

# **Workplace Survivors: *In Their Own Voice***

## **OVERVIEW AND OBJECTIVES**

The workforce has been sliced into over the past twelve to eighteen months with shocking speed and depth. Though the pace of has slowed, at its peak, several hundred thousand people per month were losing their jobs. This has placed a significant strain on those who have kept their jobs and the reverberations are still being felt. The reader will hear this directly from the mouths of workplace survivors themselves in the pages that follow.

Survivors speak about how crisis communications were handled, and the fear, confusion and distrust that remain. They share about dealing with the loss of co-workers, and the challenges of managing their workload, accepting changes to the performance appraisal system and their views regarding compensation. They also weigh in with thoughts about possible career decisions. The interviews reveal numerous stress points inside many an organization deserving of senior management attention. However, readers at all levels within their organization will be able to take away ideas for more powerfully addressing their own situation.

The material being presented is the result of nearly two-dozen confidential, in-depth interviews with a cross-section of workplace survivors, many of them mid-level managers. They represent a diverse array of industries, including real estate, creative services, consulting services, insurance, banking, consumer goods, manufacturing, and media. In addition, a small number come from the not-for-profit sector. Interviews were confidential. The survivors spoke openly and honestly.

## **PERCEPTIONS DRIVE BEHAVIOR**

What's being shared here are survivors' perceptions of 'how it is.' It's often said that 'perceptions are reality' because perceptions shape our attitudes and govern our behaviors. It's possible these perspectives are not being openly shared in your organization. The reader may find that some of these survivor experiences echo their own experience while others may not. Regardless, this is an invitation to try on how others' see and feel things. People everywhere want and need to be heard. Survivors, in particular, want this. Their experience, for better and for worse, is impacting their mood and the mood inside their organization. It also affects the strength of their relationships, productivity, wellbeing, and confidence in the organization and its leadership.

### **I. EXECUTIVE COMMUNICATION IN A TIME OF CRISIS**

*"A burden shared is a burden halved."*

Senior-most leaders faced the grim task of presenting bitter, unwelcome news to their organizations. Some of these leaders, mindful of the moment, took great care to announce to the entire audience of employees WHAT they were doing, WHY they were required to do it and HOW they were going about doing it. Pulling this off well was a significant leadership challenge. The leaders most successful with

this task made themselves visible (or at least, audible) and directly available to their audience. They were open and honest in this moment of extraordinary fragility.

*“We had a Town Hall meeting to tell people retroactively what the thought process was (behind the workforce reductions), how they struggled with this, and the reasons why it was done. This happened right before the holidays so people could come back renewed and refreshed.”*

*“Our CEO traveled and met people face to face. He held a two-hour event and took lots of questions concerning ‘what’s in store for us in the future?’”*

Unfortunately, some senior management, workplace survivors say, badly misread their audience. Utilizing email as a sole channel of communication displayed a profound misunderstanding of what people needed from their leadership during a time of crisis. It gives the impression of a leader in hiding.

*“People across the company were informed via email announcements. But these didn’t communicate well and didn’t have us support the changes through the message they sent.”*

*“I would like for there to have been full disclosure of the tough decisions that went into this and for us to know that it wasn’t taken so lightly.”*

Helping foster understanding and line up support are core outcomes whenever significant changes are being announced. The level of vulnerability, and potential for misunderstanding, even in instances where the magnitude of the layoff was relatively smaller, is great. Many survivors felt like their leaders did not rise to the occasion. They saw leaders who were uncomfortable or overly formal. In other cases, they seemed to make no sincere attempt to connect.

*“If I could ask for one thing of our CEO it would be that he talk to us. No slides. No mic. No behind the podium. Just talk. But he didn’t and this was an opportunity missed.”*

*“He sent a brief, terse email. There was no face to face communication He said these were difficult times, that the actions were necessary. He didn’t acknowledge those that were gone.”*

*“A personal talk, delivered face to face, with empathy, would have gone a long way. This would have reassured those of us left standing.”*

The disappointment is not just personal. Poor communication of the what, how and why behind the workforce reductions triggered a loss of confidence in leadership.

