



## CUSTOMER SERVICE JOB FEATURE



### Weathering the Storm of Downsizing

[By Michael Lee Stallard]

I was an enthusiastic 21-year-old recent college graduate when I arrived for my first day of work at Texas Instruments in 1981. Ready to take on the business world, what I encountered was an office of stressed-out coworkers. The day before, the company had announced its largest layoff in history. The mood at the firm made me wonder if I had just bought myself a seat on the Titanic. Since then, I've lived through many a restructuring and downsizing and learned how to cope with the normal feelings that arise in times of uncertainty.

When colleagues lose their jobs, it is natural for us to fear for our own. Triggered are a range of emotions, including anxiety, anger, sadness, and even grief. These emotions are grounded in our needs for respect, recognition, and a sense of belonging at work. Meeting these needs is critical for restoring normal emotions.

If office morale is low due to job cutbacks, I recommend people concentrate on two areas. First, focus on what you control; that is your efforts in carrying out your own job responsibilities. When you do this, your colleagues will see you in a more-favorable light. If you mope around and complain, however, it looks immature and selfish. Now is not the time to drop the ball. If the team has been weakened, everyone needs to step up during this time of adjustment.

The worst thing for people going through a time of uncertainty is to feel alone. When we feel alone, we tend to become more pessimistic and may overreact out of that

pessimism. The office mood will sink even further if everyone tries to "suck it up" on their own. When people worry about losing their jobs or are stuck in their grief over the loss of their former colleagues, the levels of the stress-related hormone cortisol soar in their bodies. A whole host of negative physical and mental effects arise when cortisol remains high. When people feel connected relationally, however, and receive encouragement from others, their cortisol levels fall. The connection helps them feel better, and the clouds of gloom will begin to clear. The second response I recommend, then, is to intentionally reach out to "connect and encourage" your colleagues.

Connecting with co-workers may include taking them out for meals or coffee or out for walks. As important as the time and attention is the opportunity to get them to talk about how they're feeling. Listen closely to them, and try hard to empathize. Encourage them by complimenting them on their strengths and assuring them that they will be fine.

Because your co-workers will feel respected by you and recognized for what they do well, it will boost their senses of belonging to the group. And when you connect with and encourage others, you will find that you feel better, too.

You can make a difference and lift the spirits of your co-workers by taking the initiative to connect and encourage the people around you. Stay on task. Your team will weather this storm, and the support and encouragement you show one another will make you better equipped for the future.

#### About the Author

Michael Lee Stallard is the president of E Pluribus Partners, a consulting firm that focuses on helping leaders increase employee and customer engagement. He is the primary author of *Fired Up or Burned Out: How to Reignite Your Team's Passion, Creativity, and Productivity*, along with Carolyn Dewing-Hommes and Jason Pankau.

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