

Downsizing well

Six Key Considerations



Many of my clients are facing into redundancies and stand-downs at the moment - some are running major down-sizing programs and others are having the hard conversations with their own teams, and sometimes both at the same time.

These are tough times - for us all - so the focus of this roundtable was to proven ways to handle these challenges better as a leader, as an HR professional and as a human.

Having run and redesigned People Change at Australia Post, as well as retrenching 50 roles in my own teams over time, I've had some direct experiences about does and doesn't work - but I've also been speaking and coaching on what makes a Change-ABLE organisation for the last few years.

This paper takes into account that experience and research, but is mainly based around a great conversation with a broad group of Talent Leaders who are in the thick of it today and striving to answer the question:

"How do we do our best in this situation?"

By being both strategic and human-centric at once (and rapidly, don't worry), you can make some important decisions today that will guide you to do your best in this situation.

Here are six key things to think about.

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Get strategic early

Think about the uptick, now

If you're likely to spin your teams back up again, that knowledge needs to inform your planning and the delivery of your messages.

While many of us are downsizing now, the ones that do this well and keep in touch with their best staff will be the ones that are first back into market when the upswing arrives.

The way you handle this experience, and these conversations, will determine if you are on the front foot later on.

If you want to be first back into market, consider the way you engage post-separation.

For those in stand-down, hosting a chat forum and a fortnightly zoom coffee will keep your top talent connected.

For those in redundancy situations, setting up a social connect space – especially in the middle of lock-down – could be a great wellbeing initiative that will do no harm to your reputation as a decent employer with current and ex-employees alike.

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Have a strategy for survivor guilt.

When social ties are being severed first by a pandemic and then by your employer downsizing, it's very easy for those whose jobs are officially unaffected to be in fact, deeply affected by the fate of their friends and colleagues.

It can not only affect morale and productivity, it can materially impact their long-term relationship with you. Evidence shows that often those left behind have a lower regard for their employer than those who were let go.

That's why, where possible, you should prioritise those who want to go over those that don't and create a sense of positivity around the actions you're having to take.

Consider how you are perceived around the redistribution of work, the treatment of those leaving (both at the time, ongoing and in hindsight), and make sure you make room for the feelings of those left behind in the same way you would for those leaving.

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Tool up your middle managers - fast

No matter how good your communications, middle managers are the ones handling the hard questions, and their job is tough.

They're not 'in the trenches' but they're not 'inner circle' either. They're looked up to as senior leaders yet are too junior to wield any real authority.

When the pace of change is this fast however, they are the most important link in the flow of information. *Strengthen the chain.*

Gartner's 2020 HR priorities states that top-down comms actually lowers engagement and hastens change fatigue. Middle managers can help translate top-down and generic comms into personalised and specific information. We can enhance engagement and stave off change fatigue with one little tweak.

Delivering the message well

One of the things that I've noticed over my many conversations is that we managers are not very good at delivering the message well. It's sometimes the overwhelmingly legalese script that does it, or a lack of confidence in delivering it, or too much confidence and not following it at all.

What I've determined is that empathy, etiquette and under-estimation are the key differentiators between doing a good job and a mediocre or poor one.

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Empathy

Showing true empathy may mean going against your natural instincts at times.

The first time I delivered the message I softened the blow. Or I thought I did. By the third time of delivering it this way I'd realise that by trying to make it better, I was actually making it worse.

Sugar coating: it makes you feel better, but not them. A lack of clarity at times like these creates more anxiety rather than less, so stop trying to fill the gaps with words. You're coming from a lovely place of trying to soften the blow, but in fact you're achieving the opposite with the fluff. *Less is more.*

Get to the point: by engaging in small talk at the beginning of the conversation, I mislead them into a false sense of security and then sprang the punchline on them once lulled. No-one enjoys being ambushed.

Etiquette

Have the etiquette for a two-way conversation built into your script or you might as well have it delivered by a robot. Speak, wait, listen and respond.

