

# **STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH WORKPLACE CHANGE**

## **COLORADO STATE EMPLOYEES ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (C-SEAP)**

- 1) Take Charge:** Plan in advance how you will respond to the changed workplace environment, or, if you are furloughed or laid off, what steps you will take to manage your job-search, your finances, and your home life. Write your ideas down. Prioritize the most important steps. For example, when will you update your resume, when will you make contacts to further your job hunt, when will you begin looking at other job-hunt resources such as the classified ads. How will you manage the stress and anxiety that can be expected?
- 2) Talk:** When change does occur, feelings may be both positive and negative, and often both at the same time. These are normal responses, to be expected. Identify one or two or a few people in whom you can confide about the personal impacts of the changes. It is often a relief to hear that others have similar concerns, and you may gain useful information from others' ideas of how to handle the situation. Don't allow yourself to be isolated with your concerns. However, don't limit your conversations to people who are feeling enraged or despairing about the situation; try to seek out people who have a sense of hope and some good ideas about managing the situation.
- 3) Maintain a Realistic Outlook:** Unrealistic expectations can be a tremendous source of stress and unnecessary suffering. Unfortunately, when organizations undergo downsizing, restructuring, or other major change, a whole host of unspoken, and sometimes unrealistic, expectations can arise. Upper management may expect, for example, that increased productivity will occur, even though the workforce has been seriously reduced. Employees, on the other hand, may expect management to be able to solve problems for which there are no ready solutions. Remind yourself that some problems can be solved with direct action, and some require passage of time and ongoing analysis before meaningful steps can be taken.
- 4) Improve Lines of Communication:** Clear communication is of greatest importance during times of upheaval. Don't get into rumor-based discussions, and don't share unsubstantiated information. In seeking information, be specific: what is known about \_\_\_ at this time? When can we expect to know more? Are there options, or is there only one way? If there are options, what are they? Do they apply to me, or only to some categories of employees? If you are an information provider, be specific: acknowledge what you know, and equally important, acknowledge what you don't know. Offer specific target dates for updates, and even if there is no new information, update people at that time. People would rather hear that there is no new information, than wonder why you haven't been in touch.

**5) Use and Grow Your Coping Skills:** The body and mind respond to unwanted changes in a number of ways, including the release of stress-related hormones that can disrupt sleep and appetite. You may find yourself irritable, sad, resentful, and feeling disorganized or overwhelmed. The best ways of caring for yourself, so that your energy for coping with the situation can be as great as possible, and your mind at its clearest, include the following:

- a. Exercise, even just a little: If you're already an exerciser, it's important to keep it going. While staying within your level of fitness, doing a little more than usual will be beneficial. If you haven't exercised in a while, or have health conditions, just adding a short daily walk at a gentle pace has proven effects in reducing stress, anxiety, sleep disturbance, and appetite disturbance. If you're not sure if exercise is appropriate for you, call your doctor's office and ask.
- b. Maintain a schedule. See No. 1 above. The loss of the routine that is built into a work-schedule is one of the most difficult things about a job layoff. Get up at a predictable time each day, and go to bed at a predictable time. Don't watch more TV than you used to. For each day, plan the steps you are going to take, and do most important things first. Treat the hunt like a job.
- c. Relax your body: The stress of change can readily turn into aching muscles and headaches if we ignore the body's needs. Take a few minutes each day to gently stretch and relax your body (handout attached).
- d. Calm Your Mind: One of the common signs of stress is noticing that your mind is filled with a ruckus of competing thoughts, demands, and worries, making it hard to think clearly about any one. Take a few minutes each day, at any time of day it can be worked in, to deliberately allow your mind to quiet and slow. Even a very few minutes per day can have cumulative calming effects, allowing you to do the things you have to do with greater focus. This is especially important if you find that you are feeling 'scattered', having difficulty deciding what to do first, or feeling stuck by having too many demands simultaneously (handout attached).
- e. Use Distraction: Plan some time each day where you deliberately get involved in things that have nothing to do with the job situation. At this time in your life, it's not just fun, but also *important* to read that enjoyable book, watch that favorite video, listen to some music you really enjoy, catch that favorite TV show. These activities calm the mind and reduce the body's physiological stress response. It's not self-indulgent to do some things for fun; it's self-preservation!
- f. Use Additional Resources as Needed: If you notice that you are having sleep difficulties or that your appetite is off for more than a 3 or 4 days, call your doctor and ask for additional recommendations. The same is true if you find that you are so worried or upset that even when you use the recommendations above, you are unable to focus on the ordinary tasks of your life, or on coping with the work situation. If you find yourself thinking that the situation is hopeless, or you feel too low in energy or motivation to cope, reach out for individual support and counseling. Call your doctor or insurance company for a referral. United Way of Colorado can also provide counseling referrals, some of which offer low fee 'sliding scales'.
- g. If you are a state employee, C-SEAP can be a no-cost resource for you. C-SEAP counseling services are a free, confidential, benefit. We have several offices around the state. Please feel free to contact us at the numbers below.

