“The Executioners’ Song”: Listening to Downsizers Reflect on their Experiences

Barry Wright  
St. Francis Xavier University

Julian Barling  
Queen’s University

Abstract
Substantial research attention has been directed to the victims and survivors of layoffs; however, the downsizers themselves have escaped similar attention. We conducted in-depth interviews with 10 downsizers to try and understand what effects, if any, are associated with laying others off. Several themes emerged consistently, suggesting that downsizing others is professionally demanding and leads to role overload, a search for meaning, social and organizational isolation, a decline in personal well-being, and decreased family functioning. Similarities and differences in the experiences of survivors and their executioners, and executioners and “jury members” are considered, and the question of why downsizers have not been studied previously is posed. We conclude by presenting an “outcome” model that describes the stages of this experience for downsizers, and we begin to identify strategies for ensuring downsizers’ organizational effectiveness and personal well-being, as well as a research agenda.

Résumé
Les chercheurs ont accordé beaucoup d’importance aux victimes et aux rescapés de mises à pied, sans porter toute-fois attention aux dirigeants responsables des compressions d’effectifs. C’est pourquoi nous avons interviewé dix individus ayant effectué des compressions menant au licenciement d’employés. Il s’agissait de savoir d’abord si ces individus avaient été affectés par le renvoi d’employés et, dans l’affirmative, d’indiquer en quoi ces réductions les avaient touchés. De ces entretiens se sont dégagées des constantes. Côté profession, nous avons noté chez le “downsizer,” premièrement, une surcharge de travail, puis un questionnement et, enfin, son isolement, à la fois social et organisationnel. Côté personnel, nous avons remarqué chez lui une qualité de vie déclinante de même qu’une vie familiale perturbée. Bref, nous avons voulu tenir compte de ce qu’ont en commun victime et «bourreau» et de ce qui sépare l’un de l’autre. Il nous importait de tenir compte également de ce qui lie et de ce qui éloigne le «bourreau» du «jury». En outre, nous nous sommes demandé pourquoi les chercheurs avaient négligé d’étudier les dirigeants qui effectuent des compressions. C’est ainsi que nous avons pu construire un modèle qui permet de décrire l’itinéraire d’un dirigeant dans cette situation. Il nous a été possible également de suggérer des stratégies susceptibles d’assurer au “downsizer” son efficacité organisationnelle et d’améliorer son bien-être personnel. Enfin, nous proposons un programme de recherches portant sur le “downsizer”, personnage jusqu’ici désigné par les chercheurs.

“The nature of bad news infects the teller.”  
(Anthony and Cleopatra, Act 1, Scene 2)

Downsizing is probably the most consequential organizational activity since the early 1980s. Across North America, large organizations, in a virtual rush to increase stock value and promote efficiency, have shed themselves of “excess” and “surplus” workers. In 1990, McDonnell Douglas laid off 17,000 employees, while in 1991, General Motors laid off 74,000. By 1993, layoffs in large organizations had grown in frequency and size: IBM laid off 60,000 employees; Sears, 50,000; Philip Morris, 14,000; and Boeing, 28,000. In 1994, Digital Equipment laid off 20,000 employees; Nynex, 16,000; Delta Airlines, 15,000; and GTE, 17,000. In 1995, the Chemical-Chase merger was followed by 12,000 layoffs.
Early indications suggest that this trend will continue. AT&T announced that it will lay off 40,000 employees over a 3-year period (Sloan, 1996; Uchitelle & Kleinfield, 1996), while Petrocan declared that they will be trimming their workforce by 11% in 1996 and 1997 (Jang, 1995). Public organizations fare no better: The Canadian government declared in early 1995 that it will layoff 40,000 federal employees over a 3-year period, and the Ontario government announced that it intends to downsize by approximately 20% (i.e., about 13,000 civil servants). Proponents of downsizing tactics argue that several benefits compel its continued use. These include the need to achieve lower overhead costs, a decline in bureaucracy, quicker decision-making, smoother communication, greater entrepreneurship, and an overall increase in profitability. However, research evidence and anecdotal testimony suggest that budget cuts and layoffs are important stressors in organizations, indicating that achieving increased profitability might be difficult at best (Bennett, 1991; Cascio, 1993).

