

LAYOFFS: 13 WARNING SIGNS THEY MAY BE HEADED YOUR WAY

By Gail Frank, *Frankly Speaking: Resumes That Work!*

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Summary:

Layoffs and downsizings don't "suddenly" happen. They are the result of weeks of analysis, discussion, outside opinions, and wrangling among top management. Take notice of events in your office to stay alert to 13 classic warning signals that some employees are about to lose their jobs.

1. Your H.R. People Look Stressed

Keep an eye on the mood of the Human Resources department. Are they cheerful? Stressed? Secretive? Your H.R. department is privy to upcoming management plans regarding human capital. Any type of downsizing is very stressful for the H.R. department. The stress intensifies as Layoff Day approaches. Often, lists of affected employees are changed right up until one hour before the employment layoff meetings occur. The H.R. employees must watch the names of coworkers they know and like bandied about and their fates decided. Yet, it is their job to accomplish this part of their job well. At the end of a day of layoffs, many H.R. people are distraught at what they had to do to their fellow employees.

2. More Than The Usual Amount Of Secret Meetings

Department heads may start disappearing for hours with vague explanations for their absence. When you look at your boss's calendar, you see vague meeting descriptions in place of specific information. For example, instead of "Meeting for New Product XYZ with Finance and Marketing" it simply says "Meeting." Dana, a marketing assistant, simply assumed that the covert meetings meant her boss was working on another top-secret acquisition, only to discover one week later that he had actually been plotting her dismissal.

3. You Are Asked To Prepare A Job Description

Suddenly, there is an unusual amount of attention focused on your daily job tasks, duties and procedures. Barbara and her co-workers were told that a new Human Resources salary and compensation initiative required them to document, list, flowchart, and detail all elements of their credit analyst positions, and prepare reports with all key contacts. This disguised cataloging was to ensure that all top accounts would be covered and procedures detailed after the majority of the department was let go. Barbara and her co-workers did not do an adequate job of justifying how their jobs benefited the company.

4. A New Laser Focus On The Status Of Incomplete Projects

Top management contacts project teams and asks them to detail and document status on projects for special clients or major customers. Can the project be completed? What tasks are outstanding and who has to complete them? Sometimes projects are

even suddenly moved up and must be completed sooner than the agreed-to date. For example, a project manager told Danny, a systems engineer, that the customer had requested an earlier delivery date. Two months later Danny learned that the real reason for the increase in speed was that the majority of the engineering department (including him) was being laid off in anticipation of a merger with a larger company.

5. A Spending Freeze On Items That Usually Are Not An Issue

When cash dries up, a company typically starts to cut back on all expenditures. In Karen's training department the assistants usually order participant workbooks in bulk, at least six months supply each time. When Karen was told to order only one month's supply, she thought it was a little odd, but did not question her boss. At a hastily called staff meeting three weeks later, she learned that her department was being eliminated and that an outside training company was taking over the workshops to cut costs. Unfortunately, one of a company's largest expenses is often personnel expenditures.

6. Perks And Gifts Disappear

If a company is contemplating eliminating employees, it will often take away certain perks and privileges from them, such as holiday gifts, cell phones and parking spots. When John's company held its twice-a-year sales meeting, they were always held at a top-level resort. The meetings were both a reward for a job well done, and to motivate the sales force for the future. When John found out that the upcoming sales meeting was going to be held locally at a lower tier hotel, he wondered if something was happening. His hunch was correct--one week before the meeting, 40% of the sales force was let go. The sales meeting with the remaining salespeople was all work, no play as they learned about the increases in their workloads to compensate for the loss of their co-workers.

7. Colleagues Start To Shun You

Sometimes downsizings come as a complete surprise. Other times select people in the organization know they are imminent. Be cautious if people who normally embrace your friendship become distant. Kathy was friendly outside of work with an upper-level manager in another department. She noticed that her friend starting avoiding her, breaking lunch dates and not returning phone calls. She later found out that her friend was on the reorganization task force that eliminated Kathy's job.

Be cautious of the reverse situation as well--if someone who has previously been unfriendly offers to help you complete a project or run a supplier meeting, they may have ulterior motives or secret information about your employment status.

8. You Are Asked To Cross Train Your Co-Workers, Bosses And/Or Temps

When a company loses employees, whether they eliminate a few employees in a several departments or wipe out an entire department, the work still continues. Somebody has to know how to do it. Cheryl was told that her company was embracing a new philosophy of "cross-training" so that employees would be better able to support each other. She spent two days training a co-worker in her department how to enter new client information into the system. In return, she spent only four hours learning a

few of the co-worker's tasks. When five positions were eliminated in her department, her former co-worker was able to take on Cheryl's duties the same day Cheryl departed.

9. Your Product Development Department Goes Home Early

Hey! Where did all the product development people go? When there is a decline in workload from the frantic pace of new project initiatives every 3-4 months, you may suddenly notice it has gotten very quiet in the office. Typically, product development and the engineers work late and usually don't have time to socialize. Suddenly, you see them going home on time, hanging out by the water cooler and volunteering for the annual charitable drive. Their workload has suddenly dwindled, and a reduction in force may not be far behind.

10. Your Boss's Attitude Suddenly Shifts

Your boss may have historically been a taskmaster. She pushed hard, denied you vacation time, glared at you if you had to leave early, made you rewrite reports, and generally had very high expectations. Art had such a boss, and constantly bemoaned his fate. When his boss started easing up on him, he was delighted. He mistakenly assumed that she either had a change of heart, or was preoccupied with other projects. The truth was, his boss had mentally moved on once she made the decision to eliminate his position at the end of the month. Art was the last to know, and his delight was short-lived.

11. Project Groups Are Broken Up, And Not All Members Are Re-Assigned

When D.J.'s project team celebrated the successful launch of their new software product, he was anxiously wondering what his next assignment would be. He was hoping for a chance to work with some of the talented people from this successful project. As the days passed, all his former teammates were taken aside, interviewed, and told what their next assignments were going to be. Many packed up and moved cubicles, leaving D.J. to sit and ponder what was happening as he completed menial small projects for another department. Finally, when most of the team was re-assigned, the remaining team members were called together and told that all the projects were fully staffed and there was simply no work for them to do. D.J.'s new project was to file for unemployment, collect his severance, and find himself a new job.

12. Management Starts Attending Certain Meetings

In Max's company the Vice Presidents from each business unit met weekly. Suddenly, the company President announced that they would change the structure of the meetings and that the middle management team would also start attending "to bring closer alignment between management layers." In actuality, the President and his H.R. staff were planning a compression strategy; several weeks later the V.P. level was eliminated and those managers received separation packages.

13. External "Consultants" Are In Meetings With H.R. and Top Management

When a company is considering downsizing, layoffs or reorganization, they often hire outplacement consultants and employment attorneys to assist them in the process.

They may also hire accountants, H.R. benefits specialists, and/or management consultants. All of these consultants specialize in the planning and execution of employee terminations.

H.R. may also start to take a higher profile in the office. With these external consultants they may be spotted huddled with upper management either in conference rooms or the boss's office. Additionally, you may notice executive management "stopping by" or meeting in the H.R. office, usually located on the first floor. Or the entire group may go offsite for a day-long meeting to plan the terminations.

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