



# Guide to Managing Layoffs

## **Practical Information for Managers and Supervisors**

The University of Colorado Boulder  
Department of Human Resources

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# Introduction

Telling an employee that his or her job is being eliminated is, perhaps, one of the most difficult challenges a manager or supervisor may encounter. It is doubly hard for the affected employee to understand this action when they have no control over the decision.

Human Resources (HR) has developed a document titled “Layoff Procedures” for managers and supervisors to help navigate the layoff process. The procedures are very specific in the steps that must be followed and it is critical that you consult with HR prior to any communication or action pursuant to potential layoffs. In addition to implementing these procedures, managers and supervisors are asked to be sensitive to the human and emotional side of the layoff action. Unfortunately, the steps for managing the human side of this process are not as clear and prescriptive.

This guide has been created to assist managers and supervisors in working through the layoff process with dignity and respect for both the employee who is leaving, and for the employees remaining in the department. We have researched best practices from a variety of organizations and other sources and have compiled the following information that we hope you will find helpful in managing these changes in your department.

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# Communication

Communication is key to a successful layoff process. If your department is facing the need to restructure your workforce, here are some important points to remember:

## **Prior to the layoff notification(s)**

- Plan your communication early - Plan what you will tell your employees about possible layoffs. Developing a formal communications document with a list of talking points will be helpful.
- Communicate early and often. Plan when you will tell your employees about possible layoffs. Keep them apprised of developments over time.
- Communicate openly and honestly. Employees can better plan for a worst-case scenario if they know the possibilities.

## **During the layoff notification process**

See “Preparing for and Conducting the Layoff Notification Meeting” (beginning on page 4)

## **After the layoff notification(s)**

- Continue communication with separating employee(s). See “Preparing for and Conducting the Layoff Notification Meeting” (beginning on page 4).
- Communicate with the remaining staff. Remaining employees may feel that they may be the next ones losing their jobs and some may feel guilty when colleagues have lost their jobs.
  - ✓ Be honest about what you know and what you can share. This not only minimizes concern relating to employees’ own job security but also diminishes the rumor mill.
  - ✓ Facilitate group closure by giving employees a chance to express their concerns publicly and hear directly from you about what has occurred.
  - ✓ Listen to how they feel and prepare to reassure them.
  - ✓ Inform them of changes in workload or assignments and discuss with them how the work will be covered.
  - ✓ Provide opportunities for employees to meet with you personally to answer questions and to alleviate fears.

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# Preparing for and Conducting a Layoff Notification Meeting

Informing employees they are losing their job is a difficult and stressful task for a manager or supervisor. For the interaction between the employee and the manager or supervisor to go smoothly as possible, careful preparation and planning are the most important elements.

The objectives of the notification meeting are twofold:

(1) To inform the employee that his/her job has been eliminated and that he or she is being separated, **and**

(2) To do so in a respectful and dignified manner that keeps the person feeling positive about the University and begins the transition process in a positive way.

## Pre-Meeting Preparation

- Be familiar with the circumstances (e.g. lack of funds, lack of work, or department reorganization) leading to the elimination of the employee's position. Also, be familiar with the process that was followed, including how the decision was made in selecting who would be laid off.
- Prepare a script as a guide. This will ensure that you convey all the necessary information to the employee. Practice and rehearse the message you will deliver and how you will deliver it without reading your script word for word. Be genuine with your communication, even if reciting from a script.
- Consider if the employee will leave immediately after being notified of the layoff or will continue to work through the period of notice. HR can advise you on the best strategy for your situation.
- Consider how you will handle the employee's workload and what you will tell other employee if you are asked. Will it be distributed among other employees? Will services be eliminated?
- Provide resources for the employee to help them move forward. Provide names and telephone numbers. In addition, refer to the following as resources that are available for them:
  - ✓ Faculty and Staff Assistance Program for counseling and support
  - ✓ PBS Benefits Representative to learn about available benefits

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- ✓ Recruitment Representative to learn about re-employment and other job opportunities within the University
  - ✓ Other external community resources.
- Be aware that the separation process can be emotional for all parties; prepare for this. Because of the emotional context it is important to anticipate questions you could be asked and have the answers to those questions available.
  - Take the time necessary to make the proper arrangements for the notification meeting.
    - ✓ Select a place where you can have privacy.
    - ✓ Select a time earlier in the day on a day that is not immediately prior to a weekend, holiday, or scheduled vacation for either the employee or manager/supervisor.
    - ✓ Consider the day in relationship to significant dates for the employee (e.g. family celebration, religious holiday, employee's birthday, etc.)
    - ✓ Plan for uninterrupted time.
    - ✓ Allow enough time to complete the meeting without being rushed including time for the employee to ask questions.
  - Consider having an appropriate person (i.e. a department administrative assistant) who is not privy to the subject of the meeting notify the employee of the meeting. This will allow you to introduce the purpose of the meeting in a private, controlled manner without engaging with the employee before you are prepared to speak to them.
  - Depending on your knowledge of the employee it may be advisable to have an FSAP Counselor or a Human Resources representative on-call if needed. Discuss with them any possible problems you feel could occur or any concerns you may have. In addition, you may also wish to consult with the University's Public Safety Department if you feel there is a possibility of a violent reaction.
  - Arrange for another manager to be with you during the meeting.
  - Assess the impact of the employee's departure on co-workers and clients.
  - Seek appropriate coaching from Human Resources Consultants and/or the Faculty and Staff Assistance Program Counselors.

