

# The Human Side of Turnarounds

David M. Patt, CAE

Association Executive Management

"You've done a great job but your position is being eliminated," are words you may hear in a turnaround situation. The association has been forced to downsize to save itself and has no choice but to let some good people go.

Here are some things you can do to try to avoid being one of those people:

1. Assess the organizational situation. Are budgeted positions not being filled? Are vendors paid late? Are lower quality materials being used in the office and in programs? Are senior managers directed to cut their budgets? Does the latest financial statement show the association in debt?

If any of these are true, the organization may be in turnaround mode and will likely implement drastic cuts.

2. Assess YOUR situation. Is your position or department essential to the association (be very objective about this)? Can it be eliminated or merged with another? Is your expertise the same as that of the Executive Director?

If any of these are true, you may be expendable.

3. Understand the Executive Director's position. The ED is in command and has the support of the Board. Your survival is dependent upon the decisions of the ED, who may not discuss them with staff. If across-the-board cuts are deemed sufficient, senior staff are probably safe.

However, if the turnaround requires deeper cuts, the ED will be looking for positions and or departments that can be eliminated or merged. Longevity may be a minus, too, as the Executive Director may want to "clean house" and bring in a new team, one that has no loyalties to the past.

4. Save yourself. If you think you may lose your job, start applying for new positions immediately. Don't tell co-workers and never tell your supervisor. If it is known you are job hunting, your position may be eliminated sooner than you expected.

5. If you choose to stay, just keep doing your job well. Don't ask if your position or department is in jeopardy. That will show you have stepped outside of your responsibilities and care more about yourself than about the association. Don't ask the ED how you can help, either. That, too, is not your job. If you are identified with the old Executive Director and that person is fired, you may be next. If that person is new, you may be seen as a brown noser. Any of these scenarios could result in the loss of your job.

6. Look for subtle ways to promote the value of your position (not of you, personally). Do you, or your department, produce the association's largest profit center? Recruit the largest number of new members? Generate the most publicity? Embed those facts in a routine communication, so you get the message across without being a braggart.

7. Ask if there's something else you can do. If you are laid off, ask if there is something else you can do for the association (but recognize there may not be). Your willingness to accept a part-time, temporary, or contractual position during the turnaround will demonstrate your professionalism, loyalty, and adaptability. It will also give the Executive Director an opportunity to keep a productive employee.

8. Request a reference or contact person at another association. It can go a long way toward helping you land another position. Even a hard-nosed Executive Director will probably want to do whatever is possible to help you.

9. Leave on good terms. You may want to be hired back if the turnaround succeeds, and you certainly want a good reference in any event. So, don't criticize anybody when you leave (even if they deserve criticism). Don't plead for your job - it won't do any good and will make you look unprofessional. Don't accuse the association of discrimination. If you feel you were treated unfairly, consult an attorney and adhere to legal advice.

Associations don't want to downsize, they want to grow. But sometimes downsizing is a necessary first step. So, do what you can to avoid being a victim of that strategy.