

Managing survivor guilt post restructure – free event

Guest speaker: Alex Wilson, Group Human Resources Director for BT

March 2009

BPP recently hosted a free event to deliberate managing survivor guilt post restructure, with guest speaker: Alex Wilson, Group Human Resources Director for BT. A topic for today's climate, and one the audience were interested to hear Alex's comments.

Summary of Alex's presentation:

Fundamentally Alex does not believe in the premise of survivor guilt post restructure, he believes it to be a myth and a revenue stream created by consultants that want to give advice, on what you should not have needed in the first place. He thinks the term is patronising to the people who remain post restructure. He does have another view that it can be very real but regards survivor guilt more as a failure of significant change management capability within an organisation. Alex compared managing survivor guilt post restructure, to treating the symptom rather than the cause.

Two groups: those that look for a job for life and then those with rapidly changing skills and multiple careers which is the way of the future. The next few generations, will work at four to five companies or will have four to five changes in their career, and will see change as away of life.



Change management activity rather than survivor guilt is a much stronger concept but Alex did think survivor guilt applies in the right circumstances such as to long severing single company employees.

Mourning syndrome, mourning the people that have gone, work buddies of 15-20 years, is not going to apply to this generation. Manifestation of survivor guilt will be real if you don't treat your staff in a certain way, then why should they treat your customer or what they are delivering to your market any differently. It will lead to a fall off in productivity, low morale, and you will have staff working to the clock and it will not be a good situation.

Although whatever change management is carried out, can result in exactly the same negative stuff, if you say we are going to move from A to C without explaining how or why, you will get the same situation hence we come back to change management. You need a consistency of treatment.

If you have not done the change management well then you might as well treat the resulting symptom as managing survivor guilt but Alex does not see this as guilt, but more as your staff are just hacked off because you carried out the change appallingly badly.

Organisations should make change transparent, where are you coming from and going to, make it honest, clearly understood and as you go through make sure each element of your population understands what it means for them. Communicate and keep on communicating, just because it becomes boring for you it does not mean it will for your audience.

Even if they don't like it, as long as you are honest and transparent that will go a long way to avoiding having to manage any survivor guilt. The three main points to remember are:

- Trust your employees
- Treat them with dignity
- You must be able to exhibit absolute fairness of thought and action

Visible leadership is the key during a time of uncertainty. People need to hear and understand what is happening, as fear thrives on uncertainty, so leaders should go out there and talk about it, to make them understand the change programme being undertaken.

People have an infinite capability to handle bad news if you trust them and communicate with a degree of honesty and transparency, and that's why Alex does not buy into the concept of survivor guilt. If people think that they have been treated with dignity and fairness they have the capacity to handle bad news, even if it's for them.

If you look at the group that remain after restructure and downsizing the powerful pieces will be the communication, clarity, leadership, honesty, dignity and transparency.

Final comment from BPP:

Alex Wilson presented a very thought provoking and insightful talk on survivor guilt; the reason Alex's talk was so insightful is that he presented his own views on this area and encouraged his audience to think through theirs. Alex's views are topical, and he makes no apologies for them. His view that survivor guilt is just another "consultants" whim as a result of a poor change management programme is potentially controversial however he backed up his argument with clear strategic business understanding and HR knowledge. His presentation was an excellent example of an HR professional operating at the 'top of their game' and he clearly demonstrated his knowledge of the business drivers that force organisations to undertake change programme and then talked through how this can be done well. His arguments were substantiated to ensure that the organisation was never put at risk and was constantly looking after its people. This, surely, is how HR should operate in every organisation.

