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Being Made Redundant: From "The Writing on the Wall" to "A Bolt from the Blue" - "Being Disposed Of" as a Human Tragedy

Abstract

This paper focuses on the experience of being made redundant. A qualitative study conducted in Australia involved phenomenological, in-depth interviews with middle- and senior-level executives. Ten respondents were interviewed about their experiences of being made redundant. What is evident from their stories is a clear passage of "being disposed of" differing only in whether their fate was evident prior to their disposal - "the writing on the wall" - or whether it was a complete shock - "a bolt from the blue". Ultimately, whether respondents knew what was coming or not, the process was often shocking, hurtful, humiliating, and harsh. Many respondents reported going through the process of being made redundant more than once. All believed it could have been handled better.

Keywords

Downsizing, Grief, Qualitative research, Redundancy

Introduction to a Human Tragedy

This paper seeks to explore the personal experience of being "disposed of" from one's place of work. We do so, not because it might save organisations more money (although it might), but because we claim that current processes of making staff redundant can be likened to a human tragedy. In this paper, we use the term downsizing often, and it is carefully noted that this connotes a more managerial perspective (from which most of the literature in this area is written). Terms such as downsizing, delayering, restructuring, and rightsizing are often used, as are a myriad of other terms representing forms of organisational change currently in vogue.

However, we are actually interested in the experience of being made redundant that accompanies these processes. We think of redundancy as referring to positions (and, despite the rhetoric, people) sloughed off by organisations. We also distinguish between those who are laid off voluntarily and those who are not. Redundancies are usually assumed to be voluntary, and accompanied by a financial incentive package. However, for the respondents in this study, redundancies were all presented to them without choice. We also found that redundancies do associate with the discharge of staff for less than "rational" reasons, such as political agendas, power struggles, or senior executive whims. Downsizing or redundancy, for
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the purposes of this study, does not include the discharge of individuals for cause (Cascio, 1993: 96), although it is acknowledged that downsizing may remain a convenient managerial approach for dealing with "problem" workers.

Laying people off is now couched in familiar and yet euphemistic terms that are more akin to scientific decisions rather than human tragedy. Sacked workers are "downsized", "separated", "severed", "unassigned" and "proactively outplaced" (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 1996: 11). Workers are "slashed", "cut", "eliminated", "excessed", "right-sized" and "surplused". Others are "severed", "trimmed", "re-engineered", "pared down", "terminated", "chopped", "given early retirement" and "put out to pasture" (Laabs, 1999: 30). However one terms it, there have been few sensitive qualitative studies to address the experience of those that discarded from their place of work.

The Players

The literature on downsizing tends to be clustered around the entities of the "survivors", the "executioners" and the "victims". Of these three groups, the primary concern in the literature has been for those who remain in organisations - the "survivors". The psychological impact of downsizing has primarily been assessed from their perspective (Clarke, 1999: 3). Those who survive frequently experience what has been termed the “survivor syndrome” (Cascio, 1993: 101; Horsted and Doherty, 1994: 53; Gottlieb and Conkling, 1995; Tal, 1996; Bedeian and Armenakis, 1998; Clarke, 1999: 3) or "survivor sickness" (Clarke, 1999: 3). Problems of lost commitment or the “commitment gap” (Gottlieb and Conkling, 1995), and other grief and anxiety problems, are problematic for employers. Following downsizing, surviving employees become narrow-minded, self-absorbed and risk averse. Morale drops, productivity reduces and survivors distrust management through being fearful of future cutbacks (Cascio, 1993: 101).
The "executioners" are those who do the downsizing. The ostracism that they face, having been dubbed "executioners", "axemen" and "corporate murderers", makes their experience of survival different. Managers who remain behind tend to see themselves as the "victims of change" (Littler, Bramble and McDonald, 1994: 2; Clarke, 1999: 3) through having to do the difficult job of either making the decisions as to who must go and, worse, relaying that information to the people concerned (Wright and Barling, 1998). These people try and steer the organisation through the inevitable journey that has been characterised by anger, confusion, anxiety, resentment, cynicism, resignation, hostility, retribution and hope (O'Neill and Lenn, 1995: 23-31; Wright and Barling, 1998: 340). They may also experience the negative reactions that lead to reduced work performance and lowered organisational commitment (Brockner et al, 1987: 539; Clarke 1999: 3) that other survivors face. Wright and Barling (1998: 342 ff) reported the experience of the "downsizers" as professionally demanding, incorporating significant role ambiguity and overload, a source of profound guilt, and a situation resulting in organisational and social isolation.