Not surprisingly, there is a large literature addressing different aspects of downsizing. Beginning with the Great Depression (Jahoda, Lazersfeld, & Zeisel, 1933/1972; Komarovsky, 1940) and continuing unabated since then (Jahoda, 1982), the victims of downsizing have attracted considerable attention. Because of this research, much is known about the social, psychological, and medical effects of unemployment (Fryer & Payne, 1986). More recently, research has focused on the survivors (O’Neill & Lenn, 1995), with the result that the anger, anxieties, fears, and medical consequences of chronic job insecurity are now better understood, as are any effects on survivors’ job involvement (Brockner, Grover, Reed, & DeWitt, 1992; Cascio, 1993). There is even some research on “lame ducks,” those employees who know for certain they will lose their jobs in the foreseeable future, but who in the meantime have kept their jobs (Brockner et al., 1994).

One group that has failed to attract any systematic focus is the “executioners,” i.e., the “downsizers” themselves, those individuals who must plan and/or carry out the downsizing. There is some speculation about the organizational and personal consequences of conducting layoffs (Kets de Vries & Balazs, 1997; Smith, 1994); however, the lack of any systematic research focusing on this group of individuals may be short-sighted. If they are indeed negatively affected by being the bearers of bad news, they may be ill-equipped for the post-layoff organizational challenge. Just how well the leaders function soon after the layoffs is important for the long-term success of the organization (Cascio, 1993) because these are the people who will in most cases steer the organization through the downsizing and into the new environment, a journey characterized by anger, confusion, hostility, and hope (O’Neill & Lenn, 1995). Thus their continued psychological well-being could be critical to the success of the downsizing in the short term and the functioning of the organization in the medium and long terms.

Leaders have always encountered multiple organizational roles, conflicting demands, and hectic schedules. During the next decade, however, organizations seem destined to be dominated even more by reorganization, change, and disorder. On a personal level, downsizing leaders will increasingly confront the seemingly conflicting roles of executioner and visionary. Moreover, their roles are demanding because not only must they plan, develop, and implement the downsizing strategy, they are also required to market it to its victims and survivors and rationalize it to their own families and friends. It is during this implementation that leaders come face to face with the victims, making the layoff process both strategically and personally challenging. The extent to which these leaders and managers can maintain a sense of dignity, integrity, and purpose is critical.

It is the heightened effect of stress and the potentially debilitating effects of the downsizing that form the primary rationale underlying this study. Specifically, we examine the effects of planning and implementing a downsizing on the downsizers themselves.

Theoretical Framework

This research used a qualitative, grounded theory approach as a theoretical guide. Grounded theory was developed as a data-driven analytical method to interpret reality in social situations (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory should be seen as “a way of thinking and conceptualizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 275); this approach allows theory to be generated initially from the data as participant voices are heard, interpreted, and then developed substantively into theory. This aim is accomplished by systematically examining the data to find any dominant patterns of relationships, with these patterns then being compared to existing theory to see if there is a correlation between the two. If existing theories seem applicable, they may be accepted as presented or refined so that the new elaboration fits the data. Researchers using a grounded approach consequently expect to develop statements concerning the

Portions of this research were supported by grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Imperial Oil Foundation, and the School of Business, Queen’s University. Constructive comments from Kevin Kelloway are gratefully acknowledged. Address all correspondence to Barry Wright, School of Business Administration and Information Systems, St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, NS, Canada, B2W 2W5.

Revue canadienne des sciences de l’administration
Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences
15(4), 339-355
theoretical relationships between constructs. Thus grounded theory involves the continuous analysis of data as it is collected, coded, and categorized, in order to generate new theory or elaborate on existing theory. It is an inductive theory-discovery methodology that permits the researcher to develop theory based on the accounts of empirical observations.