*“Nothing was clearly communicated. It seemed like it was an on the spot decision without much thought given to it.”*

*“I would have liked for us to tell the truth to people even though that’s not an easy pill to swallow. But it’s what you owe people.”*

Making matters worse, for some survivors, was their perception that the timing of the reductions seemed cruel or capricious. Some of the cuts seemed to be made reactively, producing hurt, cynicism, and distrust.

*“People were let go in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> week of December. We were told this was necessary for the business. This is true but it isn’t right. It came down to dollars needing to be taken out of the system.”*

*“Much bigger things have to happen with operations to make the company stronger. Otherwise, this decision looks like window dressing to make it look like we’re taking the right measures. The announcement came right before a quarterly earnings call to prove we’re taking the right steps to streamline SG&A.”*

*“The May and June layoffs were so last minute and took everyone by surprise. They said, ‘we have to shave another 10%. We need your lists right away.’”*

Survivors were particularly disturbed when additional rounds of layoffs occurred in spite of announcements that this would not happen. Survivors understand their organization is subject to events outside their control, however, when reassurances prove false, it compounds the fear, uncertainty and doubt people already feel.

*“In the state of the union meeting we held, they mentioned that no more layoffs would be planned. Yet, two or three weeks later, two senior people were let go out of nowhere. People felt very betrayed and deceived.”*

*“The CFO announced at our last earnings call that another 400 jobs had to go. This reinforced the feeling that they were doing things on the fly. It would have been better to have taken people out all at once rather than the band-aid approach. Otherwise, why put the organization through all this?”*

*“Dealing with multiple rounds, or the threat of multiple rounds, is one of the hardest things of all. The wait can drag on and on. Everyone keeps looking over their shoulder, the rumors keep spreading and you are losing productivity out of almost everyone.”*

Senior management must continue to make their presence felt in a focused, clear-minded way throughout times of crisis. Calling a single meeting or making a single announcement is insufficient. In the absence of regular communication, survivors are left distracted and fearful. The uncertainty feeds the rumor mill.

*“He did make the announcement, answer our questions and allay our fears but he hasn’t been visible since. This seems strange. What’s going on? What decisions are being made? Clearly, more layoffs are not out of the question.”*

## **II. WHY SURVIVORS ARE CONFUSED AND SKEPTICAL**

*“There was lots of politics.”*

Though the deepest workforce reductions occurred six or more months ago, senior management must recognize that unanswered questions can easily become a feature of the conversational landscape.

*“Without direct communication we wonder, ‘will there be another round?’ What’s the criteria for this? People are still wondering how did they decide, how many, what department? It seemed arbitrary. This is typical of how the organization communicates.”*

*“In my group, people constantly ask, ‘why did this person go vs. that one? Or, why this group and not another one?’”*

*“Our company went to great lengths to ensure the selection process was fair. But life isn’t fair at times. So was it fair? Maybe not. Was it done fairly? Yes.”*

Survivors paid keen attention to how co-workers were treated when they were let go. They appreciated when co-workers were accorded respect, care and concern which also help mitigate the impacts of the terminations and help preserve good will among the survivors. Conversely, when colleagues are rushed out the door without a good-bye, it alarms people and creates a gulf between upper management and the workforce.

*“They were told the news, and told about next steps, then given 15” to pack their things and go.”*

*“People were happier that the person who told them was someone they knew. There’s some bitterness but at least there was a human element vs. having it be someone they didn’t know from HR.”*

*“Some individuals were informed by their boss. Others had the HR manager do it. We called her the Angel of Death.”*

### **III. MANAGEMENT IS CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE**

*“People want to know, ‘how stable are we?’”*

Middle management survivors have had to grapple with their own conflicted feelings about how the process was managed and how far it went.

*“It was fair in the beginning. We were a bloated organization. It was a matter of identifying redundancies and the roles we no longer needed. But then they cut into the bone of the organization and you were stunned about some of the people being let go.”*

*“Asking for clarification about some of the decisions just doesn’t seem like the way we do business. I don’t get involved with the HR folks.”*

Some management-survivors felt disempowered by their own senior management who left them out of the decision-making process.

