



## IN THIS EDITION

Vol 2 · No 5 · NOVEMBER 2010

Survivor's syndrome 1

Our next edition 2

## EDITORIAL

Who among us can claim that we weren't impacted by a restructuring process or massive layoffs within our organization at some point or another during our career?

In fact, rare are the people I meet who didn't experience the survivor's syndrome at a certain time within their team or company.

Being conscious of the syndrome's existence and giving it all the importance that it deserves is vital to an organization.

Therefore, with this e-newsletter, we wish to help you better understand this phenomenon, provide you with key principles to deal with this situation effectively, and so minimize its impact.

Since this e-newsletter is our last issue for the year, I wish to thank you for your interest in our publications. We look forward to being back in February 2011 with other interesting topics that reflect your concerns and which will give you food for thought.

I wish you a great year-end and happy reading

**Isabelle Côté, President**

## SURVIVORS IN THE BUSINESS WORLD

The recent economic crisis forced many companies to downsize or conduct major layoffs. Bombardier or even General Motors quickly come to mind. Within a company, the impact of these decisions brings about the reduction of positions, which in turn leads to many job cuts. On the other hand, in the news, attention focuses more on the newly unemployed, showing too little concern for employees who were spared and remain with the company. In fact, these employees can be heavily stressed about their professional future, as well as that of their employer, at a time when they must face greater responsibility and extra work. This state is known as the survivor's syndrome. We'll discuss this topic in order to better understand this syndrome, which is too often overlooked, as well as its impact on employees and organizations, while exploring effective ways to manage surviving employees and restructuring periods, and limiting their adverse effects.

### *What is the survivor's syndrome?*

In fact, it's about diverse emotions and symptoms experienced by people who have had to deal with major drastic changes or traumatic situations. This syndrome was first diagnosed in soldiers or survivors of major accidents (e.g. plane crash). Usually, survivors display feelings of anger, distrust, and guilt.

### *What is the syndrome diagnosis within a corporate framework?*

The first diagnosis of this syndrome within a company was established in England back in the 1990s when it was noted that employees who kept their position after widespread restructuring or massive layoffs—therefore, those who "survived" within the company—also experienced such symptoms. In the business world, the survivor's syndrome is linked to layoffs and job insecurity.

### *What are its personal and professional impacts?*

On the **personal level**, the most widely recognized symptoms are:

- Losing faith in one's future within the company (fear of losing one's job);
- Changing values and professional objectives, which can lead to a break with the corporate culture and values;

- Losing one's sense of belonging due to a drastic change in the work environment and the loss of certain colleagues;



- A stronger aversion to risk, which translates into a feeling that nothing within the organization is stable anymore;

- Physical repercussions, in some cases from a more intense fatigue and higher stress to burn-out or even depression.

On the **corporate level**, there are also major widespread impacts:

- Dampened team spirit and obscured long-term corporate vision; this is attributable to losing one's sense of belonging and to dissociating oneself from corporate values;
- Extra zeal in support of the decision that maintained one's position or inversely total loss of motivation (rise in absenteeism, job searching, etc.);
- Lower productivity, a consequence often mentioned by companies having undergone massive layoffs; an American survey conducted in 2001 showed that only 32% of companies believed that restructuring had a positive impact on their bottom line, while only 25% thought that it had a positive impact on productivity;
- The voluntary layoff of some employees following restructuring leads companies on a slippery slope—top resources were selected to ensure the organization's future, yet some decide to quit later on.

Also of note: managers often mention as an aggravating factor the lack of organizational strategy, which increases the perception of instability within the company. It is therefore very important to manage survivors and restructure processes effectively in order to limit as much as possible the negative impacts of this devastating syndrome.

## In periods of downsizing or major layoffs, how could you convince top management to invest in survivors?

The voluntary departure of some worried survivors could impose **additional costs for their replacement, estimated between 93% to 200 % of their annual remuneration**, depending on their competencies and responsibilities!

This may drive your company to invest in organizational restructuring plan, in order to achieve the initial objectives!