### The Notification Meeting

Employee notifications should be conducted in person. Typically, the employee's immediate supervisor or the department manager conducts the notification meeting. This would **not** be a good time to have someone with whom the employee has never spoken conduct the meeting.

- Don't engage in small talk, get to the point. Deliver the message directly but compassionately and allow the employee time to read the written notice of layoff you will give them during this meeting.
- Stay with your script and remain calm. Straightforward, clear explanations are important.
- Give the employee some background explaining why this decision is necessary.
- Do not make comments, even if well intended, that could compromise the decision. Stay away from discussions that could confuse the primary message.
- Be sensitive to the employee's situation, but also be direct and firm. Make sure that the employee knows the decision is final and is non-negotiable.
- Don't blame others for the actions being taken.
- Don't become defensive, argumentative or confrontational. It is best not to critique the decision that has been made.
- Be sensitive to the employee's response. Hearing the employee does not mean you agree with him/her.
- Tell the employee how much you appreciate the work they have done and recognize his/her contributions.

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- Allow the employee to ask questions and let them know they can come back to you with questions later if needed, since it sometimes takes time for an employee to process what they've been told.
  - Listen carefully and, after the meeting, document anything that could lead to a potential problem. Consult with Human Resources and/or the Faculty and Staff Assistance Program, if appropriate.

- **Offer support and encouragement; treat the employee in a dignified manner.**
  - ✓ Encourage the employee to contact the resources available (e.g. Faculty and Staff Assistance Program, Payroll & Benefits Services, Employment Services, etc.).
  - ✓ Be available in the next few days to meet with the employee if he or she has additional questions.
  - ✓ Understand and appreciate the employee's position.
  - ✓ Focus the employee on the next steps in his/her future.

### **Keep the Meeting Professional**

Here are a few pointers for conducting a professional meeting:

Listen to the employee and exhibit empathy (not to be confused with sympathy); Pay attention to their cues. Some employees may want to ask questions, while others may just want to get the information and leave.

Avoid any negative body language, e.g. rolling your eyes, appearing bored, checking your watch, or anything that may be construed as being uncaring or unconcerned for the employee's well-being;

Keep the meeting focused on imparting the information needed, emphasizing the various benefits and services available to the employee; Do not engage in arguments with the employee or seek to provide unnecessary justification for this action.

If necessary, allow the employee a reasonable amount of time to "compose" themselves before having to face co-workers.

### **Problems that May Occur in the Meeting**

The employee may:

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- ✓ Become resistant, defensive and/or threatening want to plead his/her case, or bargain for another opportunity.
  - ✓ Want to speak with a “decision-maker”.
  - ✓ Ask “why me?” questions.
  - ✓ Threaten a lawsuit or other formal action such as a retaliation complaint
  - ✓ May get personally upset with the manager or supervisor
  - ✓ Try to make the issue personal or about performance
  - ✓ Argue about a person being retained who they believe is less capable, has less seniority, etc.
  - ✓ List the repercussions cascading from the job loss.
  - ✓ Break down emotionally.
  - ✓ Go into shock and not accept what is happening.

### **How to Deal with Emotional Reactions**

Stay in control of the meeting and your emotions at all times. Be familiar with, and comment on, how the decision was made. Be supportive and offer positive suggestions where appropriate.

Be prepared for the following reactions:

- If crying occurs:
  - ✓ Offer tissues
  - ✓ Permit the employee the time to be alone to cry, if needed.
  - ✓ Be supportive, but refrain from touching the employee.
  - ✓ Be patient.
- If anger occurs:
  - ✓ Listen. Anger is a normal response.
  - ✓ Respond to verbal attacks directly.
  - ✓ Remain calm and request the employee to remain calm.
  - ✓ Do not discuss employee performance issues.
  - ✓ Stop the meeting until the anger ceases to reconvene at a later time.
- If silence occurs:
  - ✓ Acknowledge the employee’s feelings.
  - ✓ Allow the employee to discuss feelings. Be empathetic.
  - ✓ Ask open-ended questions to determine that the employee understands the layoff message.
- If denial occurs:
  - ✓ Repeat or rephrase statements.
  - ✓ Ask open-ended questions to determine whether the employee understands the layoff message.



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- ✓ Empathize with the employee with statements such as, “I know this is quite a shock” or “This is really hard to understand at first.” Give the employee direction on what he or she needs to do.
  - If threats occur:
    - ✓ Don't put yourself between the employee and the door. Give them easy access to leave if necessary.
    - ✓ Keep calm, take a deep breath and do not let yourself get baited into a shouting match
    - ✓ Suggest a brief cool down period, pause and then reconvene when you feel that emotions have calmed.
    - ✓ Have planned campus police become involved if needed.