*“We were shocked at the news and at not being included in the decision-making. Everything was held close to the vest.”*

*At the highest level the quality of communication was pretty good but as you get nearer and nearer the specific areas, quality is mixed.”*

Other middle management survivors, seeing how the process unfolded, have become cynical.

*“The decisions came down from the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> level and not even the staff managers are getting much say. They picked off the people with the lower ratings.”*

*“At the end of the day, they just move us around like pawns on a chessboard.”*

Some survivors have adopted a negative attitude towards management-survivors who seemed either uninformed or unresponsive to employee’s desire to better understand what was going on.

*“It was an emotional situation. Our boss seemed to know nothing and he couldn’t give any clarity about how the process was being carried out. Or, if he did know, he wouldn’t tell us.”*

*“At the very senior level, they’ve done a good job of explaining how we’re losing money and must bring costs in line. It’s the intermediate level where it’s not clear why various people were picked.”*

*“There was no communication around why. Sometimes you could see why someone wasn’t needed but it’s often such a shock and I don’t see the effort on the part of mid-level managers to explain it.”*

Some management-survivors were disturbed by the counsel they received with respect to how to communicate to staff they were pink-slipping.

*“I just followed orders and if people wanted to talk, I’d say what happened. I offered no insight. I felt I had to go along.”*

*“In a meeting with my boss and our HR generalist, I was told how we should handle these 15” meetings with the outgoing people. I was advised to say that decisions were not performance related. But that wasn’t actually true. To tell them otherwise, they said, was to open a can of worms. So, I couldn’t tell the truth to people who I knew and have coached and worked with directly.”*

#### **IV. HEALING THE SURVIVORS’ WOUNDS**

*“You’re on your own.”*

Unfortunately, too few senior managers, survivors say, brought people together in a time of extraordinary upheaval. People were left to their own devices at a time when they needed ways to come to grips with what had happened. Discomfort is natural. It’s easy to turn away from the emotion. However, just as families, communities, and societies have established rituals for mourning, it’s essential that managers help shepherd people through their grief.

*“There’s been no real venue for dialogue. People talk to who they’re personally comfortable with in private conversation. The company did not try to put any meetings together to foster dialogue or healing at all. It’s too late for those meetings now.”*

*“To help people through the situation, one group threw an event and did a ritual to acknowledge that what they had had before is over.”*

## **V. SURVIVORS NEED FOR A COMPELLING STORY**

*“People have lost faith. Basically we’re just grinding it out.”*

Survivors are looking to senior management to write the next chapter of the organizational story. It must be a story around which the entire organization can regroup and rebuild. The creation of this story helps restore a sense of purpose. It unifies people, lifts morale and reinvigorates productivity. It tells people we are looking forward and you are important to that.

*“We’re hopeful. We now have a new Managing Director who came in with a vision. This is positive. We’ll be able to build back up again. We’re looking to the future.”*

*“Emotions are stirred up because of the missed opportunity of leadership to get people onto the same page and to create an opportunity to motivate and regain the trust of the people.”*

Workplace survivors also want evidence that there is a strong plan for the business going forward. It must be a plan that is more than about slashing 10% more out of the operating budget. Being included in the formation as well as the execution of these plans is critical to gaining their full support.

*“We do a pretty good job executing the downsizing but probably we’re not as good at clarity with the go-forward plan and to have survivors know it’s not coming around again. Getting folks to believe in the future is what we haven’t done as well.”*

Survivors know there will continue to be setbacks. They can handle that. They ask, in return, that senior management be straight with them and not flinch from giving an accurate rendition of how things are going.

*“Trust in management is an issue. On our quarterly call, the CEO painted this incredible picture of the business then three more people got laid off last week!”*

Survivors naturally want to be the fullest possible contributors so they are energized when they go to work each day. This helps put into context the sacrifices they are enduring now. They need help deciphering what is needed from them so they can write themselves into the organization’s story about the future.