At the beginning of the 2000 decade, we could observe that **less than 50% of the organizations who have conducted an important organizational restructuring were able to reach their profit goals, after five years!**

Would you like to share your comments on this article or previous e-bulletins?

Or suggest a topic for a future e-newsletter?

Please write to us at [info@ssasolutions.com](mailto:info@ssasolutions.com)

## TEAM INFO-SOLUTIONS



CHANGE MANAGEMENT  
TEAM EMPOWERMENT

500 Place d'Armes  
Suite 2900  
Montreal, QC  
H2Y 2W2

[www.ssasolutions.com](http://www.ssasolutions.com)

[info@ssasolutions.com](mailto:info@ssasolutions.com)

### *How should you manage survivors and ensure their professional growth?*

The manager's role is absolutely critical for survivors. On the other hand, fulfilling resources' expectations can be tough if the manager is her/himself a survivor.

### *In such a situation, the management style is similar to coaching, namely:*

- Enlisting contributors to the planning and deployment of the change management process;
- Facilitating communications and developing a feedback culture within the team;
- Acknowledging work accomplished by the team;
- Providing opportunities for professional development and training;
- Sharing accurate information about the difficult times the company is going through, the restructuring plans, and the vision for the future;
- Not making promises that can't be kept or validated.

It may be appropriate, particularly when the manager is a survivor who must first and foremost deal with her/his own situation, to call on independent consultants. It is actually common for corporate executives to bring in one-on-one or group coaching consultants as the best possible means to come out winning.

### *How can you best manage the restructuring period in order to reduce the effects of the survivor's syndrome and overcome the crisis?*

- **Corporate culture:** Employees need to believe that justice prevails and that their work is recognized so that their judgement in times of instability is not unfavourable from the outset.
- **Communications and humanity:** And so, senior management has to explain the situation thoroughly, including the reasons behind the layoffs. It is important to avoid feelings of injustice or too much instability among employees. Senior management must show a proper understanding at all levels, whether the employees are leaving or staying.

- **State of mourning and adaptation period for survivors:** After layoffs, observe a state of mourning and facilitate bidirectional communications between employees and managers. It is recommended to organize workshops with an independent consultant to improve communications and focus on concerns and upcoming projects.

- **Empowering employees:** To reassure themselves and to rebuild their confidence in the future and in their abilities, employees must reduce their dependencies on the company and develop their own career plan. This step will favour the return to cruising speed within the company and restore employees' capabilities.

- **Motivation and involvement:** After an adaptation period, it may be quite appropriate to motivate resources by assigning new projects, getting employees even more involved in corporate decision-making and strategies to rebuild their sense of belonging and instil confidence in the future.

You'll agree that the survivor's syndrome is very complex and deserves attention. It may seem paradoxical to invest in employees who were spared even during layoffs and difficult times for the company, but the benefits of sound management during these very disruptive periods are indisputable. It is therefore very important to work out a detailed plan for the restructuring process by carefully anticipating each and every phase. As such, SSA can be a valuable contributor to your process, since a great extent of our service offer covers this aspect. In fact, SSA works with organizations on mandates such as setting a phased plan to meet a predefined objective based on the current situation; defining roles and responsibilities at all levels during a time of change and repositioning; as well as ensuring one-on-one management coaching or group coaching.

To conclude, we wish to share this with you: Many are the benefits of making difficult times a little easier for everyone.

## THE MANAGEMENT OF AGES AND GENERATIONS!

There are currently four distinct generations in the Canadian workplace. They all have diverse perceptions and characteristics and more than ever, they need to work in collaboration! The challenge for the organizations is to recruit younger employees and retain older employees. This creates a situation where companies need to ensure harmonious cohabitation while taking advantage of the strengths and benefits of each group. The key is to create an organizational culture where the **different generations perceive each other in a positive manner.**

How is it currently going in your organization in that regard? Our next edition will allow you to better understand the different perceptions in order to be equipped to face this challenge which is more and more present in our organizations.