

# Using Solution-Focused Applications for Transitional Coping of Workplace Survivors

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*Solution-focused applications are proposed to assist survivor employees to return to workplace homeostasis after co-workers voluntarily or involuntarily leave the organization. A model for transitional coping is presented as well as a potential case study illustrating the application of the model. Implications for the theory, practice, and research of solution-focused techniques and for human resource development are considered.*

**Keywords:** Workforce Reduction, Solution-Focused, Employee Coping Strategies

## Literature Review

### *Research on effects on organizations of voluntary and involuntary leaves of remaining employees*

With changes in technology, global competitiveness, workforce composition, and organizational change involving mergers and rightsizing, the management literature has seen a great deal of research on employee reduction and its organizational consequences since the 1980s (Armstrong-Stassen, 1994). Subsequently, there is extensive research on coping at the workplace, which has primarily focused on how employees deal with the loss of their job after lay-off or termination. Several researchers speculated that layoff survivors may react similarly to workforce reduction compared to those who lose their jobs (Leana & Feldman, 1992; Doherty, Bank, & Vinnicombe, 1996). Although the impact of downsizing on its remaining workforce is detrimental (Brockner, 1988; Cascio, 1993) and determines the organization's survival in the long term (Armstrong-Stassen, 1994) we still know very little about coping strategies of the layoff survivors. Because the successful charting of organizations through change relies on managing the remaining employees (Doherty et al., 1996), it is important that managers and HR professionals consider the psychological effects of staff reduction. Such effects can include a sense of loss of control, hostility, a tendency to want fault or blame, shock, disbelief, betrayal, work overload from shifted responsibilities (Phelan, Schwartz, & Bromet, 1991), which can lead to burnout (Whigham-Desir, 1993), animosity towards management and concern about co-workers (Doherty et al., 1996). Robinson (1995) found that when employees believed their employer had violated their psychological contract, their trust in their employer declined (Mishra, Spreitzer, & Mishra, 1998) and so did their satisfaction with and commitment to the organization.

Lack of attention to matters like those can lead to a reduction in staff that compromises the work effectiveness of the organization by reducing the dedication of surviving employees (Pemberton & Davidhizar, 1998), decreased motivation (Doherty et al., 1996), lower morale (Doherty et al, 1996; Ramsey, 1995), guilt and fear about job security (Doherty et al., 1996; Harshbarger, 1987), which in turn can affect professional performance (Ramsey, 1995; Clements, DeRanieri, Fay-Hillier, & Henry, 2003; Armstrong-Stassen, 1998). Johnson and Insvik (1997) even spoke of depression in the workplace, a disease that impairs thousands of workers of their will and capability to work and costs employers billions of dollars in sick leave, medical expenses, in addition to counseling, medications, and production losses (Breuer, 1995). Employee assistance program professions rank depression as one of the top five problems reported by employees (Anderson, 1993). Many employees may in fact suppress grief responses, fearing punishment or reprisal for disrupted work patterns. Such suppression is potentially more disruptive and destructive (Bendersky-Sacks, Clements, DeRanieri, Klinck-Krentel, & Fay-Hillier, 2000; Denenberg & Braveman, 1999). Also, silence contributes to disenfranchised grief, grief that people experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported (Doka, 1984). Grief is disenfranchised when the loss, the relationship, or the individual who grieves is not socially recognized, which is typically the case at the workplace. Becker (1973, 1975) theorized that human culture and organizations are

mechanisms by which we deny human loss and assume our immortality. Menzies (1960) saw organizations as a defense against anxiety. Such unconscious processes can lead to the avoidance of bereaved persons at work, with the consequence of disenfranchised grief (Hazen, 2003).

Understanding the dynamics related to loss can accelerate the recovery process and promote restoration of workforce normalcy for employees and organizations (Clements et al., 2003). Overall, many organizations continue to pursue strategies and practices that are short-term and organizationally biased but which provide little support to the surviving employee. This is essential to managers and administrators who must maintain ongoing productivity despite disruption, while promoting adaptive coping for their employees.

#### *Coping Strategies*

The coping strategies typically needed by employees for dealing with the chaos of organizational change (Bridges, 1988; Leana, Feldman, & Tan, 1998) fall into two general dimensions: control-oriented coping and escape/avoidance coping (Latack, 1986). Control coping consists of actions and cognitive reappraisals that are proactive whereas escape coping consists of actions and cognitive reappraisals that involve escapist and avoidance strategies. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) named those two dimensions problem- and emotion-focused coping. Those using problem-focused coping methods are found to cope more effectively than those using emotion-focused methods (Havlovic, Bouthillette, & van der Wal, 1998).

