

how to conduct a
**layoff notification
meeting**

the complete guide



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Introduction

Turnover happens at every season and at every company. Sometimes reductions in force (RIFs) affect a large number of employees at once, and other times they affect only one. Regardless of the company or industry, the way we treat employees as they exit has never been more important than it is today.

When we surveyed 1,300 job seekers, we learned 38% of those who were terminated or laid off have shared a negative review about the company who let them go either online or with a professional or personal contact. (**Source:** [CareerArc Employer Branding Study](#)) Employer review sites and social media have fast become the go-to resources for hopeful job candidates looking for real, peer reviews of how employers treat their employees.

When a layoff or termination is done well, the affected employee will feel they have been treated with dignity. Equally important, they will leave with a more positive impression of their employer, and more focused on the real task at hand—gaining new employment.

This guide was designed to assist you in conducting employee separation notifications, and to work through the RIF/layoff process with dignity and respect for the employees affected.

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How to Prepare for Layoff Notification Meetings

What is a Notification Meeting?

A notification meeting, or RIF notification, is the meeting where the employer gives formal notice to an employee that his or her employment has ended.

If you want the interaction between the employee and the manager to go as smoothly as possible, careful preparations and planning are most important.

The company's objectives for the notification meeting are:

1. To conduct concise, yet compassionate, separation meetings in a respectful manner that inform employees that their jobs are being eliminated and they are being separated;
2. To protect the corporate and employer brand, to the general public, and for future recruitment; and
3. To minimize negative impact on employees leaving and staying.

The notification meeting objectives for the employee are:

1. To hear and understand the message as it is intended;
2. To retain dignity throughout the process; and
3. To know the resources available to them to assist in their transition and have direction on what to do next.

Pre-Notification Meeting Checklist

- Be familiar with the circumstances that lead to the decision to eliminate the employee's position.
- Prepare a script as a guide. This will be a difficult meeting and it's easy to forget things. A script will ensure that you convey all the necessary information. Practice the message you will deliver and how you will deliver it. Try to be genuine in your communications.
- Prepare messages and scripts for both affected and unaffected employees. Know what you will say about the action being taken, the reason, and when and how it will happen. This will allow you to deliver the message in the most consistent, professional, and humane manner.

Provide Resources

Be prepared to provide resources for the employee to help them in the transition. For example:

- Human Resource and benefits transition information.
- Career center resources, if applicable.
- Outplacement resources—like [Mercer Outplacement](#)—to assist in employees' transition, job search, and resume preparation
- Other company or external community resources

Prepare to Address Tough Questions and Emotional Reactions

The separation process can be emotional for all parties; prepare for this.

- Try to anticipate questions ahead of time and have the answers to those questions available. Remember to have a box of tissues available.
- Take the necessary time to make the proper arrangements for the notification meeting.
 - Select a place where you can have privacy.
 - Select a time early in the day and on a day that is not immediately prior to a weekend, holiday, or scheduled vacation for either the employee or manager. You don't want employees who think of questions after a notification meeting, to have to wait over a holiday, a weekend, or even overnight to get answers.
 - Be considerate of the day in relation to significant dates for the employee (e.g. family celebration, religious holiday, employee's birthday, etc.).
 - Plan for uninterrupted time.
 - Allow enough time to complete the meeting without being rushed, including giving the employee time to ask questions.
- Consider having an appropriate person (i.e. a receptionist or department secretary or assistant) who is not privy to the subject of the meeting notify the employee of the meeting. This allows you to introduce the purpose of the meeting in a private, controlled manner.
- Depending on your knowledge of the employee it may be advisable to have a counselor or a Human Resources representative on-call if needed. Discuss with them any possible problems you feel could occur or any concerns you may have. In addition, depending on circumstances, you may also wish to consider extra security if you feel there is a possibility of a violent reaction.
- Arrange for another manager to be with you during the meeting.
- Assess the impact of the employee's departure on co-workers and clients.
- Seek appropriate coaching from Human Resources and/or Employee Assistance Program Counselors.

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The Notification Meeting

Employee notifications should be conducted in person. Typically, the employee's immediate supervisor or the department manager conducts the notification meeting. Do **not** have someone who the employee does not know or has never spoken with to conduct the meeting.

- Don't engage in small talk, get to the point. Deliver the message directly but compassionately and allow the employee time to read the written notice of layoff you will give them during this meeting.
- **Stay with your script and remain calm.** Straightforward, clear explanations are important.
- Do not make comments or over-explain the decision, even with good intentions, as this could unintentionally compromise the decision. Stay away from discussions that could confuse the primary message.
- Be sensitive to the employee's situation, but also be direct and firm. **Make sure that the employee knows the decision is final and is non-negotiable.**
- Don't blame others for the actions being taken.
- Don't become defensive, argumentative or confrontational. Do not try to critique the decision that has been made.
- Be sensitive to the employee's response. **Hearing the employee does not mean you agree with them.**
- Tell the employee how much you appreciate the work they have done and recognize their contributions.
- Allow the employee to ask questions and let them know they can come back to you with questions later if needed; it sometimes takes time for the employee to process what they've been told.
- Listen carefully and, after the meeting, document anything that could lead to a potential problem. Consult with Human Resources, if appropriate.
- Offer **support and encouragement** and treat separating employees with respect.
 - Encourage the employee to contact all resources available to assist in transitioning.
 - Be available in the following days to meet with the employee if they have questions.
 - Be understanding of the employee's position and emotions.
 - Focus the employee on the next steps in his or her career.

