



## A Dignified Exit: How to Say Goodbye to Your Leaders

Letting go of an executive is never an easy decision. From notifying the individual and properly delivering the news to answering the right questions and exhibiting empathy, exiting a key team member is a delicate process. [Patricia Polischuk](#) provides a clear roadmap on how to ensure this difficult conversation is conducted as smoothly as possible.

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The business decision has been made and although the executive's performance has been strong—they've managed critical projects, they're respected and trusted, and they've been with the company for many years—there's no longer a place in the new org structure for their skills.

What next? How do you exit a top performer without sending the wrong message to the remaining leaders and employees?

As a career coach, I've supported hundreds of executives who have lost their jobs without cause. Being introduced to someone after they've been told, "Your employment has been terminated," I have experienced firsthand how hundreds of companies manage this difficult conversation. FYI, there is no good way to tell someone they've lost their job, but there are ways that can make a bad situation even worse.

In my experience, 90% of the time employees are in shock after hearing the news, even if they were expecting it. But nothing can cause an exit meeting to escalate from shock to anger faster than poor planning.

The following tips can help ensure a difficult conversation is conducted as smoothly as possible:

**1. Involve HR:** Involving HR in the process can help you avoid costly mistakes and reputational damage. Their critical role includes:

- preparing the message, managing the logistics, coaching the manager and attending the meeting.
- ensuring that the severance package is fair and consistent with corporate policies as well as compliant with jurisdictional employment legislation.
- reviewing key details of the severance package including the amount and duration of the final support, benefits coverage, additional resources provided, as well as the time allotted to review the package and return a signed release waiver.

**2. Determine the best person to deliver the message:** Usually it's the direct manager but, if that relationship is strained, the message may be better received if delivered by someone else.

**3. Decide on a location and date:** Will the executive be in the office or working remotely? Would they prefer to be told the news in person or would they be upset having commuted into the office only to be told they are no longer employed? When setting the date and time, avoid personal events including vacation, anniversaries, birthdays, or other significant milestones.

**4. Triple check the documentation:** Ensure that the executive's name is spelt correctly, dates are accurate and free from typos.

**5. Keep the message short and concise:** The person should know within the first thirty seconds of the meeting that their employment has been terminated and when it becomes effective – immediately or on a specific date. It can appear to go against the theme of respect and dignity but the reasons for keeping this message brief are:

- the decision is final, the longer the manager stays in the room, the greater chance the executive may feel they have to challenge the decision.
- under stress, an exiting executive can react and say things they may regret later.

6. Keep it about them: It's normal for a manager to be nervous and it's okay to say that it was a difficult decision to make. However, as stressful as it's been for the manager preparing for this meeting, it's even harder on the leader who's hearing that they no longer have a job.

7. Thank them: It may seem insincere to recognize the employee's contributions when you are terminating their employment, but they have made an impact on the organization and should be acknowledged. This also reinforces the fact that the leader's employment has been terminated without cause.

8. Include a contact name: Make it clear in the severance letter, who they can contact if they have questions. Be flexible if they request a different contact.

9. Be prepared to answer two questions: The questions I am most frequently asked when I meet with the leader, other than why did this happen are:

- Will I be given a reference?
- What are you going to say to my team, the organization and/or my clients?

10. Put yourself in their shoes: Consider how you would like to be treated and supported if you were the person leaving the organization. Managers who keep this in mind, deliver the message and act in a manner that conveys respect and compassion.

## High-touch and seamless outplacement

Something to consider when planning a leader's exit, partnering with an experienced outplacement provider. Hearing the news that their employment has been terminated can be overwhelming for a leader. The role of the outplacement professional is to:

- Provide emotional support which may include coaching on how to explain what has happened to their spouse, children, family, and friends.
- Confirm the resources that are in place to assist them as they move forward.

- Address their immediate concerns and reiterate key information and dates in the severance package.
- Explain what happens next i.e., leaving the office, when their access to systems will be shut down, collecting company property (credit cards, office passes, keys, passwords).
- Arrange a follow up call or meeting to check in and see how the leader is doing, answer any questions, and suggest support options if they're struggling emotionally.

By taking the time to prepare for exit meetings you are ensuring that the message, actions, and support that you're providing are all aligned with your employer brand, and that senior employees are treated with respect and dignity as they exit the organization. Keep in mind, your remaining employees are often more concerned with how you offboard someone than how you onboard them.

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## Our Contributors

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