#### *What has been done and implemented in organizations to alleviate those problems*

Considerable financial resource is often allocated to provide personal counseling, job search, skills development, and support to ensure the smooth passage of employees out of the organization. Most employers who have undertaken comprehensive programs assert that restoring employees to health almost always results in a more productive workforce and a healthier bottom line (Johnson & Indvik, 1997). In Maryland, the National Institute of Mental Health and the Washington Business Group teamed up to develop a \$75 kit designed to train employee assistance professionals and HR managers on how to deal with workplace depression. The kit teaches managers how to recognize depression, provides guidance on avoiding common mistakes, and recommends effective steps to help depressed workers seek treatment and get back to their job (Gordon, Hequet, Lee, & Picard, 1996). Outplacement programs to assist terminated employees cope with job loss have increased significantly since the 1980s (Tomasko, 1987). However, few organizations have developed analogous programs to help remaining employees cope with their reactions to a workforce reduction. This paper proposes a model for transitional coping of workplace survivors. The model is based on theories generated from solution-focused applications.

### **Psychotherapy at the workplace and applying solution-focused therapy techniques**

The utility of human resources to optimize employee motivation within organizations aptly yield the highest responses with a stress mastery model that comprehensively addresses human support needs that are context driven and help when inevitable adjustments and changes occur with both the employee and organization (Kohler & Munz, 2006). Implementing a complete stress management program that is both personalized and practical is proposed. This may in fact increase productivity and decrease absenteeism (Munz, Kohler, & Greenberg, 2001).

### **The Practice of Solution-Focused Applications**

Solution-focused Therapy is a methodology, which originates from the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee (de Shazer, 1985; 1988; 1994). It is a relatively recent development and approach to psychological treatment, which offers an alternative to most other therapies, which focus on clients' problems. It is a paradigm shift from the traditional focus on problem formation and problem resolution, which underlies most approaches since Freud (Trepper, Dolan, McCollum, & Nelson, 2006). As such, solution focused applications collaboratively seek solutions with clients within a structured framework of brief implementation focusing on the client's present and future, capitalizing on the strengths and resources of the client and significant others around them. Solution Focused Applications (SFA) originated in family treatment and has since proved beneficial when working with individuals, couples and in groups, within a range of mental health settings, including primary care, community, day care and in-patient settings. Current literature reports the use of SFA in specialist psychological services including crisis intervention, health promotion and child and adolescent mental health services, providing therapy for people with depression, anxiety, substance misuse and eating disorders. Because it is based on resiliency and clients' own previous solutions and exceptions to their own problems, it is applicable to many difficulties faced by clients and has been applied to virtually every client group and many problems seen by clinicians. These include family treatment (e.g., Campbell, 1999; McCollum & Trepper, 2001), couple treatment (e.g., Hoyt & Berg, 1998; Murray & Murray, 2004), treatment of sexual abuse (Dolan, 1991), treatment of substance abuse (e.g., Berg and Miller, 1992; de Shazer

& Isebaert, 2003), treatment of schizophrenia (Eakes, Walsh, Markowski, Cain, & Swanson, 1997), migraine headache (Guterman, Mecias, & Ainbinder, 2005), and eating disorders (Jacob, 2002). The SBA approach has been applied beyond traditional practice to include interventions in social service agencies (Pichot & Dolan, 2003) for child protection, (Turnell & Edwards, 1999), educational settings and model schools (Franklin & Streeter, 2004; Rhodes & Ajmal, 1995; Ajmal & Rees, 2001), and business systems (Berg & Cauffman, 2002; Mortensen, 2002).

