

# How do you Talk to the Staff who've been Stood Down

It's not easy, but there are helpful do's and don'ts to bear in mind.

The pandemic has been a monumental challenge for Australian businesses. To survive, many have had to overhaul business models, make wholesale redundancies or redistribute staff. In some cases, entire industries have had to stand down employees until the government relaxes restrictions entirely and the world resumes a more regular commercial reality. In those situations, employees have consistently looked to their managers for guidance, honesty, empathy as well as up-to-date information on the status of their employment. For managers, these are difficult conversations to hold. Not only because of the topic, but because it can be hard to know how a staff member is going to react to any given news. Confrontingly, these conversations cannot be avoided, however with the right preparation and knowledge, you can have the key skills needed to conduct these conversations with the professionalism required.

## WHAT TO EXPECT

When informing a member of staff that their job role is not going to be required for some time, you are likely to get a range of different reactions:

**Shock:** This is a totally expected initial reaction. But shock can linger. Even though their situation has remained unchanged for a while, some people may still react to news with some element of shock and dismay. They could be shocked with how long the predicament is lasting and may have expected the conversation to be different. They could be confused as to why their job

still isn't available, or instantly uncertain as to whether they will ever be able to fulfil their previous role again. If someone is demonstrating these signs, it's important to clarify with them that they have fully understood the message. Don't be afraid of using silence to allow the person time to comprehend what has been said and ensure they have all the information they need about the situation.

**Anger:** The ongoing frustration of not being able to go back to work can be hard for some people to deal with. Sometimes, these frustrations boil over into anger and aggressiveness. When dealing with this reaction, the temptation is to become argumentative or defensive yourself. However, try to avoid this because none of these responses will diffuse the situation - or help the employee. Instead, attempt to remain calm and listen to the person's issues. Sometimes staff just need to vent. And, given the circumstance, that's more than reasonable. Eventually some constructive questions will come, where you can provide helpful answers. But take your time, don't rush the conversation. Also, don't take someone else's anger and aggression personally - it's a difficult time for them and they often have no one else to vent frustrations to.



**Constructive/realistic:** At the opposite end of the scale, some people will listen to your message and accept the reality. They are likely to ask you questions and seek solutions to their predicament in a calm and measured manner. In response, it's helpful to listen and provide them with as many options as you can. Keep an eye on people who seem to be 'too calm' or 'too accepting' as there may be more going on for them than they are prepared to show.



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## HOW DO YOU TALK TO THE STAFF WHO'VE BEEN STOOD DOWN

**Denial/control:** Similarly, some people react calmly to the news, but avoid asking questions, or appear to downplay the situation, or even shut-down. This can be a red flag. Suppressing their emotions could lead them to becoming extremely distraught down the track, and not asking constructive questions about the situation can leave them with poor knowledge of what to do and how to cope.

### WHAT SHOULD YOU SAY

Of course, you want to be as transparent and realistic as possible. But, at the same time, you also want to offer hope that the role might return in the not-so-distant future when and only if this is a realistic possibility. If it's not, you must not create false hope as that can be ultimately more destructive. It's a fine balance, but one that must be struck if you are to deal with the situation properly and avoid potential future confrontations.

**DO:** Prepare for the meeting well. Know exactly what you're going to say to this person and how you are going to deliver it. Take control and be aware that you may get a variety of responses.

**DO:** Explain that this continues to be a business decision in response to the pandemic. It is not personal.

**DO:** Keep the meeting or phone conversation relatively short. 10 to 15 minutes should be plenty of time to explain the situation unless they need to vent or debrief which may require a longer call and some patient listening and empathic affirmation.

**DO:** Offer alternatives and provide examples of what other people have done in their situation. Tap into any past experiences they may have had going through something similar. This is major asset to them if they have overcome a similar experience.

**DO:** Remind your employee of the benefits the company may still provide them. This can include EAP services, which can offer



both practical and psychological support. Some organisations have peer-support and other internal support mechanisms that are available at times like this.

**DO:** Schedule a future meeting when you can talk again. Smaller more frequent check-ins and meetings can work well for most people. It also gives you a chance to assess their coping and mental state over time.

**DO:** Provide some hope that their job will become available again in the future – but only if this is a genuine possibility. Manage expectations very carefully around this implied promise.

**DON'T:** Give exact dates for when the role will be available again, unless you are sure as this can be new trigger for a further decline in mental health and erosion of trust.

**DON'T:** Give too much information about your own job security or position at the company. It can't be about you. If you do, this gives the employee an opportunity to compare their situation to yours, which can foster resentment especially if you have ongoing employment.

**DON'T:** Make the conversation too casual. Try to avoid 'cringey' icebreakers and overly personal questions. Remember, this is a tough business conversation and should be treated as such - any personal workplace friendships should be briefly put aside. You can still be warm and empathic but be disciplined.

**DON'T:** Get emotional yourself — whether that's angry, sad or frustrated. Your job is to provide meaningful and constructive advice while appropriately conveying the business's message. If emotion does come up, work with it, don't apologise for it, and get back to the conversation at hand. Some emotion can convey empathy: too much can make the situation more confusing or unhelpful.



### FIND OUT MORE

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