However, our concern is with those that lose their jobs - those that fade away - and who tend to get labelled the "victim" (Kets de Vries and Balazs, 1997: 23; Clarke, 1999: 3). We prefer not to use that term, focusing our attention, instead, on what has happened, rather than on any personal attributes of the individual. All the respondents in this study had no choice about leaving the organisation. These "disposed of" are the protagonists in the downsizing process, and are the group that has received the least attention in the literature, despite the very large numbers of people involved.

A Sensitive, Phenomenological Study

Most of the studies to date tend to focus on employer concerns only. For example, there are those that extol the costs and benefits of downsizing (for example, Cascio, 1993; Mathews and Duran, 1999; Pollock et al, 1999: 182). Others consider the performance of those that are left (for example, Cascio, 1993; Gottlieb and Conkling, 1995; Braun, 1997; Layden and
Harrington, 1998; Wright and Barling, 1998), and the likelihood that some downsizing
approaches may be more effective than others (Mathews and Duran, 1999: 1). Few take a
humanistic approach, considering the need to respect the dignity of their employees and the
pain caused by unnecessary or thoughtlessly imposed layoffs. Even Wright and Barling's
(1998: 340) grounded theory exploration tended to discuss the problems experienced by
downsizers from an employer perspective.

Phenomenology is concerned with the richness of individual experience, of exploring
everyday experiences and the subjective perspective of the respondent, which is why it is
chosen here. Phenomenological studies value lived experience (Oiller, 1982: 178), especially
the meaning it holds for the individual (Drew, 1989: 431). The value comes from learning
about lived experience from the informant's perspective - to capture experience as it has been
lived and share it with others (Vickers, 2001: 33). The respondents' "reality" is valued as
being subjective and perspectival: the "truth" that flows from it has only one legitimate source
of data - those who have lived the reality being investigated (Baker, Wuest and Stern, 1992:
1357).

Focused, in-depth phenomenological interviews were conducted. Ten respondents (nine male
and one female) were interviewed at least once, sometimes twice. The interview data was also
supplemented with additional email correspondence from one respondent who had continued
ruminating over his experiences, some personal correspondence, and some in-house
organisational information. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis
undertaken. What is reported here is a thematic analysis of the characteristic journey
undertaken by respondents. The journey consisted of five distinct phases, as described by
respondents: "The Good Times", "The Reversal", "Knowing", "Being Disposed Of" and
"Afterwards". All respondents reported having been made redundant on more than one
occasion.
A Human Tragedy: Narratives of Disposal

The Good Times

It was frequently reported by respondents that the organisation where they had worked had experienced a particularly buoyant and optimistic period, characterised by high growth and high income. Adrian spoke of record sales, an expanding company, and high morale. He spoke with enthusiasm about his early months at this organisation:

MV: And what was the morale like in the place generally?
Adrian: Well, when I first got there, it was fantastic (Adrian, #1: 2-3).

Lewis reported a similar story; that morale was great, that he worked in a great team and that business was booming. He spoke of the extraordinary growth period:

Lewis: Well, also, when I joined the inflows into that division were $200 Million a year. That was in January 96. By 2000, they were $4 Billion. We went through a hell of a ride. I was, at one time, probably doing a hundred presentations a year around the country. I was travelling around the country at least twice a year. I was probably working at times around 100 hours a week. It was an extraordinary ride and the whole range of things happened. (Lewis, #1: 5).