### **Things To Do After The Meeting**

- ✓ Conduct a follow-up meeting with the employee to see how he/she is coping and provide any information you were not able to provide in the notification meeting (if the employee is still on site).
- ✓ If the employee is working until his/her separation date, you should supervise this employee just as you would any other employee.
- ✓ Be aware of the employee's emotional state. If you have concerns, notify your resources.
- ✓ Observe what's going on in the office between the separating employee and the remaining employees. (e.g. are the remaining employees being respectful and supportive or systematically excluding this person? How is the telephone being answered when this person is not around?).
- ✓ Notify Human Resources of any critical issues.

## Follow-up with Remaining Employees

With discretion, inform the remaining employees about the action(s) that have taken place. Understand that people have lost friends and may have their own anxieties. Get people refocused quickly on any restructuring, reassignment of work or other changes.

Discuss workload and/or support concerns and needs. Focus on the positives.

Thank employees for their continued support but make no promises or guarantees about the future.

Be accessible to your employees for any issues or concerns they may have about the changes.

Above all, be tactful, direct and clear in explaining the circumstances that led up to the decision, the decision-making process, and the changes within the organization. Offer employees the opportunity to ask questions.

## Sample Dialogue with the Employee

The following information may assist in planning a script for the layoff notification meeting as well as preparing the manager or supervisor for various reactions from the employee.

[Manager to employee]

1. Greet the employee.

Manager: Hello, \_\_\_\_\_. Thank you for meeting with me.

2. Notification (speak slowly and calmly)

Manager: I've called this meeting because I must, unfortunately, inform you that your position is being eliminated. We do not have another position in our unit for you. This means you are being laid off and will work with Human Resources to determine your retention rights.

(The official notice of layoff letter is sent 10 days after the layoff is communicated to the employee.)

Manager: As you may know, we are in a time of (budget cutbacks, reorganization, etc.) Although, we've done everything possible to minimize the impact of these \_\_\_\_\_ on our department, we still need to implement some very difficult decisions. I'd like you to know that this action is not easily taken and only after long and careful review of many options. It is a final decision.

**(pause for a few seconds)**

~~Manager: I know this is difficult news. Is everything I've said clear to you? Do you have any questions?~~

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The employee will, typically, lead the conversation at this point. Answer questions honestly and appropriately. You should expect reactions anywhere in the range of emotional behavior to logical, strictly business related behavior.

### Appropriate Response to Emotional Reactions

In addition to physical reactions such as crying, anger and non-acceptance, emotional responses may also include the “why” questions. “Why me?” “Why not another employee?” “Why did you make this decision?” Other questions may include:

- ✓ Who made this decision?
- ✓ Who can I talk with to get this decision reversed?
- ✓ Are there any other jobs available for me?
- ✓ Can I keep my job if I take a pay cut or reduce my time?
- ✓ Who else is being released?

Listen carefully and make eye contact with the employee. Assess the employee’s emotional state and/or behavior to see if he/she might be a threat to himself/herself or others. If so, call your resources for assistance. Otherwise, answer those questions that are appropriate to answer. Do not allow the employee to continue too long.

Show empathy for the employee but avoid trite statements or platitudes such as:

- “It’s not the end of the world.”
- “Consider this a blessing in disguise.”
- “The glass isn’t half empty, it’s half full.”
- “It’s just a job.”

While you may wish to continue with the meeting, consider what might be best for the employee and whether he/she will hear any further information you may deliver at this time. In most cases, you should take the time to deal with the emotional reactions and responses of the employee before turning to any “housekeeping” matters you need to deal with.

Manager: Is there someone I can call for you?

or Would you like to take a brief break before we continue?

In many instances, the employee may move directly to the facts relating to the

**or**                    Would you like to leave for the rest of the day and we can continue this discussion tomorrow?

layoff. This allows the manager to begin discussion of the “housekeeping” matters.

### **Housekeeping Matters**

Manager: At this point, I need to discuss with you how you will leave the department and the resources and assistance the University makes available to you.

This transition statement will reinforce that the action being taken is final and will begin moving the employee forward in that direction. Again, make eye contact with the employee and speak calmly.

If the staff person will not be required to work past the day that the notification meeting occurs, it will be important to have clear instructions for the following:

- Arrangements with the employee to empty his/her office. Have boxes available if the employee will be emptying his/her office immediately: or,
- Discuss a possible time less disruptive to the office when the employee can come in to retrieve his/her belongings.
- Confirm who will be following up with him/her regarding any questions or concerns that were addressed in the meeting.

If the staff person will be allowed to work after the notification meeting, it will be important to discuss the following:

- Confirm last date of work.
- Encourage the staff member to make an appointment with Human Resources to review transition resources such as:
  - ✓ Retention rights
  - ✓ Reemployment, rehire, and other employment procedures.
  - ✓ Resume Service/Effective Interviewing/Career Counseling
  - ✓ Time Off To Attend Interviews
  - ✓ Orientation Sessions
  - ✓ Letters Of Recommendation

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In addition, whenever possible, make efforts to complete recognition events, going away parties, etc. Obtain permission from the affected staff members before scheduling an event. Consult with Human Resources for ideas on how to implement a transition event that will have a positive impact on all who are affected by this layoff.