

Living out values during redundancies: How to make people redundant in a Christian manner?

By Patrick Goh¹

Redundancy is the one thing that sends everyone into a spin. For many, only bereavement or divorce is more devastating. It also puts people who have to manage the process through tremendous stress and pressure.

Conventional Wisdom

Some leaders default to a 'regulatory' approach, devising 'downsizing' plans based on fairness and legal compliance. Others go down the strategic route by crafting a financial sustainability plan. In this approach, HR departments are expected to align the redundancy process with this sustainability plan, often by producing a 'best practice' checklist for implementation.

Values, values, values

*"Your beliefs become your thoughts,
Your thoughts become your words,
Your words become your actions,
Your actions become your habits,
Your habits become your values,
Your values become your destiny."*

— Mahatma Gandhi

My answer to the question "how to make people redundant in a Christian manner?" is simply "**do not leave your values at the door**".

Redundancy processes have to be organised and indeed agonised through the lens of your values.

It is surprising how many Christian organisations don't do this. For example, in one setting, staff noticed that the leadership team spent less than 5% of their time praying about the financial predicament, and more than 90% of their time discussing and devising their sustainability plan. For an organisation whose core value is "put prayer first", this cannot be right.

If we are not working to our own values, whose values are we working to?

Financial management is often represented as neutral and value-free. However, like any other discipline, it is based on a particular set of assumptions – in the case of finance, usually a capitalist worldview.

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In response to the current recession many charities have turned to 'sustainability plans' devised by their financial practitioners – very often at the expense of people-centred approaches to change management proposed by their HR/OD counterparts or by staff themselves!

The late Eric Miller from the Tavistock Institute reminded us that any intervention is a political intervention “insofar as it promotes some values and not others. Professional status in finance and accounting does not place the practitioner beyond the realm of values”. So, before we implement any financially-based solutions, we have to ask ourselves “are the values and assumptions behind these solutions congruent with those of our organisation's values?”

In my experience, when sustainability plans are unilaterally devised and imposed by senior management, the drive for organisational “alignment” and talk about consultation are in reality attempts to get “compliance”.

Holding up a mirror

People generally find it easier to discuss values in good times. However, in my many years working in the Christian sector, I've noticed that values, beliefs and ethos are often side lined when leaders are faced with the pressure and stress of making redundancies. Sadly, some leaders have even tried to justify this as good leadership – i.e., recognising the “burning platform” and “quickly making tough decisions”. For me, this does not excuse putting values to one side or on the back burner.

Here are some examples of the consequences of non-reflexive action:

- Middle managers folding under pressure by their bosses to get rid of people senior managers don't like or want;
- Vocal managers fighting to maintain, even extend their 'empires' at the expense of others. (e.g. it is not uncommon that fundraising teams actually increased in staffing and funding (as part of the sustainability strategy), while every other department had to make cuts);
- Teams getting rid of people who are “a bit eccentric” but nevertheless competent;
- Managers getting rid of people who, in their view, are not “can do”, or, who are “not a fit”;
- Quiet or amenable people unfairly targeted;
- Retaining assertive, vocal people (because they are likely to take us to an Employment Tribunal);

- Victimising overly vocal people (who champion the rights of others);
- Leaders using the opportunity to implement a 'pet' idea/project or to make the restructure they've always wanted but couldn't because of opposition;
- Laying off people who you have a personality clash with;
- Getting rid of people whose contracts include benefits that Senior Managers want to do away with (tied housing, cars, etc.);
- Exiting people who hold different theological view/s;
- Inappropriate use (e.g., favouring senior staff) of settlement agreements (formerly known as compromise agreements).

'Living' our values during testing times is the only way that we make our values real and authentic. Difficult episodes should be seen as opportunities to live the values.

If organisational cultures are essentially stories people share, how we deal with redundancies will be woven into the organisation's stories of "who we are" and "how we do things around here". These stories play a crucial part in our public identity and consequently our aspiration to be an employer of choice.

No amount of effort or money spent on branding and communication can erase the corporate memory of how critical moments in the life of our organisations are badly handled.

The aftermath: What kind of organisation have we made?

Unlike commercial branding, values cannot be merely window dressing. Every time a staff member experiences a gap between our 'story told' and our 'story lived', our Christian identity takes a backward step. At worst, this pattern could result in a sense of spiritual malaise.

After each downsizing exercise, it is important to review what we, the organisation, made as a result of the redundancies. By this, I don't mean a 'learning review' about what worked and what didn't. But rather, a 'meta'-conversation (i.e., a helicopter view conversation with decision-makers) about whether there are discernible patterns or consequences on our demographics or relationships as a result of the downsizing – e.g. was the outcome inadvertently discriminatory to junior staff, older people, women?

'Reflexivity' is a conversation about what we have become as a result of our action/s and a discussion about whether we are happy with what we have made. And, if not, what should we do about it?

Note about 'self'

Christians continue to struggle with our human nature and sin (self-preservation, competitive streak, fear, ambition, greed, anger, gossip, etc). When under pressure to select people for redundancy, therefore, it is important to be reflexive about how our shadow side works.

For example, in the context of workplace politics, how likely are we to subliminally use the process of downsizing to exert or gain more power and control or to discriminate against, rather than to value difference?

During times of recession, people are normally more pliable because they are afraid to lose their jobs. In this context, Christian leaders have been known to take advantage of this situation to unilaterally make changes they might not have otherwise been able to.

When the going gets tough, leaders and managers need to:

- be reflexive (rather than reactive);
- envision how we want to live the values, and
- to determine how we can live our values courageously.

It is a time for making choices, finding our voice, being real, connecting, and above all, it is a time for enacting our values.

HR/OD: Finding our voice as a profession

One of our challenges is senior leaderships pigeon-holing us as a 'transactional' function, i.e. only here to do the legal and best practice bits well.

We need to find a voice beyond the transactional to having a transformative role. We can do this by helping our organisations move away from the dualistic thinking that redundancies boil down to 'hard' or 'soft' initiatives or it is about making a choice between finance or people strategy.

We need to help our organisations' integrate financially-based change strategies with an intentional employee engagement initiative. This moves us away from the "either-or" position (e.g. profits or people; survival today or building for tomorrow) to a more holistic "both-and" position. Ironically, one stated value of many organisations is "people are our greatest assets". This cannot be just in good times!

A time of crisis is precisely when organisations need to unleash its greatest asset, i.e., creative, purposeful and knowledgeable people, made in the image of God. It is only through human cooperation, enterprise, innovation, creativity, commitment and hard work that get organisations out of tough times.

A strategic OD/HR approach is about bringing people together. Creating space for listening and sharing the issues/challenges and dilemmas openly – with the view of co-creating actions. The opportunity to hear the voice of the whole

system they are a part of, brings out the best in people. This is when dialogue becomes more collaborative, visioning becomes more creative and owned.

I've heard it said that "Best Practice", is a term organisations used to describe the latest or trendiest techniques from the outside, i.e. gurus, academics and other organisations. In my view, "Best Practice" needs to be reframed as effective ways of working that best reflect and embody our values. This can only come from within.