Both stories convey a sense of enthusiasm, of energy, of the commitment that the respondents felt towards their employing organisation. In Lewis' case, he reported working extremely long hours, lots of travel, and of his excitement and sense of thrill at being involved with what he termed "a hell of a ride". Warren also described his employer as a 'very progressive company, very compassionate company ... almost family working together' (Warren, #1: 3). Anthony echoed these sentiments: 'I felt it was like a family atmosphere' (Anthony, #1: 3). He also found his work challenging and rewarding. Alice (#1: 4) reported challenging work and an exciting work environment. Jake (#1: 2) and Ben (#1: 5) both talked of the enjoyment they experienced working within the organisation.
The Reversal

Respondents also all spoke of a significant and marked change in their organisations - a reversal, shift, or transformation - as a result of external forces. The sorts of changes described included: a new senior manager (Alice, #1; Jake, #1; Lewis, #1); a restructure (Adrian, #1; Alice, #1; Lewis, #1; Warren, #1), a merger (Anthony, #1; Jake, #1), or a market downturn (Adrian #1; Anthony, #1; Ben, #1; Lewis, #1). Often, several of these factors came into play at once. What emerges in the narratives is evidence of lower morale, reduced enthusiasm and changed expectations. In many cases, the reduced energy and loss of adrenalin is notable. Lewis uses the powerful metaphor of "things coming off the boil", of cooling off, of becoming less driven and less frenetic:

Lewis: Yes, we'd been going on a hell of a ride. Paul left. The new MD was winding down. So, 2000, a lot of things basically a lot of things came off the boil. There was the tax changes. GST affected the bottom line quite significantly. There were, companies like ours got hit quite badly in terms of having to absorb costs.
(Lewis, #1: 6)

For Adrian, an industry downturn and a change in marketing process, found sales dropped drastically and staff concerned about their future. For many respondents, the organisational response was to quell any fears; to reassure and soothe. The forum varied: At Lewis' work it was a large off site gathering. Alice and Anthony were asked to reapply for their jobs; they were to play key roles. Always, the message of future, forward progression, staying calm, working together, and having nothing to fear was continually reinforced. At Adrian's work, it was a staff barbecue:

Adrian: The MD got up and told everyone "Don't worry about your jobs. They're safe" … "This is a natural downturn. We expect this. You won't lose your jobs. We're working with the creditors. We've been to the bank. We've secured funds, de-de de-de
de-da." So, and he did all that. So, you know, and he's very charismatic and very good looking. (Adrian, #1: 10-11).

A clear point of demarcation emerged in the stories of their workplace before the change, and after. Ben said, "It changed a lot for me" (Ben, #1: 15). He repeats this experience of a marked shift when describing his third redundancy also: "Well, that changed as well" (Ben, #1: 24)

Knowing

The next phase of this characteristic journey we term "knowing". It refers to when the respondents "knew" what was going to happen. For some, knowing commenced, often subconsciously, many weeks or even months before their redundancy, through the reading of various cues. For them, the "writing was on the wall" some time before their disposal (especially evident with the value of hindsight), even if it was not certain at the time. However, there were others who learned of the outcome very suddenly, and pointed to no advance warning of what was to transpire, either known or deduced after the face. For them, the news of their redundancy was sudden; a shock - a "bolt from the blue". Of interest, whether respondents knew what was coming or not made little difference to their response to being disposed of.

The Writing was on the Wall. Many respondents reported having their responsibilities removed quite abruptly, often publicly. For example, when Adrian took sick leave to have open heart surgery, half of his responsibility was re-assigned to another manager - permanently - while he was away. Lewis was told that he would have to find work in another division, that his responsibilities had been passed to another:

Lewis: Now Ross came in and wanted things done very differently. He wanted specific product marketing material, even though the market had changed dramatically
over the last 5 years and what we were doing was very successful. He decided that I couldn't do that. He wanted somebody else to do that. So, he brought some of his people in and gave product marketing to those people. He also decided that the technical people wouldn't be under me any more. They would be with somebody else. (Lewis, #1: 9)

Before his second redundancy, Ben was demoted:

**Ben:** So I actually got demoted. I kept my salary, I kept my grade, et cetera, but I was no longer the national marketing manager. They bought a guy in; a guy who in particular a couple of us really did not get along with. My job went from where I really enjoyed it to I hated it. I had been looking for work prior to my retrenchment. (Ben, #1: 16)

**Bolt from the Blue.** For other respondents, the moment of their disposal was completely unanticipated. For Ben, there was not even any inkling of an organisational change in his first redundancy. He actually believed, as did his colleagues, he was being called in for promotion:

**Ben:** So when I went down to the meeting where I got retrenched, my colleagues had actually suggested to me that I was going to be promoted. (Ben, #1: 3)

