

Delivering the bad news with finesse

By Jordana Huber

TORONTO — Human Resources consultant Alan Thorlakson recounts the shock expressed by a recently laid-off employee who was contacted by career transition services.

"Turns out she didn't know she was fired," he said. "Somebody dropped the ball somewhere along the road."

In another example of firing without finesse, he recalls the 25-year employee of a manufacturing company who was ushered into the bosses' office and barely seated long enough to be told "his services were no longer required."

The termination talk isn't easy at the best of times, but as the economy continues to falter, more managers are being faced with delivering layoff news — some for the first time.

"I don't think you ever get used to it unless you are sadistic," said Thorlakson, senior vice-president of the Harris Consulting Corporation. "We have more trouble with the managers that are doing the termination than with the individuals who are receiving the bad news."

Dr. Robert Buckman, a medical oncologist in Toronto, who also teaches medical students

and other professionals how to deliver bad news, said it is possible to be a "good supportive messenger even if the message is terrible.

"'You're fired, it's the recession,' is not good enough in the sense that the employee will hurt like hell," he said. "They will hurt a lot less if you take the extra 40 seconds, give them the information and respond to their emotions."

Delivering bad news requires empathy, he said, noting that doesn't mean saying things such as: "It will be better tomorrow."

"If they say 'Oh, my God,' you could say 'It's obviously a big shock,' or 'I know this is very upsetting,'" he said.

Last fall, a survey of more than 230 Canadian companies by the employment law firm Rubin Thomlinson noted that 40 per cent of companies were planning to cut jobs because of the economy.

"I am sure that's a vast understatement now," said lawyer Christine Thomlinson.

"There are a lot of people who have not done this often, if ever, and it's a tough message to deliver," she said.

Firing and layoff notices require honesty and preparation, and while it might be self-evident, being direct is also key, Thomlinson

said.

"We've had stories of employees who have left the meeting and weren't exactly sure they were fired," she said. "In one extreme case we actually had someone show up to work the next day not having honestly got the message."

Thorlakson said the conversation should take no more than five to 10 minutes and include a consistent message planned out in advance.

"You've got to treat people with compassion, but it's not compassion if you spend the next two hours going over all the little details, pointing out their flaws," he said.

A long meeting can also lead to a protracted "why me" conversation where an employer ends up saying things they shouldn't, Thomlinson said.

She said it is important employees leave the meeting with documents detailing severance or other entitlements that can be reviewed at a later date.

"The vast majority of people are going to be in shock and not hearing what you are telling them, especially when you are giving them complicated information," she said.

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