*“If I knew what they based the decision on I would know more what to do or more of what to learn so I could improve.”*

## **VI. THE REDUCTIONS HAVE IMPACTED RELATIONSHIPS**

*“We want to believe our leaders are acting in the best, long-term interests of the business. We want them to share in the sacrifices everyone else is making.”*

Survivors have been hurt by the loss of friends and co-workers. They go to work and miss seeing a friendly face or chatting with someone over a coffee. The workplace is a web of relationships that are key to the depth and quality of people's engagement with their work. Seeing that web, as they knew it, destroyed, can be devastating.

*"I've seen some good friends go. That's been tough, personally. We were all pretty close."*

Camaraderie has also taken a hit in many organizations. People are pulling harder than ever on their oars and want to see others pulling their oars in the same direction. When relationships are considered part of a zero-sum rather than as a win-win proposition, this can break people's spirit. It is so important for people to believe they are sharing in the sacrifices and part of something together.

*"There's no one out there who's not thinking they shouldn't watch their back. Everyone tries to stay busy and prove their worth. No one feels in a position to share credit for things."*

*"With so many Type A's around here, there's been a sense of 'who can cull favor the most?' There's jockeying to be indispensable."*

Maintaining an extra-high level of vigilance has become a workplace norm for many survivors. There is a feeling of suspicion and paranoia in some environments. People wonder who they can trust. They conceal their true emotions. It doesn't feel safe to share them. When people stop identifying as a team or a group and identify much more as single individuals, it takes a major toll. The quality of how they think and act together suffers.

*"People are very cautious now about their relationships, even going out for drinks. No one wants to appear anything less than really busy or others will say something about that. Bosses are cautious – they can't say too much. It's more politically charged than anything I would have expected."*

*"There's a little fear so people don't let their guard down now. It's 'do your job, get your work done, and hopefully you won't be a target if there's another one.'"*

In some workplaces, the reductions have opened rifts up, including between the middle and upper levels of management. Survivors feel the tension. It can drive people into their bunkers. This, too, is antithetical to the kind of sharing and participation their organizations so badly need.

*"There's more distrust, definitely. There seems to be a larger disparity between upper, upper and middle management. You're seeing people cover their tails. This burdens middle management who feel incrementally more paranoid about their own positions."*

*"Relations are more strained. Some feel like we're now a band of survivors. In some areas, management has taken a step back from getting close to co-workers."*

*"There's a whole lot of politics with the executives. They're much more likely to stake out their own position and leave people hanging and not give support visibly until they're sure of which way the wind will blow."*

*“At this point, you have no ability to impact their decisions, so you don’t complain, you just roll with it.”*

## **VII. DISCONNECTS BETWEEN LEVELS OF MANAGEMENT**

*“It’s extremely frustrating to be left out in the cold. I have no clue what they’re deciding. Give input? It doesn’t feel safe giving it anyway.”*

Some management-survivors feel alienated. They’ve been excluded from any real decision-making authority. Disagreement and disenchantment follow from decisions they don’t align with. To compound the problem, survivors may feel too intimidated to speak up about this.

*“My management team wants to cut costs in the easiest, quickest way possible regardless of the sense it makes. They’re more disconnected than I wanted to believe. They’re not aware of the proper staffing level and will yell and scream to get the work done. And we have some holes in our line now.”*

A few middle management survivors have acted courageously to challenge senior management. They know their voice is crucial and that they have valid concerns which need to be addressed.

*“Several of us got together to speak to the president. We wanted to hear what the future financial strategies were to prevent this from happening again. The value in doing this was in our being able to speak up even though lots of questions remained and some questions weren’t answered.”*

*“At a big staff meeting among the ‘left behinds,’ a very brave woman got up to challenge the CEO about being left out of the decision-making process.”*

*“There’s a big perception gap between us and the top regarding what’s best for our organization. It’s like we are speaking in different tongues.”*

Despair has taken root among some middle management survivors. They feel isolated and worn down.

*“Some of the people who are left are seeing their hours raised up. The same volume of work keeps trying to come through. Mostly, they’re relying on the existing workforce to do the extra workload.”*

Other survivors are encouraged by how senior management is factoring the short and longer term into their decision-making. This increases trust and confidence.

