

Laid Off? 7 Rules for a Graceful Exit

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In the hours and days after you've been laid off, your emotional state tends to range from uncomfortable to devastated — but the way you handle yourself can either help you rebound or drive your career deeper into the ground. With economists predicting that the 10.2 percent unemployment rate will continue to climb before it plateaus early next year, it seems even more workers will soon be hearing words like “downsizing,” “staff reductions,” and “cutbacks.”



Regardless of the economic underpinnings, however, a layoff always feels personal. “We like to deny that we are expendable. So when we are told ‘we have to let you go,’ it feels like an assault,” says Katherine Crowley, a New York City-based psychotherapist and co-author of the book *Working for You Isn't Working for Me*. She adds that when an employee experiences this slap in the face, he or she should avoid the natural inclination to slap back — either verbally or, it should go without saying, physically. “You never know who you will meet or need a reference from again. Exiting gracefully is one of the most important skills for someone who plans on building their career,” says Crowley.

Here's how to handle your exit with aplomb.

1. Don't Freak Out

While the deluge of layoffs means that everyone is on edge, it's hard to tell exactly how you'll react if you are called in to an invite-only party of three with your boss and an HR manager. But avoid showing anger or tears. “Keep cool and try not to take it personally. Try to treat it as a business decision, pure and simple,” says John M. McKee, a former executive at DirecTV who oversaw the hiring and firing of 3,000 people before founding his own Los Angeles-based [career coaching practice](#).

“You are not going to change anyone’s mind by debating the reasons behind this decision, so you may as well try to accept what’s happening and make the best of it,” says McKee. Shake their hands and wish them the best — and they may shake your hand back in other ways: “They may be able to get a little more for you in your final package, or perhaps allow you to take your phone or notebook computer when you leave. You may also need a reference for your next job,” says McKee.

If you need more advice or room to vent, the pros say, be sure to seek out non-colleagues, a career coach, or other professional help. “Find a safe place with a therapist or friend to discuss your shame and terror,” suggests career coach [Adele Scheele](#). “But don’t do it in front of the person who has just fired you.”

2. Negotiate Your Exit

Accepting your fate shouldn’t mean silent acquiescence, however. “Some people fail to use the moment when the other person is most vulnerable ... to ask for letters of reference, any outplacement service, extra insurance coverage, or moving costs,” says Scheele. She adds that you can also ask for your job back in the future, when the economy rebounds.

When one woman — she requested anonymity — was let go last year as the head of advertising sales in the Chicago branch of a major publishing company, she was both pleasant *and* persuasive. That paid off when she offered to stay a few extra days. “Besides the fact that I liked my [team], my reasoning was to be able to negotiate a better exit package,” she says.

Her company agreed to vest her 401(k) and make her last day the first of the next month, so she could get another month of health insurance — a date change that wound up saving her thousands of dollars. “I was laid off on August 4 and negotiated an official last day of September 2,” she says. “Thus I qualified for the stimulus package’s COBRA assistance, which was only available to those laid off after September 1,” she says. She adds: “A colleague of mine who was laid off the same day sent a nasty letter with demands. They called her and said, ‘We’re not negotiating. The exit packages are what they are.’”

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3. Fine-Tune Your To-Do List

Instead of trying to finish all your work, find out what has to get done — you’ll leave behind a good impression with your old company if you don’t leave your former colleagues in the lurch. That said, remember that they’re just not your priority anymore. “I’ve seen people working nights and at home to ‘help’ an organization that just determined they are no longer required. My advice is if the

company has decided it can't keep you, start looking after your own needs first," says McKee — even if that means interviewing during office hours.

4. Save Your Contacts

Whatever you do, don't dawdle on downloading your address book. You'll also want to get direct contact info for ex-colleagues whom you may have reached through an Outlook directory. "Your contacts may be your best lifeline back to employment, so start reaching out to them ASAP," says McKee.

Thom Singer, 43, of Austin, Texas, says he didn't take it personally when he lost his job in April. "Sometimes hard decisions have to be made, and you can point fingers or blame, or you can say 'How can I make lemonade out of lemons?'" says Singer, who had been director of business development for a consulting firm.

Singer focused his energy on turning his on-the-side consulting and speaking business into a full-time gig. And his old company is now frequenting his new lemonade stand. His former employer "came back and asked if I would work with them for a few hours a month on PR. Friends, former employers, and co-workers have all referred me for both consulting and speaking opportunities," says Singer.

5. Be Kind to Yourself

"It is traumatic to be laid off, particularly in this society where your work is your identity," says Crowley. Exercising, eating right, and sleeping enough will help you look less like a wounded animal and more like a strong candidate at your upcoming job interviews. Try to enjoy your time off — go to a museum, the gym, spend time with your children. Crowley recommends building up your confidence by finding a forum to showcase your talents. It's important, she says, to take action in the real world, by joining a networking group or working with a charity, even if you also have a Web site or blog. "I really believe that you need to get out and interact with people, too," she says.

6. Update Your Networking Protocol

Networking isn't new — and it certainly shouldn't be a foreign concept to you if you've been given the old heave-ho. But what is new is the technology available to use for the purpose. "I immediately reached out to my networking circle by telephone, e-mail, Facebook, and Twitter," says Singer, who adds that he didn't write "I got laid off" but rather "As of today, I'm launching my own company."

Whether you choose to publish the fact that you were let go or not, remember who may read it. "I always make sure my Facebook page is something I'd be comfortable showing an employer," says Sheri Rice Bentley, 41, of Madison, Wisconsin, who lost her PR job in April. "A lot of the people at the agency were under the age of 30, and they didn't [seem to] know that," says Bentley, who adds that she used Twitter to let folks know that she was available for freelance work.

7. Drink Responsibly

By all means, grab a good-bye drink with former co-workers — it can be a good way to avoid isolation — but don't drown your sorrows in tequila shots. "If you're the one that ends up with the lampshade on your head, that's the parting image people will remember," says Scheele. She adds that "it may not be in your best interest to network with the laid-off colleagues right away, if indeed they are competing for the same jobs."

Bentley says she grabbed a drink with her old boss about a month after losing her job. More important than the ego boost that came when her supervisor said she felt bad about having to ask her to leave, the casual sit-down paved the way for a referral: "She said they had some clients who weren't a good fit for them, but would I want them?" says Bentley. "I said of course."

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