## Strategies for Leaders in Dealing with Downsizing, Reorganization or Major Changes in the Workplace

- 1) **Communicate about the Downsizing**
  - ❖ Frequent, truthful and direct communication
  - ❖ Clarify the reasons for the downsizing
  - ❖ Describe how downsizing will take place
  - ❖ Provide information on support and resources (including C-SEAP)
  
- 2) **Offer Support During Downsizing**
  - ❖ Encourage employees to express emotion and reactions about downsizing in specific circumstances. It is not acceptable to spend work-time venting, but there can be appropriate times and places designated for sharing concerns.
  - ❖ Acknowledge loss/fear/resistance
  - ❖ Maintain focus on coping: allow people to express their concerns, and offer empathy for their understandable worries, but solicit input on “how can we cope with the reality of the situation we’ve got?” Be a model of leader who understands people’s feelings and responds kindly, but who also maintains a focus on creative adaptation and getting business done.
  - ❖ Offer support not only to employees being laid off, but to “survivors” of downsizing as well. Survivors are left with as many negative emotions and beliefs as those laid off.
  - ❖ Provide tools to employees both as individuals and as groups
  - ❖ NOTE: (C-SEAP can provide both individual counseling and group training)
  
- 3) **Involve Employees as Much as Possible**
  - ❖ Ask for and listen to employees’ opinions
  - ❖ Request feedback on how the downsizing is proceeding
  - ❖ Gather input from the employees who are being affected
  
- 4) **Affect Attitudes and Behaviors**
  - ❖ Rebuilding concept: In order to motivate “surviving” employees, keep in mind that a period of “rebuilding” will need to occur before past motivators will work again.
  - ❖ Be cognizant, as a leader, of your attitude and behavior on employee morale.

### **Coping With Layoffs and Downsizing**

Few stresses are more dramatic than facing a layoff. Being laid off is a frightening, emotionally painful experience. Your well-being is threatened; your self-worth can seem questioned; and your very emotional equilibrium can be seriously thrown off balance. The following are important ideas to consider:

#### **Take Action**

- Whether or not you were prepared for the layoff, begin taking action. Allow yourself a couple days to weather the shock, make a plan and follow through.
- Have a plan. Structure your time; plan what you are going to do for the day, and follow through. If it's finding a new job, plan time for updating your resume, and do it.
- Contact the unemployment office. Educate yourself on what community resources may be available, such as a food bank or job services.

#### **Taking Care of Self**

- Focus on your health by watching what you eat, getting adequate rest and exercise.
- Don't use of alcohol and drugs to cope.
- Don't blame yourself. Remember that layoff is not a personal failure. It is a situation caused by circumstances beyond your control.
- Develop Support Systems. The best way to fight stress is to talk with family and friends about what you are going through.
- Stay positive about yourself. Identify at least one practical and useful thing you have done to address the situation each day.
- Practice Stress Management techniques.
- Focus your thoughts on what you can do.

**Provided by the Colorado State Employee Assistance Program 1-800-821-8154 or 303-866-4314.**