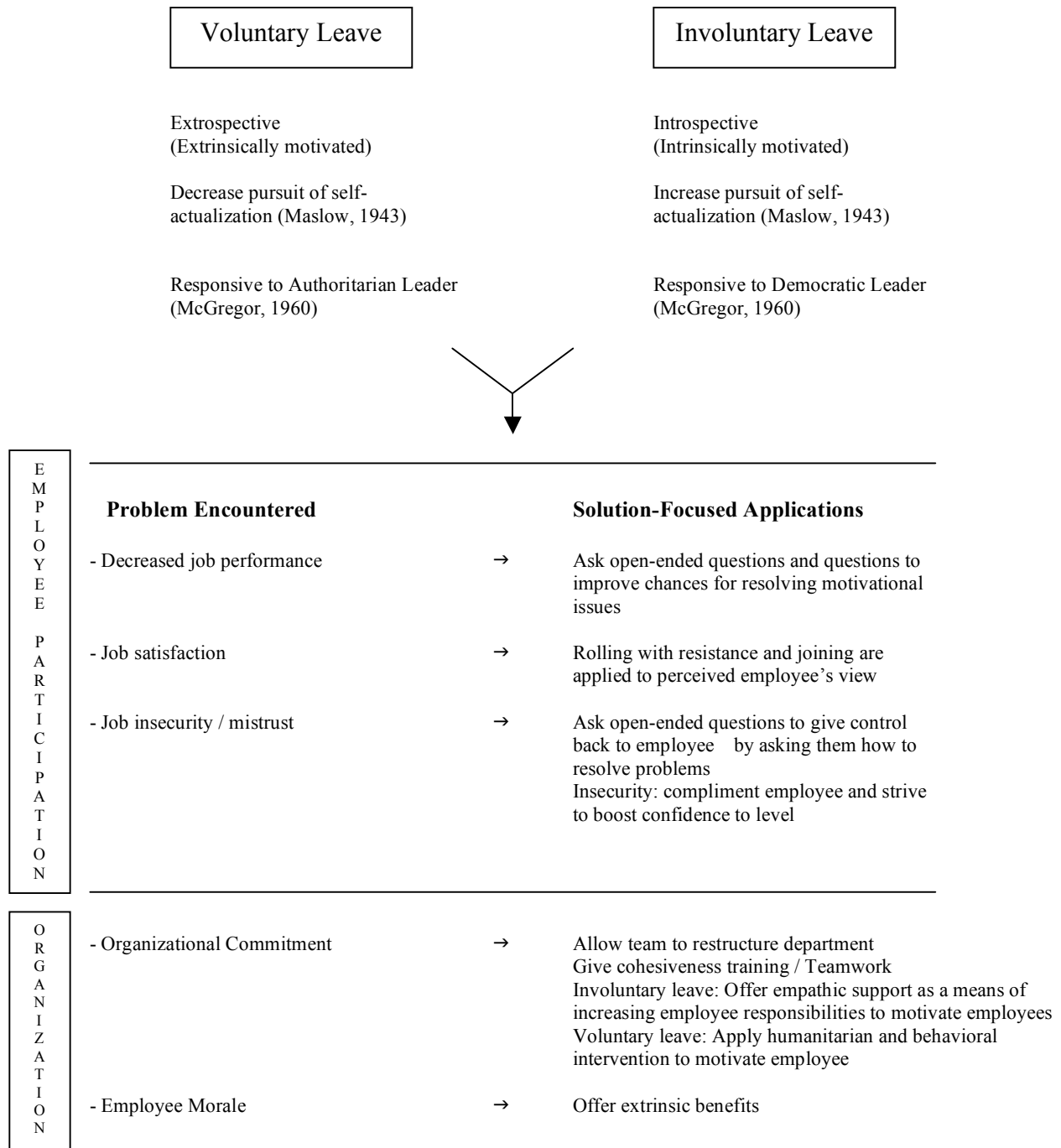


Figure 1. Model of Transitional Coping of Workplace Survivors

The proposed model suggests that surviving employees are affected differently whether employees have left the organization in a voluntary fashion (quitting) or involuntarily (firing, layoff, death).

#### *Voluntary leave*

McGregor's (1960) work was based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. He groups Maslow's hierarchy into lower order needs (Theory X, a pessimistic view of employees) and higher order needs (Theory Y, which assumes that employees are self-motivated, ambitious, and willing to accept more responsibilities). He believes that managers may use either a set of needs in order to motivate employees. However, better results may be obtained by meeting the Theory Y needs.

#### *Involuntary leave*

According to Barrick and Zimmerman (2005), it is more likely for employees to remain with an organization if they have attained a sense of job security and more actual organizational supportive relations.

#### *Organizational Commitment*

Successful organizational survivors reach out to the world and connect in community with others (Bumbaugh, 1998). Small group work encourages participants to identify with others and to realize that they are not alone. Providing teamwork training is predictive to increase group cohesion.

