

Who Do You Let Go When a Layoff Is Necessary?

The hardest task a manager will ever perform is to lay off valuable staff members. Most valuable public radio employees I have known love their jobs and are in the profession for the “making a difference” factor. While obviously those who are losing their jobs suffer the most, those who are left behind and those that take part in making the decision feel the pain as well. Ultimately there is no easy formula for who gets laid off.

With the economy affecting all factors of our broadcast service areas, you must make the tough decisions that will preserve your public service for the long-term. To survive the economic challenges you may be forced to lay off employees to get back on solid financial ground.

As a public radio manager at a university, college, school district, or state licensee, your first step must be to contact your licensee’s personnel office. Specific legal procedures to follow will probably be in place. Once you know the procedure, here are some areas of thoughtful consideration:

- **SENIORITY**: Some stations must follow the rule of seniority. If your staff is unionized, the union may demand that you give preference to people with seniority. The thinking here is that senior employees have more job experience and more station training. Since the station has invested more time and money in these workers, it seems natural they should keep their jobs.
- **MONEY-GENERATING VS. PROGRAM SERVICE**: Rather than seniority, other stations may look at their money-generating vs. program service operations. Which is more valuable, positions generating income or positions generating public service programming? If a station wants to refocus on one area of service, it may eliminate a whole service segment. In this case, the station gets rid of all jobs associated with this area of service (eliminate news or eliminate music). The employees holding these positions are laid off.
- **ELIMINATE EXPENSIVE PROGRAMMING**: Stations may find the most expensive programming production and simply eliminate it. A full unit may not be generating enough audience or financial support to sustain the operation. In this example, the station eliminates all jobs associated with the program production.
- **ATTRITION**: Yet another way to reduce your staff size is through attrition. You may not replace positions vacated by retirement or resignation. Some licensees may even offer early retirement options if a financial exigency is declared by the institution or state.

- **EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE**: Finally, you may use an employee rating system where all workers get regular feedback on their performance. If you have applied your system consistently across the workforce, you can use it to lay off a group of workers. For example, the manager can rate the employee on a performance scale where 5 is an excellent worker and 1 is a worker who is performing poorly. In this case, you could lay off all employees with a rating of 1 or 2. Here is where you suffer the consequences if you were lenient in giving performance appraisals. In other words, rather than being truthful during the evaluation process, you took the easy road by being too generous with your evaluations. Now it will be more difficult to lay off poorly performing staff because you rated them as if they were equal to a more productive employee.

However you decide to discharge employees, you must do it consistently. Be aware that selecting an entire group is less risky than cherry picking who gets a pink slip. Conducting layoffs this way also minimizes negative effects for the remaining workers. The layoff will feel less personal to those employees losing their jobs, and it immediately gives security to those who remain. That said, layoffs will still wreak emotional havoc on your workplace.

You must be fair to all workers, both to those who will lose their jobs and those who will remain. At the same time, you must maintain public service to your community with the least amount of interruption. Since a layoff will probably disrupt your daily operations, more work and responsibilities may transfer to remaining staff. To reduce the disruption and dissonance, you must systematically decide who to layoff and then effectively communicate this to all employees. The best way to get through layoffs is quickly. Be up-front, take responsibility and allow your workers some time to grieve. Only then can you move forward to full station recovery.

Here's wishing the best of luck to all that find themselves on either side of the layoff process. I hope your situation will soon become more positive.