A grounded approach to theory development has been actively used by the research community since its development. Recently, organizational researchers have used the theory to examine cooperative relationship-building (Browning, Beyer, & Shetler, 1995), entrepreneurship (Ropo & Hunt, 1995), total quality management (Wilson & Durant, 1994), and organizational change (Schor, Van Buskirk, & McGrath, 1994).

Method

Respondents and Procedures

Approximately 200 executives from across Canada attending a 3-week executive development program were asked if they had ever led a downsizing exercise and, if so, would they be willing to participate in this project. Twenty-five people indicated their willingness to be interviewed, and from this group, we selected a “purposeful sample” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of 8. These 8 were selected in order to obtain male and female perspectives from public- and private-sector organizations. In addition, to provide a measure of contrast, two more interviews were held with executives outside of this core group. A colleague familiar with our work gave us the respondents’ names; they were individually contacted, and both agreed to be interviewed for this research.

All respondents were from different organizations. The 10 volunteer respondents included both male and female leaders in private (e.g., the manufacturing, financial, and service sectors) and public (e.g., federal and provincial bodies and crown corporations) organizations who had been actively involved in planning and/or implementing a downsizing. All were Canadian senior managers at the time of the downsizing; their position titles included CEO, regional manager, deputy minister, product manager, and president.

Most of the respondents were given guidelines from superiors or from their boards of directors to reduce staff by a certain percentage of the total workforce. Others were directed to hold costs down, and they selected downsizing themselves as the cost-saving strategy. They had all personally informed members of their staffs who were being laid off. One respondent had personally laid off more than 100 employees. The minimum number of employees that any respondent reported laying off was five.

The downsizing approaches used varied, and decision-making criteria included the use of performance, seniority, functional responsibilities, and employee skills sets. All the respondents indicated that they shouldered part of the responsibility for the downsizing process and the decisions made.

All the interviews were conducted following the long interview model outlined by McCracken (1988), which comprises a four-step method of inquiry (see the Appendix for a discussion of the long interview format). In the first step, the interviewer gains an awareness of the relevant literature. The second step is primarily retrospective and is designed to foster insight into one’s own relevant experiences. The third step is the interview itself, during which participants get the opportunity to tell their stories. The fourth step involves analyzing the interview data; the goal of this step is to search for interpersonal consistencies and/or contradictions in an effort to uncover general themes. McCracken recommended that the respondents should be strangers to the interviewers, and that for most research 8 respondents is sufficient to gain access to the respondents’ cultural world. The long interview acknowledges that participant observation is not always possible; this approach allows the researcher access to respondents’ personal experiences without having to violate their privacy. During the course of these interviews, respondents were asked to describe the process that they (and their organization) used when a downsizing was implemented. We felt that by asking the respondents to describe the actual process, they would be better able to recall their own experience and respond with stronger reflections.

On average, the interviews lasted for 35 minutes. This length of time allowed us to cover the topic in ample depth. All interviews were fully transcribed, providing 170 pages of documentation. In analyzing these transcripts, we extracted a series of themes about the experiences common to respondents.

Results

In this section we will provide an illuminating picture of what it is like to be a downsizer by discussing various themes drawn from the interview texts. These themes are not presented in order of importance; each one is meaningful on its own. In discussing these themes, we will offer a sample of direct quotations from downizers, representative of their ideas and concerns. These quotes are submitted to provide the reader with an awareness of the depth of this experience as it has been lived by downizers.

We begin by providing evidence that this experience has been “professionally demanding” for our respon-
dents. Then we offer five themes that tease out why this experience is so demanding; these themes are: “role overload”; “personal meaning”; “organizational and social isolation”; “personal well-being” and “family functioning.”