Also, community meetings after the loss of coworkers can promote mitigation of traumatic stress, potential acceleration of the recovery process, as well as facilitate a return to workforce effectiveness. Allowing employees to discuss how the loss has affected their concentration promotes a sense of caring and support by the organization (Clements et al., 2003). Healthy grief is not necessarily to forget the loss but for employees to put the loss into perspective in their own particular life history and to reinvest themselves in the ongoing daily activities of life (Clements & Henry, 2002).

#### *Employee morale and trust*

There are no simple solutions to rebuilding trust and morale, but Armstrong-Stassen's (1998) findings show that providing adequate organizational support and ensuring that immediate supervisors provide emotional and informational support are associated with increased morale and trust. They further propose that an organization can provide support by showing that it values employees' contribution.

### **Case Study**

The model proposes that surviving employees to those who have voluntarily left a corporation are more likely to be extrospective-extrinsically motivated, decrease their pursuits toward self-actualization (Maslow, 1943), and are more responsive to authoritarian leaders. The recommended organizational structure for employee survivors remaining in an organization following voluntary leave is to follow McGregor's Theory Y leadership style (McGregor, 1960). These individuals are more likely to thrive in a highly structured but supportive atmosphere. Some suggestions under these circumstances might be to set up different committees to inspire group cohesiveness and empathy as well as recognize accomplishments and create a need within the organization by offering employee survivors promotions and incentives to let them know that they remain a valuable asset to the organization. For example: P, a valued employee has just left a fortune 1,000 company. Subsequently, employees spend about one to five hours everyday externally focused socializing and/or thinking about what that person is doing, whether she is satisfied with the decision, if she is going to return for a visit, will she attend a luncheon and rekindle co-worker relationships, if anyone has heard from her, who is she going to select to call, and if she will let the employees know about new hire positions where she is working. This may become a serious problem. Indeed, if the employer does not respond empathically and let the employees know that they are valued, more may leave. Nurturing the needs of employees with supportive structure and accolades and empowering them with committee leadership should identify employees. as valuable to the bigger picture

Employees that have involuntarily left a corporation are more likely to be introspective-intrinsically motivated, increase their pursuits toward self-actualization (Maslow, 1943), and are more responsive to Democratic leaders. These individuals are apt to be more responsive to McGregor's Theory X leadership style (McGregor, 1960). These individuals are more likely to thrive when less emphasis is placed on a highly structured atmosphere. Some suggestions under these circumstances might be to leave these employees alone as their stress levels are probably rising because of a silent unbalanced mood that pervades the organization's employees in thinking that they may be the next to go. Setting up different committees will probably not inspire group cohesiveness but rather create competition and misunderstanding. Recognizing accomplishments when employee morale is low for the majority will likely result in resentment. The better solution is to give the employee survivors time and space to prove that they are a valuable asset to the corporation. For example: A, a less valued employee has been laid-off from a fortune 1,000 company. Subsequently, employees spend about one to five hours everyday internally focused, tense, and

uneasy thinking about who will be next, when is the next person going to be laid-off, how are “they” making the decisions, “if I don’t shape-up I will be shipped out”, what will happen if I lose my job, and maybe I should seriously start thinking about looking for another job. Evidently, this is not a productive use of employee time either. A plausible response in this situation is to leave these employees alone, let them decide for themselves what separates the boys and girls from the men and women. Employees under these conditions will probably compete. There is no need for the employer to get in the middle of more competition. When employee stressors rise to this level, it might be advisable for superiors to implement motivational interviewing strategies. By letting the employees work out their differences, they are in a prime position to take on responsibility for their own behavior. Therefore, it might be advisable to step aside to avoid a lawsuit. Psychologically, projecting inadequacies on each other is probably high. This could lead to misunderstandings and resentment, which could seriously impact employee morale. In this scenario, it might be best to let the employees prove their worth to the corporation.

### **Conclusion, implications for HRD, and suggestions for future research**

The proposed model makes an important contribution to the organizational survivor literature by addressing how HRD professionals can help survivors cope with loss by using techniques inspired by solution-focused applications. Such techniques are brief and have been very successful in the counseling literature in dealing with patient loss, between others. It is expected that they would also be helpful in dealing with survivors’ perception of workforce reduction, co-worker loss, job insecurity, job satisfaction, and morale. How organizational survivors cope with loss has important implications for organizational-relevant outcomes. Maxim and Mackavey (2005) suggest that human resource professionals provide training to managers in ways to manage grieving employees, including handling workflow expectations and providing regular short meetings to assess work related progress. In addition to providing tools for managers and HRD professionals, this paper is a starting point for further investigation on the application of solution-focused techniques at the workplace.

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