

THE RULES OF REDUNDANCY

When organisations as diverse as the BBC and the RAF announced huge job losses at the end of 2004, I couldn't help feeling that we'll be hearing about a lot more large-scale redundancies over the next few years.

Some 2,700 jobs shed over three years will apparently leave the RAF smaller than at any time since the Battle of Britain. At the BBC roughly the same number of people are to go so that the corporation can 'keep up with the pace of change' and save £320m a year. Emotive stuff – and I sympathise with the thousands of people facing potentially long periods of professional trauma. But as a management development specialist, I'm more concerned for those staying with their employer than for those who are going.

A good organisation will provide practical support and assistance for those made redundant to cushion the blow and help them make the transition – which is why an outplacement service is an increasingly popular resource.

But what of those left behind? What support systems are in place for them? Their likely relief at having survived a cull could soon turn to resentment if they are expected to have to pick up the pieces for no reward other than the right to keep their jobs. Absorbing more work for the same pay, increased targets and stress are common fallout from redundancy scenarios. When companies start downscaling, it's often the strong, loyal people at the management level who are left to shield the people at the top from a barrage of questions from the ranks. On top of that, it is managers who are expected to meet low morale head on, to focus and motivate people and to maintain performance at such a challenging time.

It is rare that a company shows the insight to invest in the leadership abilities of the management tier when faced with the mass savings



Redundancies are once again on the increase. **Lyn Bicker** explains why it is just as important to support the people who stay as the people who have to go

and improved organisational efficiency that redundancies are guaranteed to deliver. Yet redundancies do call for some form of investment in change management. Strategies need to be revisited, objectives confirmed and communications programmes drawn up. You can see why the management tiers get overlooked at this stage – the number crunchers are too busy making sure the residual workforce is enough to keep the wheels turning.

Just as critical is the means of rallying support for change and uniting staff and senior management in a common fight for survival. Never is it so important to have effective leadership as when an organisation needs to turn workforce attention away from the gaping holes left by redundancies and towards the future.

AT THE COALFACE

It's at times like these that managers should be at their most visible and vocal – not hidden away in meetings. To regain the hearts and minds of staff, these people should be seen at the coalface. Managers need honed leadership skills in order to take the remaining staff forward as hungry teams. It is not enough to make a cursory nod towards basic management needs, such as ensuring

remaining staff are not overworked or reciting scripted answers to questions about future job security. This buffer zone must be able to balance the smooth implementation of time or cost saving measures with an awareness of how their people are responding to the changing work environment.

The workforce needs to feel visible and valued, not patronised. Critical and talented people must feel secure, and the continued presence of acknowledged rising stars in a company will reassure colleagues. To address these needs even at the beginning of a redundancy programme is too late. Companies should identify how to support those managers closest to the impact of redundancy situations in the same breath as the need to shed people.

Skills and support can be provided in various ways. Workshops can show managers how to deal with uncomfortable conversations, to motivate and unite staff. The temptation will be to buy an off-the-shelf event, but organisations will find it more effective to tailor this kind of workshop to their individual predicament. Executive coaching can also help managers focus on individual leadership weaknesses, while organisational coaching can help create a consistent management style and unite teams to concentrate on defined business goals.

As for expense, it need not prove a deterrent. Executive coaching at this level could be one session per manager with a defined level of telephone or e-mail support during the programme of change. Companies are often too focused on losing staff to think about some of the most important people left behind. But they need to consider instead the long-term benefits of a united team of managers working towards critical business goals at the same time, at the same pace and in the same style – and target their energies accordingly. ■

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Redundancies can have an equally traumatic effect on staff left in the company