

After the Chop

By

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You've survived the redundancy so why do you feel so bad? Yvonne Nicolas reports.

The axe has been wielded and your job is safe, so why do you feel so bad? Instead of jumping for joy, you're racked with guilt for former mates, despite being quietly happy it wasn't you. If this is you - you may be suffering survival syndrome.

A recent "survivor" sums it up: "You feel like a tragedy has occurred and you had a lucky escape, and you don't know what to say to the person terminated."

"That's a fair analogy," says Meredith Fuller, psychologist and career specialist.

Also media spokeswoman for the Australian Psychological Society, Ms Fuller says before you jump to conclusions you need to test two main assumptions.

"You might assume that your colleague is upset or unhappy about it - however, they might be over the moon, a chance to move on to something they will prefer and the shove they needed to motivate them.

"It's always a good idea to check rather than see the situation through your eyes.

"Secondly, others might assume that you are either smug or scared, so never assume."

You may well be next, says Tom Stafford, general manager, Cordon Bleu Recruitment Consultants. "There is real fear in the workforce and we are receiving a marked increase in the number of calls from professionals checking out the job market.

"What this says is that more people are looking to control their future, rather than have others do it for them ... understandably they feel it would be better to move before being ousted, so they are job searching," he says.

"In these situations, it's often the best who leave and that has the potential to damage those axe-wielding businesses."

So whether you get pushed, or jump first, this climate creates uncertainty and can't be good for business.

But that's just a fact of life, says Ms Fuller.

"What goes around comes around," she says. "We need to be reminded to treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself, and encourage ethical, professional, reasonable attitudes towards staff.

"Many office culls are short-sighted and smart organisations realise that life is a series of swings and roundabouts and work hard to facilitate other job options for their staff."

Douglas Long, director, Group 8 Management, which specialises in leadership management, cites a recent experience that reflects this potential loss to business.

"The board believed they had very few options," Dr Long says. "Although very profitable, given the current state of the economy, the company was overstaffed so, during 2008, major redundancies were implemented with staff reduced by over 100

people.

"Within the space of weeks after the redundancies started, enthusiasm and commitment had gone, and survivors moved from being members of highly motivated teams, to groups of individuals who were waiting for 'the second shoe' to fall.

"Rather than seeking ways to take appropriate risk and help the organisation achieve desired results, the culture changed so that they were constantly looking over their shoulders.

"They were making sure everything they did was documented to provide cover in the event of unexpected outcomes."

He says several employees also sought legal advice to check out their options.

Sound familiar? Dr Long goes on to explain that while costs to the company had been reduced, the side effects of the redundancies had been enormous.

"All projected savings were in danger of being eroded through a negative organisational culture," he says.

"This resulted in loss of revenue."

Dr Long says unless boards and management handle redundancies properly, the benefits of reducing staff levels are at risk through the impact on survivors.

"In times of economic downturn, organisations need their employees to be optimistic, committed and collaborative," he says.

"The problem is worse in organisations that are seen to operate in secrecy, or on a 'need-to-know' basis, than in organisations where management displays openness and

trust to their staff with both good and bad news."

Christopher Shen, organisational psychologist agrees.

"Very often, redundancies can be emotionally devastating for these employees who may experience 'survivor guilt' at retaining employment," he says.

"Remaining employees often experience a decline in morale, motivation and productivity as they miss their former colleagues, as well as fearing the loss of their own jobs.

"These 'survivors' are often torn between gratitude for having retained employment and feeling compassionate and tactfully empathetic to those terminated."

He says visionary organisations understand that it is just as important to support those remaining after a restructure as those who depart.

"Skilful leaders will endeavour to understand and care for remaining employees by providing opportunities to listen and support concerns, thoughts and outcomes."

Ms Fuller says often the most effective way to manage survivor guilt is to flourish in your career so that you can be a positive agent. "You never know when you will be able to encourage and support a former colleague, and vice versa," she says.

How to flourish when you're left behind

- Don't allow yourself to pick up on other people's paranoia.
- Don't exhaust yourself trying to cover the load - juggling your role and that of retrenched colleagues - it's not sustainable and will not ensure your job remains "safe" ... and does not provide quality in the long term. If a mean-

spirited boss threatens that it is now down to you to deliver additional functions, clarify with HR whether the colleagues' roles were redundant (tasks are no longer required, therefore you are not expected to take them on), or were the people terminated, and will new staff be taken on?

- Don't allow yourself to apologise and become so humble, or grateful, for your survival that you stall your own career development by meekly accepting the status quo. You need stimulation to ensure that your contribution remains vital and fresh.
- Do something pro-active; if you languish in dreary "busyness" you just become bored or resentful.
- Ask for extra assignments; check out how they operate.
- Never let others dictate how you should feel.
- Make clear "I" statements that demonstrate how adult, reasonable and balanced you are.
- Check out support websites <http://www.psychology.org.au> and the various online employee assistance programs.

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Based in Melbourne, Australia, Christopher Shen Consulting brings organisational psychology solutions to workplaces, helping people become stronger leaders and teams become better performers.

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