*“The company has been very prudent. There hasn’t been a huge impact on those people who’ve been left behind.”*

*“There wasn’t a need for the support staff we had. A workflow assessment confirmed this. A couple of weeks after the announcement, people felt fine.”*

*“Priorities have absolutely changed and our way of thinking is different. This is good.”*

## VIII. IMPACT ON WORKFLOW AND WORK CONDITIONS

*“People are insanely busy. Help me understand what your expectations really are.”*

Middle management survivors are expected to cobble together the resources to get the job done. They are proud of their ability to make things happen in spite of trying circumstances but need more support.

*“People are working lots more hours and the new senior management is not fully understanding the impacts of letting people go and what it means. I’m working a lot of hours and no one’s acknowledged this. We don’t indicate overtime on our timesheets anymore.”*

*“There are big holes now in the workflow process and not much focus on trying to fix those. It’s hard to get the work done. You used to have these people lined up on your team. The reorganization they did in the midst of this blew the process up. There are lots of pieces missing and the same amount of work divided up over fewer bodies.”*

The pressure is unrelenting. People are working in tight crawl spaces and need oxygen. Being overwhelmed takes a tremendous personal toll on people.

*“As team leaders and managers, we are having a difficult time making things work with a reduced staff that’s probably bitter about what happened without any assurance that they’re not next.”*

*“I hear a lot of people freaking out. A director I called during an emergency was practically crying on the phone saying, ‘I don’t know what I’m going to do.’”*

*“My boss feels like they’re so many things outside her control. You’re trying to do the work and there’s such a backlog and you can’t keep saying ‘no’ forever.”*

The frustration felt by many mid management survivors to fulfill all their commitments is compounded by the fear that their efforts will not be good enough. Asking for what you need can be interpreted as a sign that you’re not up to the job.

*“If something comes up at six in the evening, will it be continually expected that I need to stay till 10 or, otherwise, should I expect to receive a pink slip on my desk?”*

*“It will be difficult to manage over the next six months because of how high-profile my project is. I need to find better ways to deal with the stress and take care of myself. I’m so stressed out and not sleeping. I’m going into a downward spiral.”*

Some middle management survivors want to exercise more discretion. They are closest to the action and want to see more trust displayed in their judgment.

*“Our processes and controls are too strict. Instead of being told all the specifics about what we can and can’t do, or can and can’t spend money on, give us more autonomy and more flexibility.”*

Conversations with middle management survivors point urgently to a need to sit down, review priorities and realign expectations. These should not be one-off meetings. Some of these crucial conversations have occurred – though far too infrequently.

*“The workload goes up. It’s critical, when things look overwhelming, to prioritize. This may mean taking things off the table and that’s not easy. Everyone wants their thing. You have to go to the person you’re doing the work for and tell them you’re deprioritizing. There’s varying degrees of effectiveness with this.”*

*“Unfortunately, my manager and I have not sat down to review our expectations. We’re too busy.”*

*“The VP said at the fiscal half-year, we’d do a mini-evaluation for every employee with ‘go-for’ objectives. So this was forced into the system to address the issue.”*

A few middle management survivors shared their success in initiating conversations with senior management to align plans and priorities.

*“The workload has shifted to being more focused on activities that give you more business benefit. It’s had us look more carefully at some of our processes. This has helped prevent overwhelm. There’s more emphasis on delivering greater business benefit and balancing your work life.”*

## **IX. MOTIVATIONAL CHALLENGES**

*“On days when the sun isn’t shining, it’s very disturbing and uncomfortable. You walk on eggshells and suck it up.”*

Middle management survivors have been confronted by morale issues among their staff. It’s not sufficient in the longer-term to expect employees to be motivated simply by the fact they continue to collect a paycheck. They are motivated by a desire to do “good work” together, something they can feel proud of.

