

HR4VR recommends this script. We selected it and still find it relevant after 18 years. Here's why, Paul Falcone's emotional intelligence is off the charts coupled with his experience makes for a timeless script that focuses on being humane and factual. His full bio is at the end of this document.

Scripted Q&A for Layoff

Handling Employees' Questions

If you speak softly and with genuine concern, most employees will appreciate your sincere approach. After your opening statement, expect some employees to question the reasoning behind the RIF:

Question: Why was my position chosen for elimination?

Answer: It was a business decision. Please don't take this personally; when a reduction in force occurs, positions are eliminated. The people who are attached to those jobs then get laid off. It's the hardest thing a manager can do—selecting positions for elimination is so difficult because you realize that people's lives will be interrupted. That's why I'm so sorry that this is occurring.

Question: Who else is being laid off? Am I the only one in our department? Why me?

Answer: Steve, I can't share who else is being laid off in the department at this point. We haven't spoken to the other individual(s) yet, so I would ask that you allow me to hold off on answering that for now. [Or:] Yes, yours is the only position in our department that's being eliminated. Again, please don't feel that you've disappointed anyone. I want you to know that you could be considered for rehire once the hiring freeze is lifted. For now, though, understand that we had to eliminate one position, and, purely from a functional standpoint, your position made the most sense.

Question: How can that be? Who's going to do all the work that I do once I'm gone?

Answer: With the elimination of your position, other members of the department will have to take on the remaining job duties that you've handled up to now. That's something we'll simply have to deal with in this new "downsized" mode. Travis is here with us from human resources to discuss some of the details related to your severance package and other important benefits details relating to this layoff.

When One Is Enough

When one individual is selected for layoff from a comparison pool of employees with the same title, expect the person to say: “Wait. You can’t lay me off and keep Heather. I have more longevity than she does.”

Your answer: “I recognize that. However, I want you to know that we considered tenure in our decision. We also looked at performance appraisals, progressive disciplinary warnings, attendance records, education levels, and skills and technical certifications when determining who would be qualified to assume the remaining duties after the reduction-in-force. We determined that, based on all that historical information along with our evaluation of who would work best in the post-layoff environment, you would be selected for layoff. Are there any other questions I could answer for you?”

Script for Remaining Employee Meetings

In general, it’s better to bring about “group closure” when there are layoffs or terminations. It gives employees a chance to express their concerns publicly and hear directly from you what occurred. This not only minimizes concern relating to employees’ own job security but also diminishes the rumor mill.

Following is a sample script to help you after the RIF occurs:

“I wanted to call you all into a meeting to follow up regarding the layoffs that took place earlier today in our department. As you may know, two members of our department have been laid off. The company has provided the affected employees with a severance package and is working with them through this transition.

“Of course, no guarantees of job security can be given, but as far as we understand, there aren’t any other planned layoffs in our department at this time. I wanted to let you all know to allay any fears you might have about your own job security right now.

“We wish those laid off well, and we have treated them with the respect and dignity they deserve. I know I can count on your support in doing the same. I also want to remind you that if you get any reference-checking phone calls from prospective employers or headhunters, those calls are to be referred to me. I will in turn pass them along to human resources as per company policy. Note that the laid-off employees have been given copies of their last three performance evaluations, and they’re free to share those with prospective employers to demonstrate their strengths and areas for professional development.

“If there are no other questions, I thank you all for coming. I appreciate your patience and understanding, and I look forward to moving beyond this difficult period.”

Written Documentation Caveats

Line managers often are asked to select individuals for layoffs based on certain criteria. For example, if you are asked to eliminate 12 people from a 15-person department, you may be asked to justify your decision in terms of whom to retain and whom to lay off. When that's the case, it's not uncommon to create a comparison group evaluation form that highlights performance reviews, oral or written disciplinary communications, attendance records, tenure, experience prior to joining your company, education and technical skills or certifications.

Such documents are meant to encourage an objective evaluation process, but in case of a class-action discrimination lawsuit, the documents become subject to subpoena in the discovery process. One way to lessen the chances (there's no guarantee) of having this documentation subpoenaed is to designate the documentation as attorney-client privileged. Your in-house or outside counsel will recommend that you write at the top of each evaluation page: "Privileged and Confidential: Prepared at the Request of (attorney's name)."

The legal rules and guidelines of the attorney-client privilege go beyond the scope of this article. Just be sure to check with counsel first before drafting any documents relating to a layoff. More importantly, don't write freely with little regard to the fact that your notes may be blown up in front of a jury to demonstrate unlawful motives on management's part.

The goal of any layoff is to treat employees with dignity and respect. The key way to achieve this is to communicate openly and honestly with those laid off and with those who survive and assume the remaining job responsibilities.

Paul Falcone is director of employment and development at Paramount Pictures in Hollywood, Calif. He is the author of four books published by AMACOM, including The Hiring and Firing Question and Answer Book (2001), 101 Sample Write-Ups for Documenting Employee Performance Problems: A Guide to Progressive Discipline and Termination (1999) and 96 Great Interview Questions to Ask Before You Hire (1997). This article represents the views of the author solely as an individual and not in any other capacity.

Terminology (added by HR4VR)

- **Reduction in Force (RIF)** – a company permanently reduces its workforce. An employee would not be eligible for rehire at a later date.
- **Furlough** – is similar to a lay off because it's temporary and tied to budget. Meaning, employees could be rehired in days, weeks, or months contingent upon company financial health.
- **Layoff** – the term is tossed around so much that it has lost its true definition. A layoff is a temporary separation from payroll. An employee is laid off because there is not enough work for them to perform. The employer believes the condition will change and intends to recall the employee when work again becomes available.