

How to Help Unemployed Friends

The Right Ways and Wrong Ways to Console a Newly-Laid Off Friend

By MARILYN GARDNER

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A few days before Thanksgiving last month, Patricia Lewis's boss called her into his office at a community bank in Sarasota, Fla., to deliver some bad news: He was eliminating her job as marketing director because of tight budgets.



After adjusting to the initial shock, Ms. Lewis e-mailed the news and her résumé to friends and contacts who could be helpful in a job search. The response from many was gratifying.

"I received condolence e-mails," says Lewis, a single mother with two sons in high school and college.

"I received several social invitations and lots of encouragement from a core group." But from others there was only silence. "Those I haven't heard from, I wonder □ were they real friends? Was it me, or just my job, that was our connection? Or are they too embarrassed? My true friends are here for me, and it is not at all awkward with them."

As pink slips proliferate □ 533,000 in November alone □ those who are suddenly unemployed appreciate solace and support. Yet friends and co-workers are often unsure about what to say or do to help.

"If a friend or colleague receives a pink slip, don't dismiss it or make a remark such as, 'Buck up, you'll soon find another job,' " says Talane Miedaner, founder of LifeCoach.com. "Instead, listen carefully to what they are saying. Let them know that you'll help in any way you can. A positive thing you can say is, 'It's not personal. You know times are tough when great people like you are getting laid off.' This reminds them that it isn't that they weren't good enough, but is simply a matter of tough economic times."

Three weeks ago, those challenging economic times cost Karen Hatfield of Appleton, Wis., her director-level job when the paper company where she worked trimmed its salaried workforce by 15 percent. "I have gone through the range of emotions, from

being really ticked off at being ousted to feeling a strange sense of freedom," she says.

To friends she offers this advice: "I truly appreciate your sympathy and, more than anything, your support. Please don't pity me. I've had some down moments, but I'm not hiding at home crying my eyes out. Don't avoid me. I'd love to get together for coffee. I'm very interested in contacts you might have, even if they don't have an open job. Networking is a good thing."

Jerri Barrett, marketing director for the Anita Borg Institute for Women and Technology in Palo Alto, Calif., suggests taking someone who has been laid off to breakfast or lunch and sharing your contact list with them. "Someone I worked with when I was laid off years ago did exactly that," she says. "Thanks to him, within two months of a layoff, I had two job offers from recruiters in addition to two offers I got on my own. Offer yourself as a reference. And don't forget about the person after the initial contact. Make a point to keep reaching out to them."

But reaching out requires tact. One unemployed man wants friends to refrain from asking how his job search is going. David Wolf, a workplace-communication consultant in Ocala, Fla., cautions well-meaning friends to avoid excessive sympathy, revengeful or mean language about the boss, and the urge to give advice. And Michael Kitchens, a professor of psychology at Lebanon Valley College in Annville, Pa., says, "Do not suggest that you know what they are going through and how they feel. Even if you lost your job, you did not have their exact same experience. It is fine to share your experience, though. If you know someone who has lost their job, your best strategy is to simply be their friend."

Workplace specialists caution that friends should avoid general offers such as, "If you need anything, I'm here." They should also not act like surrogate head hunters or psychotherapists.

"Avoid the temptation to interrogate and find out the missing pieces because you are curious," says Debbie Mandel, a radio host in New York. She notes that unrealistic cheerfulness can be grating, but encourages friends to offer fun and humor. "Suggest an enjoyable activity you can do together. And don't feel guilty that you are still working."

During the dotcom bust, Allan Bacon lost his job as a vice president for a technology firm. What helped him most was having a clear story to tell about the type of position he was seeking. "That helped me get past the anger, frustration, and fear that came after getting the word," he says. "It also helped people in my network help me. It gave them a specific target to help them make connections and suggestions."

Mr. Bacon, of Charlotte, N.C., has done this in every job change he has had. He says, "When I share this with other people, their first reaction is, 'But what if I don't know what I want?' I say, 'That's OK □ no one is going to hold you to this.' You can even have more than one story going at the same time for different networks."

Vicky Oliver, author of "Bad Bosses, Crazy Coworkers & Other Office Idiots," observes that men and women often have different attitudes about being laid off. "Women tend to beat themselves up about it more, asking themselves, 'What did I do wrong?' " she says. "Men tend to describe being let go as a 'mutual parting of the ways,' even when their bosses would claim otherwise."

Other employment specialists see no gender differences. Teresa Miller, vice president of human resources at a nutrition company in West Palm Beach, Fla., finds that reactions to layoffs depend more on the individual than on gender. "Men can be just as emotional or devastated by the news as women," she says.

Whatever the circumstances, those on the receiving end of a pink slip need more than supportive friends. They also need employers who are sensitive to the challenges the newly unemployed face.

"Companies should not embarrass an employee by letting him or her go in front of everyone and having the individual walk out the door without any warning," says Michael Neece, chief strategy officer of PongoResume, an online resource. In addition, companies should not try to hide the reality of a layoff or surround it with "happy talk," Mr. Neece says. He notes that American Express calls cuts of 7,000 jobs a "reengineering plan." Fidelity Investments terms 1,300 layoffs "cost-improvement plans." And eBay describes a loss of 1,500 jobs as part of an "employee simplification."

Some employers give job-search support by paying for counseling services or offering company resources. Others cannot afford that.

As businesses everywhere downsize, there is no shame in being laid off. To those who must leave their workplace and colleagues, Steven Gaynes, a communication consultant in Fairfield, Conn., offers this advice: "Exit with grace and dignity and move on. Attitude is everything. Negativity only leads to a job wasteland."

As Lewis continues her search, she says, "I am staying positive and treating this like any project, looking at jobs online daily, tweaking my résumé, and networking. It is sometimes tempting to feel sorry for yourself, but I firmly believe that 'when one door closes, another one opens.' "

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