

Wednesday November 4, 2009

Hiring and Firing November 10, 2009, 2:15PM EST

## Ten Things Not to Say When Firing an Employee

**Amid so much downsizing, it's risky and unnecessary for managers to let feelings confuse what ought to be a clean transaction**

By [Jonathan A. Segal](#)

Since January, more than a million jobs have been cut in the U.S. Although the pace of layoffs has been declining, the downsizing is by no means over.

Job cutting is never easy, but it often becomes progressively harder as we go deeper into an organization. At the beginning, employers may be able to lay off only weak employees they might have considered letting go anyway. While these weak performers are human beings worthy of dignity and respect, we can make ourselves feel okay about their terminations because they are based on merit.

The deeper we get, the less likely it is that we honestly can say that a job elimination is simply a matter of letting go those who should have been let go years ago. Now we are letting go of solid performers who would remain employed in a good economy. Every organization has solid citizens who do fine in anything but a deep recession.

But we are not done yet. We are told to go even deeper. Now we must let go of good, or even stellar performers—employees who add value and who at a different time might be considered for promotion, rather than termination.

### last fired, last hired?

Letting talented employees go is further complicated and can become emotionally difficult for managers. First, those terminated earlier often receive better severance packages than those

terminated later. As times get tougher, organizations often cut back on severance or eliminate it altogether.

Second, the last to be let go often are competitively disadvantaged at landing jobs, in contrast to poorer performers who were let go early on. Mediocre employees laid off at the outset of the economic crisis had less competition for scarce jobs—and open positions are even harder to find now.

Perhaps the worst feeling of all may arise when employees you protected from termination in the early waves are caught up in subsequent layoff tides with less severance and fewer opportunities. You may wonder if you hurt them by protecting them.

Finally for some, there is survivor guilt. When you don't go down with the ship, you may be plagued by your "good fortune." This can become too much for a "feeling" manager. Such an administrator may need to find meaning in the job eliminations—or at least explain his or her role.

So managers often say things in termination events to make themselves feel better. Unfortunately, the comments can make the employees on the wrong side of the axe feel even worse.

## The top 10 comments to avoid uttering

Here are 10 things you should never say when terminating an employee:

While these comments may not be evidence of an illegal motive, they may produce anger that results in the employee's visiting a lawyer to determine whether a viable claim exists.

1. "This was a job elimination and had nothing to do with your performance."

Do not say this when a discharge had everything to do with an employee's performance. Your desire to protect an employee's feelings—or your own—can later be used as evidence of pretext if the employee brings a discrimination claim.

2. "We have carried you for many years. It's just not possible to continue to do so during these difficult times."

Don't trash the past. It is not only insulting to the employee, but it may be inconsistent with the employee's prior evaluations. Remember, pretext alone wins cases.

3. "We have no choice but to terminate your employment."

There are always other options. Why not tolerate mediocrity a little longer? Termination need not be the only viable option, so don't suggest that it is.

4. "You have no one to blame but yourself. You just did not try hard enough."

Hold employees accountable, but don't impugn their integrity. When employees feel personally attacked, they fight back.

5. "This is just as hard for me as it is for you."

There are few absolutes, but it is absolutely true that it is always harder to be fired than to fire. Don't ask an employee who is looking at unemployment to feel your pain.

6. "This is not the right job for you. When you get the right job, you will thank me."

That may make you feel good, but it will make the discharged employee bristle. The "thank you" may come in the form of a complaint.

7. "I am sorry, but you are fired."

You may mean: "I am sorry we have come to this situation." The employee may hear that you think you are wrong. It's not a good time to have a conversation about the meaning of "I am sorry." Avoid apologies, even though you may genuinely feel badly.

8. "I know how you feel."

Unless you have been fired recently, you don't know how the person feels. If you have been fired recently, now is not the time to share that experience.

9. "You will always be a part of the corporate family."

Trust me. This will make the fired employee think: "Oh, good. Will I still get the newsletter after I sue you?"

10. "Pardon the e-mail, but you are fired."

This may not be unlawful, but it's gutless. And it invites the angry employee to go for your gut.

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