Keep the Meeting Professional

Here are a few pointers for conducting a professional meeting:

- Listen to the employee and exhibit empathy; pay attention to their cues. Some employees may want to ask questions, while others may just want to get the information and leave.
- Avoid negative body language: Gestures such as repeatedly looking away, folding your arms in a closed posture, or checking your watch could be misconstrued as being uncaring or unconcerned for the employee's well-being..
- Keep the meeting focused on imparting the information needed, emphasizing the various benefits and services available to the employee. Do not engage in arguments with the employee or seek to provide unnecessary justification for this action.

If necessary, allow the employee a reasonable amount of time to compose themselves before having to face colleagues.

Problems that May Occur in the Meeting

The employee may:

- Become resistant, defensive and/or threatening, want to plead their case, or bargain for another opportunity
- Want to speak with a decision-maker
- Ask "why me?" questions
- Threaten a lawsuit or other formal action such as a retaliation complaint
- Get personally upset with the manager
- Try to make the issue personal or about performance
- Argue about a person being retained who they believe is less capable, has less seniority, etc.
- List the repercussions cascading from the job loss
- Break down emotionally
- Go into a state of shock and denial over what is happening

How to Deal with Emotional Reactions

Remember to stay in control of the meeting and your emotions at all times. Be familiar with, and comment on, how the decision was made. Be supportive and offer positive suggestions where appropriate

Be prepared for the following reactions:

- If crying occurs:
 - Offer tissue.
 - Permit the employee the time to be alone, if needed.
 - Be supportive, but refrain from touching the employee..
 - Be patient.

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- If anger occurs:
 - Listen. Anger is a normal response.
 - Respond to verbal attacks patiently but directly.
 - Remain calm, and request the employee to remain calm.
 - Do not discuss employee performance issues.
 - Stop the meeting until the anger ceases and reconvene at a later time.
- If silence occurs:
 - Acknowledge the employee's feelings.
 - Allow the employee to discuss feelings and be empathetic.
 - Ask open-ended questions to determine that the employee understands the layoff message.
- If denial occurs:
 - Repeat or rephrase statements.
 - Ask open-ended questions to determine whether the employee understands the layoff message.
 - Empathize with the employee with statements such as, "I know this is quite a shock," or, "This is really hard to understand at first." Give the employee direction on what he or she needs to do.
- If threats occur:
 - Don't put yourself between the employee and the door—give them easy access to leave at all times.
 - Keep calm, take a deep breath and do not get baited into an argument.
 - Suggest a brief cool down period, pause and then reconvene when you feel that emotions have calmed.

Things To Do After The Meeting

- If appropriate, conduct a follow-up meeting with the employee to see how they are coping and provide information you were not able to provide in the notification meeting.
- If the employee is working until their separation date, you should supervise this employee just as you would any other employee.
- Be aware of the employee's emotional state. If you have concerns, notify Human Resources.
- Observe what's going on in the office between the separating employee and the remaining employees. For example, are the remaining employees being respectful and supportive, or are they systematically excluding this person? How is the telephone being answered when this person is not around?
- Notify Human Resources of any critical issues.

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Follow-up with Remaining Employees

With discretion, inform the remaining employees about the actions that have taken place. Understand that people may have lost friends and may have their own anxieties about their career at the company. Get people refocused quickly on any restructuring, reassignment of work, or other changes.

- Discuss workload and support concerns and needs. Focus on the positives.
- Thank employees for their continued support but make no promises or guarantees about the future.
- Be accessible to your employees for any issues or concerns they may have about the changes.
- Above all, be tactful, direct and clear in explaining the circumstances that led up to the decision, the decision-making process, and the changes within the organization. Offer employees the opportunity to ask questions.

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Sample Script for Employee Notification

The following information may assist in planning a script for the layoff notification meeting as well as preparing the manager for various reactions from the employee.

[Manager to employee]

1. Greet the employee.

Manager: Hello, and thank you for meeting with me.

2. Notification

(Remember to speak slowly and calmly.)

Manager: I've called this meeting because I must, unfortunately, inform you that your position is being eliminated. We do not have another position in the company for you. This means you are being laid off and will work with Human Resources to complete your transition. Here is your official Notice of Layoff.

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(Give the letter to employee and allow the employee time to read it and process the information)

Manager: This decision was made after a long and careful review of the options, realizing that many good people would be affected. This has been a very difficult decision and was not easily made. I want you to know that it has been reviewed at the highest levels within the company and it is a final decision.

or As you may know, we are in a time of reorganization. Although, we've done everything possible to minimize the impact of these changes on our department, we still need to implement some very difficult decisions. I would like you to know that this action is not easily taken and only made after long and careful review of many options. It is a final decision.

