

Your De-Boarding Group Has Been Called:

Maintaining Dignity within Employee Terminations

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As this eleventh volume of *QRBD* comes to a conclusion, the world in which we research and publish is rapidly changing. While in this issue we explore issues related to artificial intelligence and deep-fakes, why people do or do not respond to surveys, and the history of one of the giants of the entertainment industry, around us we continue to see the dissolution of academic institutions, the destruction of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, the restructuring of both the United States government and our relationships with our allies, and the continued closures of once prominent retail staples. We have even seen the historic first round of layoffs in the traditionally people centric Southwest Airlines.

While my eyes have been focused on many of these mentioned changes, it is the latter that particularly struck home to me. While Director of Organizational Behavior and Human Resources at The University of Texas at Dallas, my students and I enjoyed a strong relationship with Southwest Airlines, with many of my students finding internships and permanent employment with this organization. Known for being the “airline with a heart”, on February 17, 2025, this organization which subscribed to the philosophy that happy employees make happy customers abruptly sent their employees home from their Dallas, TX, based headquarters with the knowledge that the next morning, 15% of its corporate workforce would be terminated (Singh, 2025). Bowing to apparent pressure from investors, this company who had never enacted a major layoff in its 54 years history (Snider, 2025), the airline with a heart suddenly appeared to be heartless.

Terminating with dignity

As my alumni face their employment loss, I reflected on my own experiences with termination. While thankfully it has only occurred twice in my life, I think on how I was (not) treated with dignity... the idea that all people have a basic worth and status that gives rise to fundamental rights and respect. The management of employee terminations represents a significant challenge for organizations, respecting individual dignity during this often painful process is not simply a question of organizational policy; it serves as an artifact of the company culture and the value that employers place on employees within the workplace (Lucas et al., 2017). The way in which the organizations manage terminations reflects on their corporate ethos and can have an impact not only on the people who are directly impacted, but also on the morales of the remaining employees. When dignity is supported, both remaining and terminated employees are likely to maintain a sense of self-esteem, even during difficult transitions, thus promoting a constructive organizational culture.

Dignity in the workplace includes the recognition and respect for the intrinsic value of each employee, which is significant in maintaining a positive organizational environment. Lucas (2017) stresses that dignity in the workplace is essential to mitigate the psychological impacts of layoffs. Employees who feel appreciated and respected are more likely to have better emotional

well-being, higher levels of commitment and a greater sense of loyalty towards their organization, even if they must leave due to wider organizational changes. Inversely, negative termination experiences can lead to long-lasting resentments, disengagement on the part of the remaining staff and a clouded brand image, which can have vast implications for the company's ability to both recover from and move forward from the termination.

Facing the change

The implications of organizational change are essential to understanding the context that surrounds terminations. As organizations evolve, employees often find themselves navigating in turbulent waters. D'Cruz et al. (2014) note that the challenges posed by organizational change can exacerbate feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and uncertainty among employees. These emotions can be particularly powerful during layoffs, since individuals face the potential loss of income and their professional identities. Addressing these emotional and psychological challenges in a significant and ethical way is essential for organizations that aim to maintain dignity during the termination process.

A critical component of facing the changes brought by terminations is effective communication. The ways in which organizations transmit the termination news can be fundamental in how those affected process the change. According to Lucas (2015) and Noronha et al. (2020), transparent communication strategies help mitigate negative psychological impacts associated with loss of employment. When organizations proactively communicate the reasons for the termination, they describe the available support and express empathy towards the situation of the affected employee, thus promoting the terminated employee's sense of worth and minimizing feelings of abandonment and isolation. This is particularly important as the emotional consequences of terminations are felt not only by the terminated but also by the remaining employees. By promoting a communicative environment where honest discourse thrives, organizations can maintain a level of dignity and respect for the affected workforce along with minimizing any type of resentment or survivor's guilt felt by those not affected.

The timeliness of the termination is also crucial to honoring the dignity of the affected. Rumors of layoffs have been found to have a profound impact on the stress levels of employees (Cohen, 1995). Of course, workplace hindrance stressors have been shown to negatively impact job performance as well as organizational commitment, leading to increased anxiety among the remaining employees, creating a toxic environment, where employees feel insecure and undervalued (Baker & Lucas, 2017). While laws, such as Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification (WARN) Act, dictate how much advance notice an employee should receive prior to termination, immediate notification that a layoff is going to occur is crucial to maintaining not only the dignity of the employee but also their mental well being. One of the worst experiences an employee can face is the "mystery meeting" when an unexpected meeting with management or human resources is scheduled with no explanation, causing days of anxiety and stress. Managers should avoid this delay in favor of scheduling meetings as expediently as possible with the clearly communicated message that the meeting is related to the continuation of employment as to embrace the well being of the employee as well as avoid any ripple effects the termination might have.

Avoid the box

Perhaps nothing symbolized a more ineffectively managed termination than the employee being handed a box (made worse by a security guard/police officer) and being marched out of the building. To effectively implement ethical termination practices, organizations must develop a structured model that includes comprehensive training for managing the principles of dignity and respect in employment. This training should incorporate an understanding of human resource laws and practices within the workplace, ensuring that all staff are equipped to deal with the terminations with the sensitivity and equity they require (McDougal et al., 2018; Grandy & Mavin, 2017). A suggested model can include training on active listening, empathic decision making and directive communication, allowing managers to get involved with employees about their terminations in an attentive and constructive way.

Aside from simply delivering the news, termination models should include career counseling services for affected employees, which demonstrates a tangible commitment to their future employment. Beyond simple compensation practices, special attention should be given to resources that help employees find new positions and process their experiences in a healthy way. By promoting a culture that values each individual's contributions and recognizes the complexities that involve employment transitions, organizations can cultivate an environment in which dignity prevails, positioning itself as leaders in ethical employment practices. The premise of promoting support routes for affected employees is based on the belief that dignity and respect must even be maintained, even after termination has occurred (Wieland, 2020).

Taking Flight after Termination

On February 18, 2025, Southwest Airlines proceeded with their mass layoffs. In an email sent to the Texas Workforce Commission, Southwest's Vice President of People Lindsey Lang offered, in keeping with the WARN Act, a list of 626 positions that would be eliminated from the Dallas headquarters, which did include the Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (Lang, 2025). The email assured that those affected would receive pay and benefits through April 22, 2025, provided they agree to the offered separation agreement. While Southwest did employ fairly good practice in notifying these affected individuals in an expedient manner and offering some compensation packages, the media blitz along with the still unidentified (as of this editorial) 1000 positions leaves Southwest open to potential pitfalls of a mishandled termination situation. While not conducted completely out of sync with their people-first values, only time will tell if Southwest employees and customers will see if they were treated with dignity or if Southwest has irreparably damaged their reputation through mishandled terminations.

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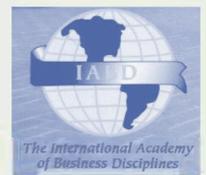
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