

An open letter to HR Professionals on separating employees with compassion and respectⁱ

I refer to the letter to Straits Times Forum from Lynette Leow dated Saturday, 4 September titled, "Letting go of employees? Do it with compassion and respect".

Saturday, September 04, 2021

THE STRAITS TIMES

Letter of the day

Letting go of employees? Do it with compassion and respect

I was overwhelmed by guilt recently after watching the movie *The Courageous Heart Of Irena Sendler*, having been prompted earlier to read a Straits Times article, "More local workers sought help on salary disputes, wrongful dismissals amid Covid-19" (July 9). What has saving Jewish children to do with the treatment terminated employees get? The simple answer is compassion.

Unlike Ms Sendler, a courageous and compassionate woman who saved 2,500 children, I am a coward who was afraid to stand up against the way dismissed employees were treated.

For more than 25 years of my career, I have represented an employer who asked many employees to leave immediately after a five- to 10-minute conversation (managers are told to keep it brief). These employees had to shut down the IT system, return company property such as phone, credit card and access card, and give up their medical benefits,

even if they were going through treatment for an illness – all on the same day, without getting to say "goodbye" and "thank you" to their colleagues with whom they had worked for years.

I had become numb and even felt proud of being able to separate personal feelings from poor human resource practices, which amounted to cold and ruthless treatment given to a once-valuable asset of the firm.

I really did feel sorry whenever I had to conduct a service termination, but I was not courageous enough to speak out against such uncompassionate behaviour.

Compassion in the workplace calls for employers to be empathetic, and to seek to understand and treat their employees as human beings and not as digits.

In reality, employees realise and accept that losing a job is not uncommon, given the disruptions in the global economy these days.

However, the process of

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termination can be conducted with compassion and respect. This would require time, commitment and responsibility from an employer.

In my opinion, other than termination on the grounds of gross misconduct which may justify immediate departure, I would advocate more open feedback and regular conversation with employees. This may take more time, especially for employees struggling with work, stress, unrealistic expectations, and health and family issues.

After agreeing on a workable progress plan, employees should be given the chance to improve, reform and reskill before employers show them the door.

Termination should never come as a big surprise to employees and when it happens, they are entitled to know why they are being terminated.

The best of employers will even provide both financial and non-financial assistance to help

with the transition.

The worst cruelty of all is when employers refuse to give the reason for termination and, therefore, there is no closure for the affected employees and the pain lingers.

I know of many such employees who have suffered from such treatment and never quite recovered from it.

Do I continue to live with pangs of conscience that I did, and said, nothing because I was too afraid of speaking the truth? Well, it is time that I borrowed some of Ms Sendler's courage and stated that, as an HR professional, I strongly disagree with employers who refuse to provide a reason for termination but simply ask employees to leave immediately without dignity and self-respect.

I disagree that compensation in lieu of notice, or ex gratia payment, is compassion.

Finally, I disagree with the notion that there is no room for compassion in the workplace.

Lynette Leow

Just like Lynette, some HR professionals struggle with the treatment of terminated employees in their organisations. They fall victim to what their bosses want. Therefore, it does take courage to stand firm and do what is right.

We canvassed the IHRP community for their views and have garnered specific and actionable advice that HR professionals can learn from when faced with these challenges. By taking these actions, HR should be able to take greater ownership of the separation process and improve your ability to build your organization, capabilities, and stay true to yourself.

Apply Business and Financial Acumen

HR Professionals must get better at using knowledge of key business drivers and important company data to make informed decisions with a keen appreciation of their impact on business outcomes. This is one of the best ways to build rapport and trust with your business leaders. It is unfair to depict employers as lacking compassion. Many business leaders that I know and have worked with balk at the thought of terminating the services of loyal employees. Therefore, HR professionals must work with their leaders to do everything possible to develop and implement strategies to preserve jobs and prevent redundancies as far as possible. This requires taking a long-term view of their manpower needs, and see retrenchment as the last resort, after other feasible options have been considered and exhausted. In this way, employers will retain their core capabilities, inspire loyalty in their workforce, and be well-positioned to emerge stronger in the recovery.

"How" is as important as the "What"

When all avenues have been exhausted and terminating employees is required, HR must ensure company's processes are in accordance with contractual and employment laws and regulations, and industry good practices. This includes administering redundancy or individual severance programmes and coaching managers to support affected individuals by providing and communicating relevant information about process and available post-exit assistance.

Here, we must not only do the right thing but also do it right. As American poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou once said, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel".

While legal and contractual obligations must be fulfilled, HR professionals can and must exercise compassion and fairness, and extend a helping hand as much as they can. Compassion comes from the heart - and nobody can take it away from us. Senior leaders will appreciate HR's guidance to communicate redundancy decisions, concerns and options to affected individuals and business leaders in a professional and delicate manner. HR professionals should never feel so disempowered to the extent that he or she cannot even exercise compassion.

Be courageous

Over and above compassion and empathy, it will take courage to act. The reality is that every HR professional will be called upon to manage at least one if not more terminations during their career. And every episode will have its challenges, including standing up for terminated employees. We will encounter cold and clinical corporate SOPs that require exiting staff immediately without an opportunity to say their goodbyes or accompanying staff off premises. Standing by your principles and treating exiting staff with respect and dignity will ultimately also signal to remaining staff the value the organisation places on its people.

Tap into the Power of the Community

The [Institute for HR Professionals](#) (IHRP) provides advice to HR professionals who need support on these issues. Our 4,000 strong community has an active buzz on IHRP Connect, our mobile-enabled learning app. HR professionals can also tap on advisory services provided by MOM Helpdesk, TAFEP, SNEF and SHRI. The latter conducts an IHRP-accredited training programme on [Employment Severance](#).

In conclusion, HR professionals are not helpless bystanders. We can and must determine the 'how' of terminations and exercise empathy, compassion, respect, and cultural sensitivity to make a painful process less painful.

With best regards

Mayank Parekh, CEO

ⁱ I am grateful for the advice and suggestions canvassed from the community of IHRP-MPs, but the views and opinions expressed herein are mine only.