(Pause for a few seconds.)

Manager: I know this is difficult news. Is everything I've said clear to you? Do you have any questions?

The employee will usually lead the conversation at this point. Answer questions honestly and appropriately. You should expect reactions that could range from professional to emotional behavior.

Appropriate Response to Emotional Reactions

In addition to physical reactions such as crying, anger, and non-acceptance, emotional responses may also come in the form of a difficult question--"Why?"

- "Why me?"
- "Why not another employee?"
- "Why did you make this decision?"

Other questions may include:

- Who made this decision?
- Who can I talk with to get this decision reversed?
- Are there any other jobs available for me?.
- Can I keep my job if I take a pay cut or reduce my time?
- Who else is being released?

Be prepared in advance to answer these types of questions. Listen carefully and make eye contact with the employee. Assess the employee's emotional state and behavior to see if they might be a threat to themselves or others. If so, call for assistance. Otherwise, answer the questions which are appropriate to answer. Do not allow the employee to continue too long. Show empathy for the employee but avoid platitudes such as:

- "It's not the end of the world."

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- “Consider this a blessing in disguise.”
- “The glass isn’t half empty, it’s half full.”
- “It’s just a job.”
- Who else is being released?

While you may wish to continue with the meeting, consider what might be best for the employee and whether they will hear any further information you may deliver at this time. In most cases, you should take the time to deal with the emotional reactions and responses of the employee before turning to any housekeeping matters you need to address.

Manager: Is there someone I can call for you?

In many instances, the employee may move directly to the facts relating to the layoff. This allows the manager to begin discussing the housekeeping matters.

or Would you like to take a brief break before we continue?

or Would you like to leave for the rest of the day and we can continue this discussion tomorrow?

Housekeeping Matters

Manager: At this point, I need to discuss with you how you will leave the department and the resources and assistance that the company will make available to you to assist you in transitioning.

We have prepared an information package that will be helpful to you throughout this transition period. It provides you with information about your next steps and the resources available to help you in your transition through Mercer Outplacement. They can provide you with tools, resources, and coaching to make your next career decision.

I understand that this might be a shock, but I would encourage you to review this information as soon as possible. If you have questions, contact _____.

This transition statement will reinforce that the action being taken is final and will begin moving the employee forward in that direction. Make eye contact with the employee and speak calmly.

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If the person will not be required to work past the day that the notification occurs, it will be important to have clear instructions for the following:

- Arrangements with the employee to empty their office—have boxes available if the employee will be emptying their office immediately.
- Discuss the possible times of the day that would be less disruptive to the office when the employee can come in to retrieve their belongings.
- Confirm who will be following up with them regarding any questions or concerns that were addressed in the meeting.
- Make arrangements for the return of any company property such as computers, credit cards, passkeys, cars, etc.
- Coordinate with the appropriate technical departments to terminate the separating employee's voice mail and computer access after (not before) the separation notification.

If the person will be allowed to work after the notification meeting, it will be important to discuss the following:

- Confirm the last date of work.
- Encourage the staff member to make an appointment with Human Resources to review transition resources such as:
 - Reemployment, rehire, and other employment procedures
 - Transition, Career Counseling, and Outplacement Services
 - Time off to attend interviews
 - Letters of recommendation

Whenever possible, make efforts to complete recognition events, going away parties, etc. Obtain permission from the affected staff members before scheduling any event. Consult with Human Resources for ideas on how to implement a transition event that will have a positive impact on all who are affected by the layoff.

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Three Main Principles

For many managers, there is perhaps no task more difficult than informing an employee that his or her job has been eliminated. This task must be handled in a professional and caring manner, and if done well, the employee(s) affected will feel they have been treated with dignity. This guide outlines best practices and pointers to benefit all parties during this transition, and those guidelines are founded on three main principles:

- **Have a plan.** Preparing for all possibilities and anticipating tough questions ahead of time can help steer the process in the right direction and at the right pace.
- **Be helpful, thorough, and clear.** The more clear, concise, and thorough the information you provide throughout the process, the less confusion, doubt, and frustration the employee will have about the decision. Know your message, but also know your limits—if you ever need assistance, do not hesitate to ask Human Resources, or other supervisors and colleagues for help.
- **Practice empathy.** The importance of remaining calm, open, and authentic in the entire layoff and notification process can never be overstated. As employers, empathy remains our strongest tool, and we must appreciate and prepare for the emotional health of our people—both during and after—their employment.



About the Author

Joyce Domijan, VP of Strategy and Program Development for CareerArc has over twenty years of broad and successful human resource, training, and career development experience. She is an experienced career coach, resume writer and leadership development trainer who has created and conducted programs for thousands of professionals.

Mercer has partnered with CareerArc to deliver Workforce Transition solutions.

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