

MEMORANDUM FOR: All Section Leaders

THROUGH: {Name}  
Federal Coordinating Officer

FROM: {Name}, Equal Rights Officer

SUBJECT: Rightsizing and Release of Employees

FOR MANAGERS ONLY

As the workload reduces and fewer employees are required, managers often face difficult staffing decisions. Attached is a prevention-oriented document for managers which provides strategies to help prevent problems and possible equal rights complaints.

This operation is fortunate to have a strong team of section leaders; however, staffing decisions can often challenge the skills of the best and most experienced among us. Time spent now to prevent problems should serve us well as decisions are actually implemented.

Read this document carefully and if you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact the Equal Rights Officer at extension {}.

# **RIGHTSIZING AND RELEASE OF EMPLOYEES**

## A SUGGESTION SHEET FOR SECTION LEADERS AND OTHER MANAGERS

As the disaster recovery process moves into the final stage, there is a predictable reduction in the number of people needed to complete the required work. Along with this downsizing or “rightsizing” comes the potential for problems as important personnel decisions are made. The information below was compiled to help section leaders and other FEMA managers avoid such potential problems and effectively manage the rightsizing process.

**DENIAL OF TEMPORARY STATUS** - In a short period of time, temporary disaster work can appear to be a permanent job. The longer people work at a disaster site, the easier it becomes to deny the reality that the job is temporary. Some denial is positive because people tend to be more invested in their work and remain committed to their peers, section and the Agency. Denial allows them to develop the attachments that are the foundation for people to be motivated to do a good job; however, the negative side of denial is that when people are released, they may feel unappreciated and rejected, even betrayed and angry. It may not be logical, but such feelings may be very real to the person released.

**PREPARATION** – Managers can reduce the likelihood of problems or complaints during the rightsizing process by preparing employees for release from the day they arrive and effectively communicating with staff well in advance of decisions being made. Early in the disaster, establish an overall plan for addressing rightsizing issues in your section.

1. Determine in advance how you will identify your personnel needs (i.e., number of people and skills needed).
2. Determine how you will decide which employees leave and which employees stay as rightsizing progresses (i.e., Specific skills needed? Performance? Out of Region? Availability? Experience? PFT to DAE to LH? Other?). Use criteria that are as objective as possible. Performance (preferably documented) should always be a consideration.
3. Determine how you will communicate decisions to individuals regarding their release. Generally, a personal conversation is preferred by the employee.
4. Set a tentative timetable for reviewing the workload and staff needs.  
Although not always possible, try to notify employees at least a week in advance of their expected departure date. (Easier in recovery phase than response.)
5. Commit to documenting any employee performance that is not acceptable to you. If such documentation doesn't cause the employee's performance to improve, it can be very beneficial when making subsequent staffing decisions. Also commit to documenting such performance and discussing it with the employee when it occurs rather than waiting to the end of the employee's deployment.

RIGHTSIZING SUGGESTIONS

Page Two

**SET THE STAGE** - There are other strategies you can use to help minimize problems during rightsizing.

1. Use naturally occurring opportunities to emphasize the temporary nature of disaster work. Help staff focus on planning for the future rather than trying to maintain the past or present.
2. Announce arrivals and departures of personnel routinely (i.e., in meetings, newsletters, etc.) so there are no surprises.
3. Provide information to your staff regularly on related topics such as preparing for release, change, transition, endings, etc. This can be developed on your own or obtained from other FEMA sources (i.e., Stress Manager, Equal Rights Officer, Finance & Administration section, etc.).
4. Ask a Stress Manager to do a seminar emphasizing the need to plan for release as an overall theme.
5. Recognize the contributions of employees being released if circumstances permit. Encourage your staff to comment about what they valued or enjoyed about the person or people leaving and the overall disaster experience.
6. Discuss openly how everyone will be leaving and how difficult saying goodbye can be for many employees (even for those with the “going home smile”).

**ANALYZE YOUR DECISIONS** – There are some steps you can take prior to announcing rightsizing and release decisions that can help you remain objective and confident.