Professionally Demanding

All the respondents we interviewed described the downsizing exercise as very demanding professionally. Given that all had been involved in laying others off, we expected that the respondents would have found the task challenging, but the impact was more far-reaching. They spoke of how this experience changed their work and personal values and beliefs, their relationships with their staff, and even, as we will see later, their relationships with their families. What this meant to them is exemplified by the respondent who offered the following advice to others who may be considering undertaking an organizational downsizing:

“Do not underestimate how profoundly this will affect you personally. And it is better to seek counselling earlier than later. You will need it. Whether this is the counsel of friends, professionals, or assistants. This is something that can profoundly affect you. Many of your normal support systems fail. Friends and colleagues at work disappear very rapidly.”

Nor is this a short-lived phenomenon. The experience still troubles many of the downsizers we interviewed. One respondent described how, even 10 years after undertaking her first downsizing, the experience still haunted her:

“We put all, there were blackboards, so we put all the names on the boards, and we just sat there, and I can remember, it gave me the creeps, there was this stunned silence, and we felt like it was the Vietnam wall or something. We were that upset, all of us . . . . Saying, look what we are doing to all those people! Isn’t there any other way? Why are we doing this? It was horrible.”

It is also possible that downsizing others becomes even more difficult when it stands in stark contrast to accepted organizational culture, and some respondents identified practices within the organization that made the experience of downsizing even more challenging. One respondent, for example, remarked that the more participative one’s managerial style before the downsizing, the more difficult the process:

“My style is very much consensual, and it becomes more difficult because people in this atmosphere, no matter how well you communicate it, no matter how well you look after the people that are severed, some-

body has been severed and the people who remain are afraid.”

Similarly, downsizers also realized that employees would perhaps be more suspicious of “enlightened” management practices, particularly if these practices were used for the first time before or during the downsizing:

“If you are a believer in participative management or employee empowerment, or whatever buzz words you use, that somehow gets waived during the downsizing. Or any team building you’ve done over the years somehow gets dubious when there is going to be a downsizing . . . if they have bought that for the last 10 years, they’re certainly cautionary on those practices that you have put in over time.”

Finally, some respondents were also worried about the continued impact of the downsizing on their own careers and personal lives, and perhaps saw that the skills associated with downsizing are not necessarily the same as those that will be required to initiate and sustain organizational renewal and rejuvenation:

“My personal—and it’s not scientific—my personal bent is that they [the downsizers] are all looking over their shoulders, their productivity is way down, and they don’t have the ability or energy to do the coaching that’s needed to get the staff’s productivity up again.”

“We may even have to start to take people like me out, and I recognize that. We may have to look inwards and say, this guy has been downsizing for 10 years, now we have to start building, is he really the person we want then?”

To summarize, respondents indicated that leading an organizational downsizing was professionally and personally demanding; most respondents described it as the most difficult task that they had performed in their professional lives. They revealed that, as a result of downsizing others, they had experienced powerful, long-lasting emotions, that employees questioned their integrity, and that they now worried about the future. It was apparent that this experience had a profound and lasting effect upon them.

Laying others off, therefore, is professionally demanding. In many cases, it requires individuals to engage in activities on behalf of the organization that may contradict its implicit culture as well as their personal values and self-image. In addition, these activities are often ones for which these individuals have received little or no training. Exacerbating the situation is the contradictory message sent by companies that have engaged in positive management practices in the past (e.g., open communication, participative decision-making, or team building), for layoffs leave the surviving employees per-
happily more sceptical and cynical (Brockner, Tyler, & Cooper-Schneider, 1992).