Honour their time and pace, not just that of the script.

Pause after the punchline. You can visually see people switch off the minute they hear the words 'redundant' or 'stood down' so anything you say after that point isn't sinking in. I learned that I should stop talking after the first sentence and just wait for them to respond – it was not the time to be rattling off a big list of compliance stuff.

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Be present in the room. I know you want to get out of there; having the conversation is no fun for managers either so we tend to rattle off the rest of the script and hope to get out with minimal conversation. Taking your time, pausing to allow people to reflect and follow their own thought pathway, and showing your compassion will allow them to process this more positively.

Language is code for culture. If you can't understand the script that you've been asked to deliver, ask it to be rewritten into something simpler and more user-friendly.

Underestimation

Your people are adults and they can handle the truth, don't underestimate them.

Delivering the message of redundancy or a stand-down is incredibly stressful. As managers, we become anxious about doing it: filled with guilt, overwhelmed with the complexity of the script, and fearful of their imagined reaction.

What if they cry, shout, or hit me?

In my experience (and I've been present in over 100 conversations to date), they rarely do any of those things unless they've been taken by surprise.

With CoVid19, as with most other situations, your team already have at least an inkling of what's going on, so don't treat them like children.

If you signal early enough and have an adult conversation early enough, you will navigate this at a much more human level and retain your relationship with your team (and retain your self-esteem as a leader – trust me you can feel like an absolute heel doing this stuff otherwise).

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We often hide the truth of org change in order to protect our people, because we care about them, or because we don't want to derail their productivity. However this has been proven to be counter-productive.

Gartner research shows that engaging staff in co-creation actually increases their ability to absorb more change, and a greater volume of change, apply more exertion to the change, and handle greater disruption from the change.

Toyota's DRIVE program showed that not only did engagement go up when the complete (and absolutely grim) picture was shared, but so did productivity.

Adopt a no surprises policy, early. If you're having a stand-down conversation to someone who is reacting with complete surprise, I can assure you they have not been living under a rock – you have been remiss in your signalling.

If you need to fast-track your approach to Onboarding, Global Mobility, Repurposing TA or managing your Resilience, then you need to do one of these things:

- Email me for the other one-pagers that you need from the above list
- Book a one-off mentoring call with your HR / project team to accelerate and enhance your implementation / project plans
- Schedule a confidential, one-off mentoring call with you 1:1.
- Join the Level-Up group mentoring program for Talent Leaders



rebecca.houghton@boldhr.com.au



www.boldhr.com.au



+61 (0)466 152 975

About the Author



Rebecca set up BoldHR to help HR Leaders do business differently.

According to Justin Trudeau in that year, “The pace of change has never been this fast, and it will never be this slow again”, but alongside the increased pace of change is an increasing failure to change - in fact McKinsey estimates up to 70% of transformations fail.

And right now, we have no choice but to change, and the smart ones among us are asking - when's the next major disruption going to be and are we ready - are we change-ABLE?

Rebecca helps you to get ready - to do business differently with confidence, through focusing on Leadership and Talent.

Her ability to synthesise complexity, challenge traditional approaches, engage teams and create alignment is well-regarded and she works with a range of clients across public & private sector who are undergoing change.

This unique combination means Rebecca has both the experience and deep expertise to advise, coach and train business leaders facing into volatile, unpredictable, complex and ambiguous circumstances.

Rebecca's career has spanned two international decades at the pinnacle of Talent thinking.

Rebecca's passion is imparting confidence and impact - many of her clients return to Rebecca even after their goals have been achieved for her pragmatic and hands-on support and her ability to navigate the many and varied challenges facing today's leaders.

She is a highly sought after coach, trainer and facilitator for established businesses in disrupted industries - and works regularly with clients in public sector, education, health and financial services.

She also devotes time to elevating the strategic capability of the Talent Industry, working closely with HR and Talent Leaders, their suppliers and partners.