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How to manage Survivor's Guilt after downsizing

While most employees in almost every industry are clear that given the state of the economy, cost cutting and job elimination has become more inevitable and commonplace, what many employees and employers alike didn't expect was the survivor guilt phenomenon that seems to be plaguing workplaces across the country.

What exactly is Survivor Guilt? As defined by Wikipedia, Survivor Guilt, also known as survivor syndrome, is a mental condition that occurs when a person perceives himself or herself to have done wrong by surviving a traumatic event. It may be found among survivors of combat and natural disaster, and in non-mortal situations among those whose colleagues are laid off.

As a nation, we are not unfamiliar with this syndrome. It has manifested itself throughout our history in post-war



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times, in the aftermath of hurricanes, earthquakes and other disasters, in those who missed their flights and avoided fatal crashes, and of course in the 9-11 terrorist attacks.

For employees who've "made the cut" and kept their jobs, feeling guilty that their befriended co-workers are no longer employed is compounded with the absence of the employees' established network and normal means of professional social interaction and venting. These feelings

of guilt and pent up emotions coupled with employee's own personal financial frustrations all breed disengagement and lack of productivity for an employer. This effect has been recorded according to a recent Accenture study, which stated that 66 percent of managers believe that economic concerns are distracting employees and hampering productivity.

Seeing survivor guilt and distraction at this magnitude - - across industries and geography - - requires intervention

in order to refocus the workforce toward productivity and success.

In order to manage emotionally distraught, stressed employees and increase productivity, companies must learn to deal with what in the past has been considered a grey area for the workplace. Companies must train their line managers, influencers/leaders, and human resources personnel to provide workplace emotional support to employees while balancing the work that needs to be done.

The first step toward accomplishing this is for all involved to unlearn previous business paradigms that emotions are to be avoided at work. Organization managers and leaders must realize that emotions are present at work, regardless of any past policy to ignore them and more importantly, if these emotions are left unmanaged, the bottom line will soon be affected.

The next step is to train managers, leaders and human resources personnel on Emotional Intelligence (EQ). Without spending a lot of money on training, there are inexpensive and effective ways of getting up-to-speed quickly on EQ. For example, the internet is filled with information on EQ specifically designed for the workplace. There are also several books that have been written on the topic that are quick, easy-to-read and apply to one's own work environment. Finally, many trainers appreciate the widespread nature of survivor guilt and the need for EQ in the workplace and are usually willing to reduce traditional training fees in order to get the word out about EQ.

Whatever method you pursue, EQ should be looked at as an investment to minimize existing stress while paving a path toward future stability, security and productivity. ■