Research on role stressors, including ambiguity, overload, and conflict, might be useful in understanding the process at work for downsizers (Jackson & Schuler, 1985). Role stressors are antecedent conditions within one's job or the organization that require adaptive responses on the part of the employee (Beehr & Newman, 1978). There are two possible reasons why downsizers experience role stress. First, they are expected to undertake activities that are in direct conflict with the conventional management wisdom of growing organizations (Cameron, Freeman, & Mishra, 1993). Their downsizing actions contravene this growth image, which serves to create personal tension between one's actions and one's beliefs about what being a leader means. Hints of this conflict become apparent when practicing leaders use euphemisms like "right-sizing," "growth in reverse," "streamlining," or "resizing" to substitute for the harsher term of downsizing. Second, respondents expressed concern about their personal futures. They wondered if they still had a future with their organization: if others could be laid off, so could they. They were worried that they might not be perceived as the type of individual who could lead the organization after the downsizing. Respondents knew how fragile a career with their firm was, for they had seen many careers end.

From this starting point, we then examined the specific themes that made this experience so professionally demanding.

Theme 1: Role Overload

Respondents consistently told us that the biggest burden for them during and following the downsizing was a substantial increase in their workload. Workloads expanded for several reasons, including a decrease in the number of people doing the same amount of work. Respondents told us that they now had more people reporting directly to them and were responsible for broader portfolios. They felt that they were being pulled in many different directions and therefore had to work harder to justify the layoffs after the event.

"I find that I start a thousand things and don't complete them. They are always with you. It's like a puzzle, but sometimes you can't find all the pieces ... I am getting used to the idea that [working] 60 hours a week is now normal."

"We worked long hours. We were there—fortunately I had no children, I had a husband and he stuck by me through the whole mess, but there were many nights I worked until 11:30 or 12:00."

"I'd say that in some ways my in-office work time is probably higher than it used to be. You expand the number of hours that you work. Because I now have so many direct reports, I have weekly meetings with my staff. That alone makes for a fair chunk of work time commitment, and other things that I do."

Mostly, respondents were aware of the effects of the increased workloads that they were experiencing.

"I'm a very close family person, and I give them all of the time I can so when you try to balance that as well with what is happening here ... I work about an average of 13 hours each day. So I'm putting in long hours at my family's expense."

In contrast, in some cases respondents were horrified to realize just how overloaded and distracted they had been.

"When I came back from this 2 years of hell and really looked at my house and started to do things like clean . . . I couldn't believe some of the stuff that hadn't got done. Where was I? Like this took 5 minutes to do, why did I never have 5 minutes?"

One respondent described how he felt that he must work longer hours in an attempt to justify psychologically that the individuals who had been terminated were indeed valuable. This respondent felt that he owed it to the people whom he had laid off to ensure that all their work continued to get done.

"You need to change the time you commit to the job for two reasons. Number one because there is now just as much [to do] and fewer people to do it, but number two is that psychologically you have to . . . the feeling is that you owe it to the people you let go to ensure that all their jobs get done."

Lastly, it is worth noting that the increased work overload is not confined to executives in the private sector. The phenomenon exists in the public sector as well.

"Well, the work time for most of the executives in the government [is] close to 12-hour days now."

Role overload centres on the increased burdens that downsizers bear both during and following a downsizing. Some respondents described that they knew just how overloaded they were, while others only realized in retrospect how overwhelmed they had been by the downsizing. In addition to working longer hours and having expanded duties, downsizers also shouldered the responsibility for getting others through this difficult time. It would appear that downsizers find their jobs more demanding due to the increased hours they are working and the larger portfolios they are managing.

Our interviews show that downsizers have enlarged their own work responsibilities as a result of the downsizing strategy. This is consistent with recent data from Revue canadienne des sciences de l'administration Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences 15(4), 339-355

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
other sources (Angus Reid, 1995; Hancock & Cowley, 1995). Reports suggest that as a result of downsizing employees in the United States are doing 1.3 times as much work as they were a few years ago, working more overtime, and taking less of their annual vacation leave and allowable paid absence. The situation in Canada is no different. A poll conducted in December 1995 revealed that 63% of adults employed on a part-time or full-time basis report having to take on significant additional demands at work, yet only 16% have received any additional compensation (Angus Reid, 1995).