*“It takes a lot of character. These are the times when your true colors come out. Now you need to be a leader who can step up even if you aren’t the one making the decisions.”*

*“My staff are demotivated and it’s challenging to remotivate them. Being there for your customer depends a lot on how your employees are feeling about their own jobs.”*

*“I balance the expectations my management has vs. my clients’ expectations and meanwhile deal with my staff’s stress because they keep hearing things. If my team is afraid of losing their job, they won’t perform their best. I tell people if I hear something, I’ll let you know.”*

A hugely important contributor to morale, productivity, and, ultimately, retention, is recognizing and acknowledging survivors for their effort. Management survivors, in the absence of praise for their own efforts, can still be generous with appreciation of their people. Morale is also tied to the future

management creates with people. Creative, cost-effective investments in their training and development sends the message ‘you matter here and you are valued.’ Making this investment is one indicator, some survivors say, of whether they will want to stay with the company.

*“Some sort of acknowledgment and support especially for the people who are new to this kind of business climate would be appreciated. This could send the message that ‘you are still valued and not a number or place on an org chart,’ and that ‘we’re still investing in your career because we see you as part of our strategy going forward.’”*

*“Getting people to see their work is valued is so important.”*

*“Career development has been cut. I request we put it back in, otherwise, it sends the message that they don’t care about you and your future and that, in fact, if you left, it would occur as, ‘great, there’s one less person to fire now.’”*

Juggling many different balls is a test of creativity and resilience, especially now. Several management-survivors share strategies for grounding themselves. This helps keep their and others’ spirit up. Being anchored to a purpose and staying aligned with ‘true north’ on one’s personal compass are key strategies for staying positive.

*“I’m here because of the agencies. That’s where my passion is. I’m committed to be here for them and they know it.”*

*“We are about living a life of significance and that’s part of the value you bring to the table. You put your clients first and the sale second.”*

## **X. PERFORMANCE APPRAISALS – A QUESTION OF FAIRNESS**

*“The bar has been raised and it leaves some more vulnerable.”*

Survivors offered comments on their organizations’ performance evaluation systems. Employees track how these systems are used in job and compensation decisions. Many survivors were fatalistic as they spoke of these changes. They can bring their best game to work each day but feel the system isn’t set up to work in their favor. The system can also foster an unhealthy type of competition among co-workers. It’s not only a matter of how you are seen to be doing, it’s how you are doing compared to others.

*“There’s been a significant change to the performance appraisal system. The instruction is to be much more critical, much tougher in your ratings than last year. There is some feeling that you’re more vulnerable with a lower rating.”*

*“There’s a centrally weighted bell curve now. While most get 3’s, they’re forcing more 2 ratings. Hardly anyone gets a 4. You know if you’re at a 2 you’re out on a plank. Some folks are grumbling about this: ‘I got screwed last year.’ Last year people didn’t realize it would end up leading to layoffs which had been unusual here. There’s lots more politics going on with this for sure and lots of games to keep from getting a 2. People are willing to throw others under the bus to avoid getting a low rating.”*

To the extent that people believe these systems are applied fairly and justly, they will support them. If not, it's another indignity as a survivor that you just put up with.

*"There's been a ratcheting up of harshness with the performance appraisals. They are stricter .... If you do what you're supposed to do, you get a 'C.' This is mostly done in a positive way but it also gives 'them' another tool. It's generated some push-back but mostly for people it's 'this is the way it is.'"*

Being assigned a lower rating can trigger questions about fairness. Others ask, 'Where's the gratitude for what I'm doing here?'

*"One woman has resigned. She was a 2 last year and knows she's walking the plank and is just trying to get by and not kill herself with the work. She figures the die's been cast and even if she put in a million hours they'll still let her go."*

## **XI. OUTLOOK ON COMPENSATION**

*"My boss says not to make anything of my rating. It just means it will be tougher to get a bigger raise."*

Tied directly to the conversations concerning performance appraisals were those surrounding compensation. The goal posts have been moved. Expectations are universally lower now for many survivors. They will accept this for the time being as the concern for more (or more just) compensation takes a back seat right now to job retention.

*"Smaller bonuses were given out but people were still happy they even got a bonus."*

*"Some have had their compensation adjusted upwards but they're doing the work of two or three people now."*

*"There's been lots of attrition and this is definitely a concern among management and there have been compensation reviews as a result."*

*"The variable compensation piece (bonuses) was a major part of incentivizing people and has gone away. They have made some upward adjustments to base salaries."*

A sense of fairness is indispensable to employee morale. It can be incredibly dispiriting to give your all, not receive the bonus you were used to receiving, *and* watch others treated much more generously.

