

Is It Possible to Lay People Off Nicely?

Anyone who's ever had a job has intuited that a happier workplace makes for more productive workers. As [a growing body of research](#) lends scientific authority to this concept, more and more companies are doing what they can to cheer up their employees. Google, with its office scooters and free gourmet meals, may be the most famous example, but it's no longer an anomaly. Airbnb provides each employee with an annual \$2,000 travel stipend. Netflix and Best Buy offer unlimited vacation days.

And then there's HopeLab. This California tech company is trying to brighten even the darkest of work experiences: firing people. Chris Murchison, the company's vice president of staff development and culture, recently spoke about the counterintuitive philosophy behind this effort. "I think layoffs are a fascinating opportunity to think about how to enliven people," he said.

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Getting laid off or fired is never easy. Even so, it's often harder than it has to be. A cold and tactless job dismissal can sting, and just watching a recently sacked employee leave is dispiriting. HopeLab, a company that builds educational apps and games aimed at improving people's health, has gone to unusual lengths to make the process respectful and considerate, even celebratory. In one instance, the company organized a Thriller flash-mob to send off an employee known to be a big fan of Michael Jackson. In another, the company said farewell to a group of workers by throwing a party with balloons, beach balls, and tacos. As Murchison put it, it's all part of HopeLab's effort to put "the good in the goodbye."

As nice as all this may sound, one has to wonder about its effectiveness. Do employees feel better about being laid off when there's a fiesta to take the edge off things? And what about those left behind? One former employee I interviewed sounded truly appreciative of the tacos provided at her going-away fete. ("Delicious," she reported.) But more than that, she was grateful for the company's willingness to talk through its decision with her both before and after the layoff, an approach that provided her with many opportunities for "closure and appreciation."

Another employee, an administrative assistant who lost her job at HopeLab during the recession, said that Murchison followed up with her every few months after letting her go, and even coached her for job interviews. "He really wanted me to succeed outside of HopeLab," she said.

If your experiences of corporate culture have been anything like mine, you, too, may find it hard to imagine a vice president of a company taking time out of his schedule to help a former secretary find work somewhere else. When you meet Murchison, though, it begins to make sense. On the phone at least, Murchison comes off as exceptionally warm and empathic, more chakra healer than HR guy. This accords with the administrative assistant's description of how he handled laying her off. "When I was told, I started to cry," she said. "And then Chris and my supervisor cried a little as well. This helped me feel that I was important, and I was not just a number but a person who had feelings."

HopeLab began rethinking the traditional layoff process in 2009, after the company chose to let four workers go in the face of the economic downturn. “We wanted to do it in a way that was respectful and preserved people's dignity,” Murchison said. The managers announced the decision at an all-staff meeting and then split the employees into smaller groups to talk about how they felt. “There were a lot of tears, there was some anger, and really good questions, but I felt it was really healthy for people to be encouraged to express themselves,” Murchison recalled. Today, group discussions are a standard feature of the company's layoff process. The laid-off employees don't typically attend these meetings, but Murchison said that it all depends on the nature of the layoff and the employee's wishes. “There might be awkwardness, but we encourage people to recognize that and not shy away from it,” he said. “This allows us to remain connected to the laid-off employees, which helps them continue to feel that they matter to us.”

Murchison is the first to point out that HopeLab isn't motivated by the do-gooder impulse alone. One [recent study from the University of Warwick](#) showed that happy employees are 12 percent more productive than their glum and anxious counterparts. If that's true, it's only logical that a badly handled layoff would hurt a company's bottom line. “People can end up fearing for their own jobs, or thinking, ‘This person was my friend. Why were they mistreated?’” Murchison said. “I think what's different for us is that we face that awkwardness and step into it, and just connect with each other as best as we can.”