Due to the increase in workload, downsizers are potentially suffering from role overload. Within any organization there is a set of behaviours that an individual is expected to accomplish. When work expectations exceed what is reasonable and/or possible to accomplish, role overload occurs (Bechir, 1995). The consequences of role overload are well documented; for example, it has been found to foster job dissatisfaction, fatigue, and low job involvement (Bechir, Walsh, & Taber, 1976); interfere with family functioning (Stewart & Baring, 1996); and produce withdrawal behaviour at home (Reppetti, 1989). Accordingly, we should be concerned about the quantitative overload that downsizers experience. As important, however, is the question of qualitative overload. Are the downsizers receiving the resources, support, and latitude to enable them to cope with increased demands? This is critical, given theoretical formulations suggesting that increased workloads are not experienced as stressful if individuals have some degree of control or latitude over their workload and sufficient support (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Thus, an exploration of the theory that examines role overload would be helpful in developing a theoretical and practical understanding of this experience for downsizers.

Theme 2: Personal Meaning: Searching for the Differences and Similarities

"This process has changed my values."

"Why are we doing this? It was horrible."

"I'll never work for anyone again because of that. Absolutely never. . . . I'll never trust anybody. I'll never work for corporate Canada again."

Given the effects of downsizing others on respondents' professional lives and their resulting work overload, it is not surprising that a common theme seemed to be a search for some meaning for the downsizings. Perhaps downsizers need to be able to interpret the downsizing in as positive manner as possible so as to be able to maintain a sense of integrity and purpose. After analyzing the respondents' accounts, we believe that several factors characterize this search for meaning.

When we asked the respondents to describe the downsizings they were actively involved in, we noted a number of procedural contrasts. These contrasts hold a key to understanding the differences and similarities in the downsizing experiences of these individuals. It was evident that the downsizing approach used furnished each respondent with a personal reference perspective from which he or she reflected back upon the experience. This personal perspective, it is proposed, served to both define and give the downsizing experience meaning. These perceptual reference points are: "attribution of cause: guilt versus opportunity," "reflections on communication style: maintaining self-respect," and "confronting the victims' and survivors' emotions."

Attribution of cause: Guilt versus opportunity. Respondents recognized that the downsizing could have both negative and positive effects—positive when unproductive or counterproductive employees were laid off. At an extreme level, the layoffs could even be seen as a series of firings hidden under the cloak of a downsizing.

"I would say that everyone is trying to avoid a firing, per se, because firing means you've got to have a cause. Nobody is prepared to prove cause these days, and the performance review system is a paper trail so thin that you couldn't prove cause if you had to . . . There were a lot of performance issues buried in those wide-sweeping downsizes."

In such cases, downsizers might even be relieved that the organization had finally managed to accomplish a firing under the cloak of a layoff.

"Yes, and call it, you know, job reorganization, whatever, at least it saves you having to face what you didn't do. Lots of times afterwards when you went back and you [said], how come this person is on the list and did you realize they had long-term drug dependency problems and you say, oh ya, we knew that."

In contrast, downsizers also reflected on the fact that in many cases, highly productive employees were laid off due to no fault of their own, and this was stressful and provoked guilt in the downsizers.

"Number one that I can think of is to convince yourself why good people are going to be leaving. That is one of the most difficult parts, is to say why this guy? When you're downsizing half your current staff, or from 800 to 400 employees, some really good ones are going to leave."

"I had to take out another group of people in December; and it's emotionally draining because now what is happening is you get down to the meat—the fat is gone, and you're taking out the worst of the best."
"Yes, and she was good, and she knew she was good, and that's when it is difficult. And I had no alternative but to say 'yes, you're really, really good,' and I would hire that person back again if I had the opportunity."

An important issue to consider is whether downsizers are laying off valued employees or firing a nonperformer. However, most downsizers responded that performance was a difficult concept for them to come to terms with. Respondents indicated that often very thin representations of performance were used to make decisions about whom to layoff. Thus experiencing the two conflicting emotions of guilt versus opportunity simultaneously or moving between them frequently makes adjusting to and understanding the meaning of a downsizing that much more difficult.

