

Conscious Careering



Are layoffs brewing in your organization? Savvy employees know how to spot the clues...

Matthew B. Youngquist

As someone who has been present at an inordinate number of layoff events, both in a supervisory role and as an outplacement counselor, I've consistently been surprised by how clearly some people are able to see these kinds of events coming—while others around them miss the signs completely and get taken totally and utterly off-guard by the news!

In today's turbulent workplace, however, learning to diagnose the stability of your current job situation is an important career survival skill that rarely gets talked about. Those folks with a knack for sensing organizational instability tend to gain a significant advantage over their peers, since their instincts give them an extra runway of time to generate visibility for their projects and make themselves more indispensable to the management team before hiring/firing decisions get made. Additionally, in situations where a company closure or mass layoff might be imminent, individuals with a good "early warning system" will be able to start circulating some resumes and developing fresh job leads while still fully employed—a factor that significantly adds to a candidate's marketability.

In contrast, those people who routinely keep their heads down and fail to pay attention to the corporate political climate usually find themselves in a tougher spot if and when staff reductions come a-calling. Not only are such employees more prone to emotional shock upon hearing the news, followed by a prolonged period of grief and adjustment, but they might also (in hindsight) regret certain significant purchasing decisions they've recently made. I've heard more than one story, for example, of an unfortunate soul who bought an expensive new home or car mere days before getting released from a company—and was then saddled with major cash flow problems following the loss of their regular paycheck.

For these reasons, it can be a wise idea to pay close attention to your workplace surroundings and to keep your antennae cranked up high for clues that might positively or negatively impact your future job security. What are these potential clues, you ask? In general, experience would suggest that you keep your eyes open for the following patterns:

● **Your boss loses interest in your performance or avoids giving you long-term assignments.** When a boss knows that he or she will be losing certain employees, they often "stop managing" the individuals in question to a certain extent. Not only do they want to avoid tipping their hand about the news through close personal contact with people, but they also don't want to be forced to lie about future project milestones that they know in their heart won't be taking place. So if your boss seems strangely unconcerned or laissez-faire about your performance—or avoids giving you assignments with a longer-term time horizon—take note!

● **Your boss seems indecisive, anxious, or acts out of character.** Often, when pending layoffs have been announced to the management ranks of an organization, these individuals find themselves under tremendous stress and will start to act strangely or make changes to their normal routine. Again, keep your eyes peeled for anything out of the ordinary. If you've got a fairly easygoing boss who suddenly seems aloof or angry for no apparent reason, this could be a clue that staffing changes are on their way. Or if your supervisor has always had an open-door policy, but now keeps his or her door closed, this might be a signal that it's time to freshen up your resume. Believe it or not, one former client of mine even once predicted (correctly) that a pending layoff was in the works simply by noticing that his boss was no longer refilling the candy jar on her desk!

● **Company executives start making frequent visits to the office.** In most cases, when layoffs are being considered, the corporate brass tends to be around more than usual to help plan and coordinate the event. As a result, if you notice an unusual number of meetings taking place among top corporate personnel, this might be a sign that a restructuring decision of some kind is in the works. Key executives from corporate headquarters flying into your branch office from out of town, outside of their normal schedule? All the more reason to be nervous...

In conclusion, as the old saying goes, just because you're paranoid doesn't necessarily mean people aren't out to get you! And while the tips above certainly aren't foolproof, and could lead to a few "false positives" from time to time, it pays to be as attentive as possible these days to the organizational climate around you. Given the competitive marketplace, a head start on your search of just a few days or a few weeks could significantly impact your career fortunes.

MATTHEW B. YOUNGQUIST is a Bellevue-based career coach and outplacement consultant who has personally helped over 3,500 professionals address and overcome the unique challenges of employment transition. He currently owns his own consulting practice, Career Horizons, LLC, where he can be reached at (425) 450-4960 or via e-mail at matt@career-horizons.com.