

LIVING WITH LAYOFF (or, How To Wear A Pink Slip)

**By Ramah Commanday, Ph.D.
School Psychologist**

Editor's note: This article first appeared in the Spring 2004 issue of CASP Today. However, it is filled with practical advice that may be used by many California school psychologists today.

When I got my doctorate from the UC Berkeley school psychology program 10 years ago, I never imagined that my unique claim to fame would be Layoff Survival. But, facing my third layoff in three years, I think that I'm ready to publish.

How did it happen? Back in the confident 1992, I left a job where I had seniority--and a long commute--to take a job very close to home. And in the years that followed, in three different districts, The Budget Crisis became an annual Spring event, as regular as report cards.

The Budget Crisis seems to unfold in remarkably similar ways, every year and in every district. First, a form letter appears in every staff mailbox. It begins Dear Colleagues, and is signed by the superintendent. The letter starts with a statement of praise and gratitude for a job well done. Then it informs you that the district has just discovered a budget "shortfall" of X million dollars, that, well, can't really be explained right now. But, (the letter goes on), this is a Crisis that we share and we all have to turn off lights and use both sides of the paper. And, although the Administration will do all it can to keep all you wonderful employees employed, the deadline for layoff notices is March 15, and you'll probably get one. Everything, however, is under control and it's hoped you're not too upset.

After The Letter comes The Disappearance. You usually discover it on Monday morning. The teachers talk in hushed voices by the mailboxes: a high-ranking district administrator has disappeared over the weekend. The office is bare, the house is sold, the family is gone. North Dakota? Kandahar? The Federal Witness Program? All that remains is the name on the district letterhead -- because the district is too broke to print new stationery.

Shortly after The Disappearance, pink slips blanket the district like a new form of weather. You discover that pink slips aren't pink (someone in the lunch room always mentions that) and, adding inconvenience to insult to injury, the district makes you have to stand in line at the Post Office to pick it up -- a certified letter. Morale plummets at every school site and for the rest of the year, most conversations open with "So what are you going to do?" Not about the students, but about how to make a living next year. Channel 5 starts parking its big white news vans outside every school board meeting. You look for your colleagues on the evening news.

And you and your colleagues trudge together through the Stages of Grief: 1) "They can't possible let ME go..." 2) "Well, what if I go 60%, give up vision benefits and be the first to turn in all my MediCal forms?" 3) "!@#\$\$%!!" .." 4) The Volvo is packed; there are jobs in Utah.

A pink slip can rob you of seniority (few, if any districts, will credit you fully for past experience elsewhere). You will struggle with anger, grief, and helplessness in the tense months when no one knows what school boards and administrators will decide. Your life plans are suddenly on hold. You will feel that all decision-making power is out of your hands, and your already demanding job begins to feel impossible. Worse, you're not alone; the thicker the pink slips, the more pervasive the low morale.

As a survivor, I've learned some important -- and surprising -- lessons about the Layoff Experience. In fact, you are not helpless -- and not entirely at a disadvantage. Continuing to make decisions, think critically, and do your work, will never be more important.

Here are some tips:

1. Don't take it personally. This is about numbers: your years of seniority, your caseload, your district's financial position. Those who make layoff decisions think in terms of cutting positions, not people.
2. Don't "catastrophize." Speculation runs wild at times like this, and you can always imagine and focus on Worst Case Scenarios. It doesn't help to be a Pollyanna, either. Live in the present, and look for the facts. For a sense of proportion, read about other countries in the newspaper.
3. Focus on the work; not the job. This is extremely helpful in maintaining your professional identity and sense of meaning. By continuing to concentrate on your responsibilities as a school psychologist, you can also model this attitude to your colleagues. By encouraging teachers to keep their attention on the students, you can help reduce everyone's stress. Help teachers, and yourself, "compartmentalize" by creating opportunities to talk about the Budget Crisis outside of work hours, so that the focus of the school day can be on work. Write letters of recommendation for each other; get together after work. Your leadership in this direction will be appreciated and not forgotten.
4. Support teachers and parents in supporting students. The Crisis is traumatic for students, too. Preoccupied teachers, flying rumors, and anxiety about loss and school closures can all affect students' behaviors and productivity. Point this out. Be ready to help teachers discuss facts and deal with rumors in the classroom. Help parents, teachers and administrators understand the ways that these stressors can affect children, and help them stay aware of fantasies that children may attach to staff changes or school closures.
5. Finish your work. Complete all of your assessments, and get closure with the students you have been working with. Try to find out who is most likely to take your caseload, and take the time to discuss the ongoing cases. Set aside the matters that must be dealt with immediately when school begins, put it in one file, and make sure that file is passed to your successor. Also make sure that all confidential material is where it belongs and case files are purged of any personal notes that you don't want passed along.
6. Stay informed. In a Budget Crisis, news can break daily. Go to all the meetings: school board meetings, faculty meetings, union meetings, psychologists' meetings. Read the local papers and visit the local web sites. Listen to the lunchroom buzz, but try to verify critical facts with the sources themselves, or as close to them as you can get.
7. Don't give up. A pink slip doesn't mean that that you're powerless. Decide how much you want to stay in that district. Can't stand the thought of leaving? Be patient and wait. Very often, many staff members who receive pink slips are reinstated by September, once the Budget Crisis dust has settled. In addition, the Budget Crisis usually inspires many retirement decisions and resignations. Even if your position has been cut, new positions often open in the district that might be right for you.
8. Have you decided to leave the district? Network. Go to CASP events. Tell all of your colleagues that you're looking for a job, call old grad school friends,

- supervisors, principals, etc. Get your favorite colleagues to write you letters of recommendation. Keep EDJoin and the CASP web site on your "favorites" list of web sites and check them often.
9. Take good care of yourself. Eat well. Sleep enough. Go to movies. Get enough exercise and do fun things with friends. Remember that chocolate has important antioxidants.
 10. Understand that layoff can actually be a blessing in disguise. Certainly layoff involves real grieving, real anxiety, and often, real financial loss. But I discovered that layoffs also force change that can lead to real growth. By working in so many different communities and in so many different assignments, I've gained broader professional experience -- and a greater network of valued colleagues -- than I ever could have gotten working in any one district.

In the past few challenging years, I look back and actually feel privileged to have worked in four very different communities and a rich array of programs for all disabilities and age groups. I've learned about meeting the unique needs of schools in a military community, a demanding university town, a close-knit but crisis-prone suburb, a city with a majority of low income and immigrant families. My caseload has ranged from preschoolers to the adult disabled, the severely disabled to the highly gifted. My caseload has included the children of the wealthy and the children of the homeless, and all in between. I have been able to collaborate with non-public programs all over northern California, community agencies and private professionals in three different SELPAs. Each job has had its own challenges and, in the process of meeting those challenges as a new employee, I've learned that I actually can "hit the ground running" in a new assignment -- learn the names, ask the questions and pick up where my predecessor left off.

Of course I hope that the next assignment will be in a district with the financial stability to keep me and my colleagues employed. And I hope that school psychologists in every California district will continue to have the courage, dedication, skill and resilience to demonstrate that we are not extras, but necessities. Hang in there.

Ramah Commanday, Ph.D., had her last job with the Vallejo Unified School District which, because of budget problems, is expected to soon be taken over by the state.