

Tales from the Firing Line

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How does it feel to tell someone that you're taking away their job and their income—not to mention taking a big whack at their self-confidence? How do you cope? How do you handle the unpredictable? Here are words of wisdom from three people who, throughout their careers, have learned to negotiate that difficult conversation.

James Wright

Position:

Partner at IT staffing firm Bridge Technical Solutions.

Experience:

In the 1990s, Bridge handled multiple rounds of layoffs for tech clients.

Strategy:

Remember: better a calm head than a loose cannon.

"The tide had really turned on the dot-com boom, and we'd done a few rounds of layoffs. I was going to a meeting to lay off some marketing people, and I stopped in the men's restroom. A guy looked at me and said, 'You coming to this meeting?' I said, 'Yes.' The only reason I would be at the meeting was if there were going to be layoffs. He knew I was going to let them go. I felt like the grim reaper. I knew from past experience that once the initial shock wore off, most of the people affected would realize that I was just the messenger and wouldn't hold it against me. I never liked doing layoffs, but I rationalized that it was better to have me doing it than some loose cannon who might say or do the wrong thing. It was going to happen either way, so I knew that if I just focused on the job at hand, I would make things better for everyone involved."

Bob Kustka

Position:

President of workplace consulting firm CHR Partners.

Experience:

Kustka spent 25 years handling terminations at Gillette Co.

Strategy:

Retain your humanity while sticking to your guns.

"I had to fire a guy who was out on sick leave. He was collecting pay from the company for a job he was too sick to do, yet working another job. In essence it was stealing. I told him the news, and he

tried to tip my desk over, so things started sliding off. My instincts took over and I yelled at him to stop. I said, 'Sit down and let's talk about it.' I got him calmed down and we talked about it—but he was still fired. Always treat people humanely, but if a person is confronting you, be willing to stand up to the situation."

Pamela Holland

Position:

COO of Brody Professional Development.

Experience:

Holland has fired hundreds of people during her 25-year career in human resources.

Strategy:

Think of the other people on the team.

"The night before, I don't sleep well. You don't want to devastate them, but if you know in your heart of hearts that you've given them opportunities, then there's a great sense of relief. How they're going to feed their family—that's not your job. I cope by holding the belief that relieving someone of a job that doesn't fit them actually frees them. I also believe that I am serving all of the other employees. They don't have to endure their company carrying someone who is not pulling his weight, or who is not contributing to the overall success of the team. All the employees who remain deserve to be surrounded by people of equal caliber and commitment to the job."