1. Before you announce rightsizing decisions, analyze them in advance to insure that you are being fair and impartial in your decisions and that you are not targeting or unfairly reducing an unusual number of individuals from any particular group (i.e., race, gender, age, disability, religion, etc.).
2. Review your decisions to be sure there is no perception of retaliation or reprisal toward any employee who you know previously filed a complaint with the Office of Equal Rights. When in doubt, talk with your Equal Rights Officer,
3. Treat your employees in a similar manner unless their performance or behavior warrants (and be sure such performance or behavior is documented). Do not show favoritism to one employee over another. Treating employees differently for no apparent or valid reason undermines your ability to function as an effective manager and creates resentment and anger among members of your staff. Remember, maintaining objectivity in rightsizing and release decisions is the key.

As a manager you cannot control the perception others have of your decisions; however, recognizing that a decision may create a negative perception provides an opportunity to engage in other prevention strategies. For example, an appropriate decision could result in the release of a female, a racial minority group member, or an employee over forty years old. In this instance, you should review your criteria to assure objectivity was maintained and then determine how you can most effectively communicate the decision to reduce the likelihood of a perceived problem. When in doubt, talk with your Equal Rights Officer (ERO).

RIGHTSIZING SUGGESTIONS

Page Three

**TRY TO REDUCE ANXIETIES** – For virtually all employees, release means change, which can create anxiety. Some perceive it as loss or even rejection, which can heighten the anxiety. As a manager, you attempt to minimize that anxiety; however, some individuals will react negatively no matter how well prepared they are. The challenge for a manager is to provide opportunities for such employees to express their anxiety in appropriate ways.

1. Validate the legitimacy of employee concerns. People become very invested in their work and are often afraid the next person will not do as well or care as much. When an employee is not being replaced, there may be a perception that important work will go undone, or perhaps may even go unnoticed by the remaining staff. Validate concerns, but don't overdo it. If you validate the concerns too much, your comments may appear to insult the abilities of the staff who are remaining.
2. Be alert for signs of anxiety and/or stress in your staff and don't hesitate to refer individuals to the Stress Manager for one-on-one discussions as needed throughout the disaster.
3. Express thanks for previous efforts to employees who are leaving and give them permission (and an opportunity) to say goodbye. Individuals frequently develop friendships and support systems while working on a disaster and they need an opportunity to bring them to an appropriate end. Otherwise, releasing may be perceived only as losing.
4. Remind employees that change can cause anxiety and uncertainty and are normal reactions to the rightsizing process. Individuals often establish comfortable routines and they learn how to function in the existing environment. Release may mean going to a new disaster where the situation will be different; thus, creating anxiety. Release may also mean returning home, which can be a very happy time. However, returning home may also create some anxiety about how to fit back into the "normal" family and work routines and the changes that may have occurred there while away. Such unknowns create anxiety and uncertainty, which can lead to frustration and expressions of anger. As a supervisor, you can help employees understand that such anxiety is natural and help them respond in a more positive and productive manner.
5. Ask the Stress Manager to provide seminars specifically focused on preparing for and handling rightsizing and release. If seminars for the DFO staff are not available, perhaps the Stress Manager can hold a smaller session for just your section or meet one-on-one with some of your staff.
6. If they aren't already available, ask the Stress Manager to offer exit interviews to employees. It gives workers a safe place to express themselves and helps them close the experience and move on in a positive way. Such exit interviews are voluntary for employees.
7. Seek job placement assistance for local hires through the Finance & Administration section.  
For example, a session on how to become a DAE Reservist might be conducted. Also, seminars may be available through the local Job Service office on topics like resume writing and job placement or perhaps one-to-one guidance discussions can be made available through local agencies..

**RIGHTSIZING SUGGESTIONS**

Page Four

**AVOID CONFLICT AND UNPRODUCTIVE DEBATE** – As a manager, it is important that you prevent becoming embroiled in arguments over rightsizing and release issues that create even more anxiety. To that end, the following strategies are recommended.