For Alice too, the moment of her first disposal was in complete contrast to her feelings about her job and the organisation. She tells of having just returned from organising a highly successful company conference. She was effusive and enthusiastic when describing what she had been doing:

**Alice:** So, it was a really big job, really rewarding, but I had literally worked around the clock for the three or four months leading up to it, and then the month before that, I was lucky if I got to sleep some nights, because we were always in the studio fine-tuning everything. I had film crews flying around the country. Then, I
literally worked around the clock at the conference, again, because partners would have last-minute changes and you had to make sure that it just ran like clockwork on the next day. I had three days off, because we were in Queensland and my husband had flown up. And the day I got back to work, I was met by very sullen faces in the office and was asked to go in and see my - , not my immediate manager but the next chap up, who headed the department. And was told that my services were no longer required. (Alice, #1: 4-5)

At the time of his second redundancy, Jake had just started the new job role; the one he had written for himself, at the instigation of senior management, a few weeks earlier. His dream job did not last long:

Jake: So I moved into my new role on the first of September. On the eleventh of September, or in the second week of the new job, on the Thursday, I was called into my boss’ office, who was there with the HR manager, and was told effectively that the role no longer exists, because of cost cutting, and that I was basically retrenched effective the following Friday. I had just over a week’s notice to clean everything up and move out. And that was the second week moving into the role. (Jake, #1: 13)

Being Disposed Of

Powell (1998: 95) has reported the existence and growth of the "abusive organisation", where people's rights in the workplace and the home are increasingly overruled and subverted to the requirements of the organisation. The abusive organisation operates with a callous disregard for employees. There is not a modicum of concern for their human needs. In this study, there were frequent reports of callous disregard for people's feelings during the "disposal process". Lewis described the organisation "feeding people out over the last 6 months" and "a process", where "one or two people started to leave, some of them very suddenly. Other people were being sent overseas." (Lewis, #1: 16). Others' experience of being discarded involved being
humiliated, being escorted from the building, having to seek permission to return. Anthony and Lewis report:

**Anthony:** Well, I suppose the indignity of it all was that all of a sudden — and I know this may not sound very nice — but the indignity from my perspective was that there were all these junior people that were just shovelling me from office to office, trying to give me due respect, but trying to be official about it. (Anthony, #1: 10)

**Lewis:** I went in and I just knew... I went in and the Director went through the usual rubbish about, you know, the reorganisation, we need to change things and do-dah, doo-dah, doo-dah. And this is your pay out and you sign it here and now. It's more than we should give you. Sign it now otherwise we won't give you that amount ... I then got told, "OK, you've got half an hour to go and clear your desk." So I had to go down, grab some things quickly and there was some security guards waiting. And then I got marched out of the building. And I thought that was so demeaning. (Lewis, #1: 28-29)

For example, Cartwright and Cooper (1994: 149-162) describe the acute problem of coping with redundancy. They describe, importantly, 'the extreme misery and sense of rejection that many people experience following job loss, and the importance and meaning which work gives to an individual's life' (Cartwright and Cooper, 1994: 149). They describe the loss experienced when one loses one's job as extending beyond the loss of income, citing numerous problems: increased dependency on other people (financially and physically); lost identity; uncertainty; self-esteem; fear of lost and deteriorating skills; and lost confidence (Cartwright and Cooper, 1994: 152). Respondents confirm their sense of loss: Alice and Jack both report being very upset, an emotional response, but also of being in shock, numb, uncomprehending, disbelieving - classic early grief responses:

**Alice:** I don't think I actually said a whole lot. I think I was in shock. I really can't remember. I can remember sitting in the office and who was in there, and I just kept
saying, 'Well, why?' And they just kept giving me probably the straight line, 'Well, as you know, we're restructuring.' But, you know, I'd been through probably about four already. And I was really upset. [slight pause] That's right, I said, 'OK, look, I have quite a bit to do to follow up from the conference. There's heaps of things to do.' ... And I said, 'Well, that's fine, but I'll need probably two weeks to finalise everything.' I'd just gone back into business mode. And they said, 'No, you have to leave today.'

