

## How To Rebuild Team Relationships After Layoffs

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 9 February 2023

In recent weeks, the headlines have been full of layoffs. Redundancies are tough on those directly affected, but for those left behind, it can be difficult too. The stress of the redundancy process, losing close colleagues, and extra workload, can leave everyone feeling the pressure. Add worries over the economic environment and higher living costs into this mix, and it's a perfect storm. These can become ideal conditions for team conflict to thrive, leaving managers to pick up the pieces. There is one key area managers can focus on that will help strengthen cohesion and minimize destructive conflict, and that is by building strong team relationships. Here's how.

### **A manager's relationship with team members**

It's no surprise that in times of stress, relationships suffer. When workers' inner resources are tested, tolerance levels tend to be lower. This affects the 'lens' through which interactions are perceived, leaving more room for misunderstandings and misinterpretations. An off-hand comment from a manager, which might have been overlooked before, can be taken to heart. A staff member worried about whether their job might be the next one to go, can interpret being left out of a meeting as a deliberate slight.

Healing and supporting a team after layoffs is really important. Team members at a low ebb might seem sad, demotivated, or quiet. Even though managers are often under pressure themselves, making the time to notice the atmosphere within the team, and taking steps to build their relationship with individual team members, will reduce the risk of conflicts flaring up.

### **Managing wider team dynamics**

Redundancies affect team morale and trust. Team members may become suspicious of their manager or colleagues: are things being kept from them, and do they know of more downsizing to come? The team's relationships, often forged over a long time, are also disrupted, as teammates adjust to the loss of supportive colleagues or friends. Lack of trust and conflict are closely intertwined. When a team trusts each other, it can ride out disagreements or accept occasional behavioral slips. When trust levels are lower, destructive conflict is more likely.

To help the team rebuild trust, managers can create space for teams to air their concerns in a safe environment. This could be a dedicated time or simply offering an opportunity at the start or end of a meeting to talk with each other. It's also important to create psychological safety, where workers feel the team environment is safe for interpersonal risk taking. Managers can role-model healthy conflict behaviors, facilitate respectful discussions, and moderate team members who are exhibiting unhelpful behaviors. This helps to build trust between team members, as well as trust in their manager.

### **Looking inwards to build personal resilience**

Much is expected of managers in today's workplace, and the post-redundancy environment is no exception. Managers have often had the strain of managing a process where trusted staff members

have been let go, or are running a smaller unit under heightened business pressures. Managers themselves may have been at risk of redundancy, after which it's common to feel survivor's guilt. A recent study found that over half of people who had avoided losing their jobs during a redundancy process, experienced guilt when they kept their jobs and others didn't. They also experienced emotions such as a lack of motivation and lower productivity.

For many managers, it's easy to overlook self-care, but this is critical. The first step is to recognize uncomfortable feelings and take action to manage them rather than avoid them. It can be helpful to seek support from trusted colleagues or friends, to talk things through and feel heard. Not only will self-care protect a manager's well-being, but it also means they're much better placed to help others.

Forward-thinking managers will actively cultivate their team relationships, fostering trust and building teams who can navigate conflict. Although layoffs will always be challenging, a team with strong connections can support each other through the bad times and pave the way for success in better times.