each other. The working community will feel the pain of loss, but it will pass more quickly through a proper grieving process. One must learn to suffer to be able to live (Italian proverb).

The Role of Those Who Are Given Notice.

WHO AM I?

When the manager told me
there is no more work,
I sensed a sudden emptiness.
Thoughts and years passed away.
I disappeared out of my own life.
But since it is my only life
- but then again, you never know -
I came back.
At first I became an object:
the one on the receiving end.
Only little by little I became a subject once again:
I started to sense, to see, to act.
In the beginning there was suffering,
insecurity, disappointment, sorrow.
Then I found my faith anew
and decided to go on.
I was appointed CEO
in a company called My Life.
(PH 1995)

When a working relationship comes to an end, it will be replaced by mental tasks of a different nature. At least the following items should be on the agenda of an unemployed person.

One must face the reality. To realize that it has happened to me, I lost my job. It's a difficult matter that will grow into one's consciousness little by little. The greater the surprise, the more difficult it is to believe it to be true. The fall is not so hard if one is prepared and has alternate

plans.

One must also face and evaluate the losses in the different fields of life. What are the short-term and long-term effects on one's economic standing? How about the freedom to make choices and decisions concerning one's life? What are the effects on the sense of inner security and values? Along with the working community, most people in this situation lose their human relationships, clients and colleagues. Colleagues may still be friends to meet, but they cannot be taken for granted every morning any more. Some people sense a great loss of social status and honour, but there are a lot of individual difference. In a small town things are more public, whereas in a big city there is more anonymity and privacy.

Being given notice may have short-term effects on one's family life. The members of the family are frightened by the situation and may be accusatory. Sometimes there is a contrary effect. The crisis may bring husband and wife closer to one another, bring to the surface warmth and support that may stay hidden in an easier situation. Friends normally remain but for a while there might be a social silence around a person who has been given notice. People may be shy to ring or pay a visit for fear of not knowing how to behave.

It is also a difficult task to bid farewell to one's work and to let it go. In the grieving process one must at first accept the loss that has occurred and then go through the emotions aroused by that loss - disappointment, anger, longing, fear, insecurity. Spinoza says: "A feeling of suffering ceases to be suffering once we form a clear and sharp picture of it." In most cases hope and trust will finally come back. One agrees to replace the losses with new aspects of life and start having positive emotions once again.

When given notice one may lose not only a job, but also one's professional identity. A person with specialized training can more easily avoid that. An engineer will still be an engineer, even if he is unemployed. If the professional identity is based on belonging to a certain organisation, one may have to face the question, "What am I without my work?" Or even a deeper question, "Who am I and what do I want out of life?" A person who has been given notice will have to redefine his identity in regard to work. Will he be a jobseeker, between jobs, an adult student, retired, available on the labour market, unemployed, or, unemployed on a long-term basis? If one hopes to find new employment, one should not use the definition unemployed. The word itself, unemployed, is filled with so many negative connotations that it would as well be put out of use altogether.

The new situation in life requires other skills as well. Especially if one wants to find new employment, one must dare to evaluate both one's own competence and one's motivation to learn new skills - and one's values of life. A person can reach and learn amazing things if he really wants to. Learning is a lifelong process and experience helps one to put things into proportion. It is very important to retain one's self-confidence and dignity, to spur oneself. It takes activity and courage to market one's competence, to create a contact network, and to take advantage of it. Wasting time should also be avoided, not staying in bed and feeling depressed. When work no more requires a daily routine, one must be created. However, one can also make the best of things, even daily job seeking leaves room for hobbies one never had time for while still at work.

Practical job seeking skills are easy to learn when the shock is over and one can make sensible plans for life. The support of one's closest people can be an important asset. Some people need professional help to recover: individual or group therapy, or at least a chance of a short debriefing. In optimal cases the employer organisation can arrange this kind of help. Once the recovery process has started, one can learn job seeking skills. Outplacement training will provide the jobseeker with up-to-date skills. Often the employer organisation can arrange training for job seeking.

Building a New Working Community.

For life does not move backwards
or stay in a day that has passed.
(KAHLIL GIBRAN)

Those who stay are usually relieved when they can keep their jobs. They should have the right to rejoice, even if some of their colleagues will have to go. The situation calls for discretion. On the other hand, a normal consequence of a mass redundancy is an increased workload for those who stay, at least on a short-term basis. The workload must be divided anew, but new methods must also be applied. If there is no real change, it will cause exhaustion and the consequence will be, besides human suffering, that the smaller work force will be just as expensive for the organisation as the larger one was previously.

Those who stay must create new methods. That requires a common vision of the future, a strong common mental picture of the goals. During the process of redundancy, the horrible vision of losing one's own job may have been the strongest vision of the future. Now long-term goals must be envisioned and attainable short-term goals must be set in order to feel joy over one's work and success in it.

The working motivation must be based on trust in the management and the employer in spite of the previous notices that were given. This new trust and confidence may not be based on a similar kind of security of one's own job as before, but there must still be faith in the employer's integrity and the predictability of one's own fate. The way the process of redundancy was carried out may give the employees who stay a lot of information on the employer and on the superiors as the employer's representatives, and that information will either form a basis for the new trust, or fail to do so.

The Set of Roles of the Superior.

To carry out a process of giving notice successfully requires that the superior is in control of a variety of aspects of work. In conclusion I will present a summary, based on the Role theory, of the role of the superior in this demanding managerial task. By the word "role" I mean a functional aspect of the task, by "set of roles" I mean the range of roles that a successful process requires.

The superior who carries out the process of giving notice should master five different roles:

1. The role of a professional manager, including the leadership of the organisation. To represent the employer and to carry out the kind of personnel policy that has been agreed

upon.

2. The role of a creator. The superior must envision the future operations, pass his visions to the employees and work together with them to build up the future operations by setting appropriate intermediary goals.
3. The role of a practical psychologist. The superior must listen to and understand the employees' reactions and be able to face them without undue stress. This role helps the superior to solve conflicts, to encourage cooperation and to build bridges between groups and individuals.
4. The role of a teacher. In this role the superior represents reality and tells the facts in a comprehensible way. He is able to present the new matters to be adopted in an understandable form and thus teach new methods to the working community. In this role the superior himself is also a lifelong learner whose example spurs even the others to learn new things.
5. The role of a wise person with experience. Based on the superior's own experience of life, work and leadership. Age strengthens this role, but even a young person may be experienced in this sense. If the superior masters the role of experience, he has the capability for a deep understanding of people and different situations, and he is able to keep his peace of mind even in difficult cases. This creates a sense of security in the working community.

The set of roles described above is based on practical knowledge and experience. It is not a set of theatrical or false roles, but personal and inner knowledge, skills and attitudes that cannot be learned from books alone. When a superior develops this set of roles for himself, it will help him to keep a professional grasp in the process of giving notice. Problems often arise when the professional grasp is lost. All the aspects that are included in the superior's set of roles are necessary throughout the whole process of giving notice. Different roles are dominant in different situations.

The superior will face his own limitations when learning to carry out the process of giving notice in a skilful way. To face one's limitations is to face reality. Yet, one can have dreams. The lines of a Japanese tanka poem puts it in a nutshell: "My old barn burnt down - I see the moon clearly now".