(Alice, #1: 5-6)

Jake shares his shock: "I had no idea that was going to happen ... I actually nearly broke down in tears" (Jake, #1: 13). He continues:

**Jake:** I didn't really say a lot at the time. I was just really numb with disbelief basically, and nodding, and I just didn't really have the thought process to go through and work out, 'Why are you doing this?' ... So when I went to the outplacement guy, he saw I was in shock and tried to keep me talking. But in the end I just had to say to him, 'Look, I've got to go' ... So I went in, locked away the laptop, grabbed my bag and a cabcharge, and went home. I'd only just spoken to my wife five seconds before I was called into my boss' office, and that was like an hour and a half later, I'm walking through the door. I'd said I'd call her back, so she was worried. And yes, just broke down in tears and told her I'd been retrenched. (Jake, #1, 15-16)

However, it was Adrian's disposal that appears the most callous. Adrian was told of his retrenchment - which only involved him - following his return to work from open heart surgery and six weeks sick leave. Upon his return to work, Adrian, had no clue what was coming, and was angry and upset when it did:

**Adrian:** You know, "This is bloody disgusting. I've just had this heart operation, you know. How could they treat me like this? I've really been dedicated to them" ...

But, it just wasn't-, you know, they wanted me to go (Adrian, #1: 48-50)
Afterwards

After hearing the news of their departure, respondents clearly recalled moving to a new phase of their journey, as they struggled with digesting what had happened and wondered what to do next. They talked about "what happened then". This portion of their journey frequently involved the process of saying goodbye to co-workers and colleagues - a particularly painful process. Adrian reported his need to tell his staff of his departure, but what an immensely difficult and emotional task this was, further highlighting the level of betrayal and hurt he was feeling:

Adrian: Oh, bloody, well, I was ... getting pretty emotional. So [emotion rising in Adrian's voice as he recounts this]. So, yes ... And I was just mess when the group came around. I was just a mess ... I said [to his staff], "The whole thing is, they didn't want me to start. They wanted me to just go, and I had, I had to tell you myself." So, I was just – and I just broke down. And I was kind of sobbing and, and trying to explain to the people (Adrian, #1: 48-50).

Lewis also reported a need to share with his staff what had happened and wrote them a lengthy letter, which was prepared in advance of his termination. Ben also needed to return to his workplace to clean up, having left hurriedly the day he had been informed of his redundancy to cope with his emotions. He shares the painful process of coming back to the office, of getting permission from security and, again, the painful process of saying goodbye to fond colleagues:

Ben: The next thing was that ..., I was asked to clear my desk that afternoon and I said, 'Well, it's impossible to clear your desk just like that.' ... So they agreed that I could come back the following day to finish it off. [slight pause] But I had to report in to security. No, I had to check first, that's right. So I phoned in the morning and was told that, once I was coming, could I let security know when I came in. I got in there,
and you felt like a thief. You know, you felt as if you’d done something fraudulent. And the guy didn’t even know anything about it. Which was even more frustrating, I suppose. So I went up to my floor, and started getting my things. And obviously the area that I worked in, this was a hell of a shock for them as well. And in that few hours they had actually had a whip-round for me and bought me a little going-away present. Well, I just choked, and I actually cried in my office. It just got to me. (Ben, #1: 6)

All respondents reported several months out of work and when a return to work was made, it was invariable to a less senior and prestigious position. Lewis reported the subsequent breakdown of his marriage, the serious illness of his daughter. Adrian returned to hospital with a serious angina, and fears for his life. Alice opted for full time motherhood for a period, which was not on her agenda at the time of her retrenchment. All reported or demonstrated feeling embittered, betrayed, sad and angry. All noted the influence, in particular, that having experienced multiple redundancies would have on their future work ethic and commitment to their place of employ.

The Experience of Redundancy: Is There Another Way?

Being made redundant is a serious and largely unrecognised source of grief for those affected. It is a human tragedy. The redundancy situation has been likened to that of bereavement with cyclical grief reactions including anger, denial, depression and readjustment being reported (Brammer and Humberger, 1984: 44-46; Cartwright and Cooper, 1994: 153-156; Horsted and Doherty, 1994: 52). The purpose of this paper was to highlight the tragedy. We need to know and feel and see what the experiences of people who have been discarded are, to learn more about their experiences so we can make it less traumatic for those who will inevitably follow. If redundancies must continue, let us find some ways to do it that are less harmful to all concerned.
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