*"There were no bonuses this year yet a bunch of us have seen the brand new Porsche and BMW in the parking lot. It doesn't feel good to see that when all they hand you is a couple of hundred bucks."*

## **XII. QUESTIONS ABOUT STAYING OR GOING**

*"Yes, I'm looking around. It's gotten more urgent."*

Survivors would like to feel more optimistic. However, they worry over the possibility that another downward plunge of the stock price, or loss of a key customer will trigger additional layoffs. Most survivors say they are glad to still have a job.

*“People will put up with this because they don’t have any other options. Folks are just happy to have a job.”*

*“I absolutely want to stay here. They’ve been really good to me. I’m a very dedicated employee so I’ve also been very good to them. Anyway, at my age, where can I go?”*

*“I’m very grateful I’m here.”*

Regardless of how much effort they put forth, or what they’ve accomplished in the past, many survivors can’t help wondering how secure their jobs are anyway.

*“You wonder, ‘will we have more layoffs?’ Should we be papering the streets? Sitting tight? What’s the true health of the company vs. what we’re still proclaiming? Where do we actually stand?”*

*“You never know when your number will be up and for what reason.”*

Some survivors have grown unhappy with the deterioration of their work environment. As they make clear, the desire to hang onto their job does not equate with staying committed to their company, if things continue the way they’ve been going.

*“I’ll give this some time. It’s incredibly stressful to go through this but this is also a pretty good, reputable company. However, if the culture doesn’t get any healthier, I may not be inclined to stay.”*

*“Anecdotally, you hear people say, ‘as soon as I get the chance, I’m going to change my environment.’*

As a final note here, this just in from a McKinsey report dated 31 August, 2009: “And just 36% of middle managers (compared with 52% of all executives) report that they are very or extremely likely to choose to be with their current employers two years from now, given their current excitement about their roles as well as their current stress levels.”

### **XIII. CULTURES IN FLUX**

*“These types of changes can lead to benefits. Stirring the pot can help drive better policies or more efficiencies. This has helped us step back and improve the foundation of our business.”*

The economic unraveling has posed a massive stress test for many organizations. The strength and vitality of their cultures have been subject to incredible pressure. It is reassuring and immensely empowering, some survivors say, to draw on the organization’s values as a source of strength.

*“If anything, this whole process has helped us build a bond and get through a difficult period.”*

*"I have a lot of respect for the fairness and equitability in the company. Nothing's happened that would cause me to lose that respect."*

*"There's a huge amount of partnership occurring."*

Some survivors see a silver lining in that the job cuts have given their organizations the impetus to streamline themselves. Seeing their organizations become more adaptable is encouraging; they intuitively know that the ways of the past no longer serve the way of the future.

*"We've had a 'nice' culture. It wasn't aggressive. This has loosened things up. Some people have been here too long. Things got a little stale. This will shake things up; it will be an inflection point for the organization."*

There are instances where management-survivors are exercising initiative, e.g. by developing their own training and development programs.

*"I'm kicking off a leadership an emerging leadership program with some of our junior folks because I care about the culture and the people here."*

Some survivors shared that various customs that created a sense of fun and celebration, were cut out of the budget. Life can go on without the company picnic or office holiday party. But, some question, 'what kind of life?' The shared traditions and celebrations have helped define who they are as a community. A few survivors have spoken up to buck this trend.