1. Always remain “calm, cool and collected” in your discussions with employees; thus, demonstrating your respect for others even though there may be a difference of opinion regarding your decisions.
2. Be factual, straight forward, and clear about what you know and don’t know.
3. Don’t debate issues over which neither party has control and avoid being drawn into tangential issues which may also be upsetting the employee. Acknowledge the employee’s viewpoint without making a judgment whether it is right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate, etc..
4. When listening to employee concerns, listen attentively. When responding, use neutral statements like:
  - “Thank you for telling me what you think about this.”
  - “I’m sorry you feel this is unfair, but its real and we have to make it work.”
  - “I understand how you might see it that way.”
  - “I’m sorry you think this decision is personal, but it isn’t.”
  - “I know this information leaves several questions, but I will give you further information as soon as I learn about it.”.
5. Encourage workers to ask questions and check out rumors.
6. If a section is being heavily impacted by rightsizing, consider inviting the appropriate key management person to meet with staff to answer questions,
7. If an employee is taking out their anger on you or others, tell the individual clearly and specifically what they are doing that is not acceptable and that it must stop. Be assertive (firm but calm), and repeat the statement. Consider using statements such as:
  - “You have been rude and argumentative with your colleagues and it must stop immediately. If there is a problem, I will help you find a way to deal with it without taking it out on others.”
  - “Raising your voice to others is not acceptable and must stop. If you need a break to cool off, then take it, but you cannot continue to take your frustration out on others.”.
8. In the event an employee cannot control their frustration or anger, consult with the Stress Manager about other options. If there is no Stress Manager present, contact your immediate supervisor to determine how you might proceed.
9. Don’t forget to document inappropriate and/or unacceptable behavior or performance. You have a responsibility to both the employee and the Agency to provide an accurate performance review that hopefully will improve employee performance and establish a foundation for decisions about future deployments.
10. Always remain calm. Even if the employee’s conduct has made you frustrated and angry, remember that you’re the manager. You’re the one who is expected to remain calm in the face of adversity. Pause, breathe deeply, and think before you speak! Also, seek out colleagues who can assist you (i.e., the Stress Manager, the ERO, other managers, etc.).

**KEEP EMPLOYEES INFORMED** – Dealing with ambiguity is very difficult for most employees and can negatively affect their motivation and productivity. Keeping them informed is important and the following suggestions are recommended:

1. Share information about rightsizing, release, transfer, and rotation plans accurately, quickly and comprehensively. If points of the plan are unclear or still being developed, let your staff know. Generally, it's even productive to share tentative plans, but be certain to emphasize they are subject to change.
2. Let your staff hear rightsizing and release decisions from you first, not through the grapevine or rumor mill. This also means you as a manager will need to keep in touch with the key decision maker(s) overseeing your section and you will need to monitor your staff workload closely to keep abreast of your staffing needs. You can't inform your staff promptly if you aren't informed yourself.
3. If final decisions have not been made, share the timeline for making the decisions. Again, you can emphasize the timeline is subject to change, but providing the timeframe for decisions can help people deal with the ambiguity.
4. If tentative plans change, provide updated information to your employees as soon as possible. Not only does it help employees deal with the change, but it helps build trust in you as a manager.

**FINAL THOUGHTS** - As you proceed with downsizing and release of employees, it helps to keep everything in perspective. Don't get so overly focused on the details that you lose sight of the overall goals.

1. Communicate. Communicate. Communicate! Effective communication is every manager's greatest tool.
2. Be fair. Whatever decisions you make, fairness should be one of your goals..
3. Don't overdo it. An overreaction to normal stress and anxiety can create problems where none existed. Observe your staff carefully. Be a good listener. Be understanding and empathetic. Then use your best judgment to proceed, but don't overreact or you could become the creator of stress and anxiety instead of the person allaying it..
4. Don't forget those who remain. When trying to assist those who are leaving, it is easy to overlook the needs of those employees who stay. They often perceive themselves as the victims who must now do their own work plus the work everyone else did. Carefully review workloads and adjust as needed.
5. Don't hesitate to seek advice and counsel from your colleagues. You're not the first manager who has had to confront rightsizing and release issues and you won't be the last. You also aren't the only one confronting it right now. You have lots of company! Use the many resources around you and hopefully you and your staff will find the rightsizing and release process less difficult and a more natural and positive experience.

GOOD LUCK!