

Avoiding an Information Vacuum: How Law Firm Leaders Can Mitigate Negativity During a Downsizing

By [LawVision](#) on March 4, 2014

I recently authored an article for the March issue of the Association of Legal Administrators publication *Legal Management* entitled “Hope for the Best but Prepare for the Worst: Are You Prepared to Manage a Layoff at Your Law Firm?” A section of the article focused on the biggest source of toxicity in a downsizing: An information vacuum.

Seasoned leaders who have been through a layoff can attest to the demoralizing and debilitating effects of a negative atmosphere at their firm. In the absence of clear, honest communication, it’s natural for human beings to assume the worst. Here are ten best practices to mitigate negativity at your firm during a downsizing:

1. **Communicate, Communicate, Communicate.** Let people know what you’re doing and what’s going on by implementing a policy to provide as much information as possible on a consistent basis.
2. **Use Multiple Channels.** Hold town halls, open meetings, brown bag lunches, focus groups or roundtables. Have one-on-one consultations. Conduct anonymous feedback surveys. There’s no “one size fits all” solution to communicating with your employees and soliciting feedback.
3. **Open Your Door.** Listen. Walk the halls. Make yourself approachable. Off the cuff, informal interaction with employees is invaluable to gauge the atmosphere at your firm. If you’re holed up in your office crunching numbers or reviewing documents you’ll miss crucial opportunities to hear what’s on the hearts and minds of your employees. It may not feel comfortable, but this isn’t the time to stay in your comfort zone.
4. **Complete all Reductions in Force at the Same Time.** To the extent possible, make sure remaining personnel understand what has happened, why the decision was made, and your expectation that the firm has made the necessary cuts (while not completely boxing yourself in if things don’t go as planned.). You do not want remaining personnel to be afraid that they’re the next to be laid off.
5. **Involve the Entire Leadership Team.** Undoubtedly, leadership will be stretched very thin after a layoff. To the extent possible, ensure that all senior leaders are reachable and visible.
6. **Articulate a Vision for the Future and Draw Upon Your Firm’s Values and Culture.** You need your remaining employees to be engaged and invested in the continued success of the firm. Communicate the firm’s direction and your strategy to get there. Get employees focused on the importance of their individual contributions toward the firm’s long-term sustainability and success.
7. **Promote Engagement.** Review individual goals and revisit performance management plans to ensure that new roles align with the highest and best use of each employee. Identify what motivates each individual and strive to provide opportunities for personal and team enrichment.
8. **Encourage a Diversity of Perspectives.** Surround yourself with trusted advisors with diverse backgrounds and opinions. As much as possible, seek opinions from a cross-section of practice groups, offices and departments.
9. **Implement a Hiring Freeze.** Although attrition is inevitable, backfill vacancies with internal hires to the extent possible. Promote and develop talent from within the firm rather than recruiting externally. Nothing sends the wrong message like posting a new job opening immediately subsequent to firm layoffs.
10. **Accept Your Own Limitations.** You will make mistakes. There will be days when you’d rather pull the covers over your head than go into the office. Prepare your family and friends for some moodiness and short tempers, and know that this is temporary. Build-in some downtime to relax. Read a book, see a movie, or make a date for your

favorite exercise class. Even taking a walk during lunch will help to regain inner balance. You'll need it.

Proactively thinking about how you would lead through a downsizing is essential to increasing your effectiveness as a leader, regardless of whether you actually anticipate implementing a layoff in the near future. Information vacuums can creep into everyday leadership and management, and mitigating a negative atmosphere can yield incredible rewards through good times and bad.