*"Cost cutting is so severe that morale building events are no longer feasible. No one in management is willing to provide the refreshments for these events."*

*"We keep trying to preserve some of our traditions, like the annual picnic. Or, giving out turkeys at Christmas. These things have helped build community and have stood the test of time. They help keep the fabric of the group intact."*

*"We've reinstated a committee that was formed to maintain morale. At the last meeting, people wanted to cut out the summer get-together. There's a huge effort by people to say, 'it's a bad economy and we can't afford that.' But you send a bitter message vs. sending the message that we CAN make it work and we CAN organize events in more economically-minded ways."*

#### **XIV. TIME TO CHOOSE**

Many organizations are in a state of tempest and transition. Leadership is under the gun. It's been very difficult for them to breed confidence in a future that is hard enough to read and shape in the best of times. Many survivors in their employ feel pushed to the max. It's remarkable how much survivors have been able to accomplish – and their own senior management, too – when they're so physically and emotionally drained. Too often, events have left survivors feeling marginalized and lacking enthusiasm for their work. Their capacity to influence the people and events around them can feel more limited than ever. There is little to renew them and little to look forward to.

Unless addressed, it's an environment where helplessness and resentment will fester. So now is the time for senior managers to re-engage their employees. Engagement is a powerful intrinsic motivator. It

unlocks energy and re-ignites enthusiasm. Re-engaging employees signals confidence in their judgment and creativity. It allows them to bring their greatest gifts forward precisely at a time when they are needed most. It has you be partners in creating a more meaningful future.

One major step in this direction is for their senior management to make a concerted effort to listen. They need to meet with people in the organization, give *them* the floor, make it safe for them to speak honestly and openly, including about their disappointments, issues and frustrations. It's a gift to give people that generous form of listening and it's missing in many places. Survivors also prize honesty. They know senior management cannot and should not promise lifetime employment. However, helping them be clear about expectations is essential for them to occupy themselves with their work rather than to pre-occupy themselves with worries and concerns that sap energy, and dampen or destroy morale and productivity.

Partner with employees to mitigate their workloads where these are disproportionate to the time and resources they have to work with. Then ensure follow-through which is key to senior management credibility. Recognize and authentically appreciate people for the effort they're putting forth. This lets people know senior management sees who they are and what they're doing. Do it regularly. Also, be more imaginative. Seek novel ways to invest in their training and development. E.g. if you assess that several managers need support conducting critical conversations with their staff, find a way to provide that. Relatively small investments in people can produce huge dividends for the entire organization.

It's also essential to address the culture. A strong, values-oriented culture is more important than ever. Judging from the research, cultures may be threatened more than many people realize. When senior management, under pressure as they are, stand tall for the organization's values, it restores hope and faith. It confirms to people that they are working in the right place and for an organization where what matters is honored, no matter what it may otherwise be expedient to do.

Managers can make it a practice at their meetings to choose any one of the organization's values and, as a regular practice at their meetings, invest 10 minutes in a "Values Moment" discussing where and how a particular value is alive in the organization, or if not, what can be done about it. Then watch for how these conversations translate into gains in morale, productivity, and retention.

Senior management may also want to consider establishing covenants such as the following to make crystal clear what they can be counted on for and held accountable to. This amounts to a very public demonstration of what they stand for. It is the kind of leadership people want to follow. For example:

"You can count on us to

- Be clear, open, and honest with you about the state of our organization for better and for worse;
- Treat you fairly and with respect and dignity;
- Be transparent with you about how we make decisions that affect your job;
- Create an environment where it is safe for everyone to speak up - and honestly disagree; and
- Partner with all employees to create a future they can be excited about and proud of."

We're at a choice point. Maintaining a commitment to the re-engagement of your employees is the right thing and the smart thing to do. Rising to the occasion under these difficult circumstances takes great creativity. Survivors are up to the challenge *and* need robust senior management leadership to do its part. Morale, productivity, retention, and the value of the employer's brand are at stake. So is revenue generation, customer satisfaction and your standing in the marketplace. This is the challenge before us.

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***About Fierce Partner Consulting and Coaching...***

*Fierce Partner is a professional consulting and coaching firm dedicated to fueling and sustaining inspired partnership in the workplace. Drawing on over two decades of motivational change management, leadership and workforce development experience, Fierce Partner works with clients to provide transformational solutions, appropriate to each level of the organization. We enable clients to address threats and opportunities affecting workplace culture, systems, and operations. Examples include organizational surveys, values audits, one-on-one and team coaching, leadership presence, conflict resolution, training in critical conversations, dealing with overwhelm, meeting management, and motivational seminars.*

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