Reactions to communication style: Maintaining self-respect. A second perceptual frame downsizers used to measure their effectiveness was the communication approach they applied. Downsizers expressed the need to be able to treat employees with dignity during the downsizing. They spoke of maintaining their own self-respect and developing trust through compassionate actions by ensuring that all of their dealings with their staff were seen as fair. In this regard, they emphasized that the method of informing laid-off employees was critical for their own integrity. Some downsizers reported that their approach was not as effective as it could and should have been, while others spoke highly of the approach they used in communicating the downsizing message.

“You do get emotional feedback from the survivors that you are a axeman.”

“What we did is we called everyone that was staying—and I can’t believe we did this, but I’ve heard it has been done before—to a meeting room downstairs. We told the two groups... you are going into a meeting in the morning, or you’re going to a meeting in the afternoon. The ones in the morning are the ones we kept... Of course, I mean like we did everything, and we might as well have just blown the whole building up... It would have been a whole lot easier than to do what we did.”

“I think we knew, morally, all of us, we shouldn’t be doing this... perhaps we shouldn’t be doing it that way.”

“It was horrible for them. The survivors are in the worst position, especially at that time, because they are asked to do more work for the same money, and they don’t trust you. I think they saw me coming in as a hired gun. They never trusted me. The people that were left, almost 100% of them, left the next year. It was a nightmare. I ended up leaving the company 2 years later.”

Despite the personal difficulties associated with downsizing others, respondents became worried when the downsizings became too easy; it did not fit well with their self-perceptions.

“As we got better at [downsizing], as we went and did more of this, it got to [the point where]... the person coming in for that last meeting [knew] exactly what we were going to talk about... We [had] had the discussion in the office, to the last one being done in a restaurant over dinner.”

“I have the belief that you do this job the best you can. Individuals should be treated fairly by the organization. I try to ensure that the decision process is fair and humanitarian. I also try to provide the individual with a comfort structure.”

When the downsizers believed that their communication strategy was appropriate, they reported less personal strain and tension. These respondents spoke of maintaining their staff’s trust and the respect of those who were laid off. Although the exercise was still difficult for them, they reported that maintaining open communication channels helped them.

“They begin to trust us. They [said] they understood what we were trying to do. Something that was fairly traumatic became, well... I would say that 80% of the people that got those letters actually thanked me. And I believe the secret to that is open communication.”

Thus downsizers reported that communication style and strategy were important parts of the experience. When it was perceived positively, they managed to maintain self-respect; when it was perceived negatively, they felt added distress. The same held true whether the respondents were interacting with the victims or with the survivors.

Confronting the victims’ and survivors’ emotions. Respondents indicated that they received instantaneous feedback from the victims about their emotional reactions to being laid off. In our sample, most of the respondents met individually with the staff whom they would lay off, although a few met with their employees in groups. Downsizers described a wide range of reactions from victims to the news that they had been laid off.

“I say over the 17 [that I have laid off], I think I’ve run the gamut of emotions... One expression of outright anger, personally directed right at me. Others angry with the company in that a commitment or, I guess, a contract between an individual and the company [had] been broken... I had expressions of gratitude, you know I saw it coming and now I’m glad it’s over and I can get on with my life. I guess the emotions were somewhere between anger and gratitude.”

“You see those people [who] are extremely angry, who are threatening to go back and do significant damage to either the employer or the person who
gave them the news. You see people who are in denial...they must have made a mistake, my name couldn’t have been on the list. A lot of people are just numb.”

“Just before Christmas I let some people go and holy Jesus they were devastated—they had no idea in the world that they were going to be let go.”

The victims’ responses are important because they strongly influence how the downsizer experiences the situation. The more confrontational the meetings are with terminated employees and the more explicit their emotions, the greater the stress on the downsizers and the greater their subsequent fear of physical retaliation (Barling, 1996).

Respondents also commented that they were aware of the impact that the downsizing had on survivors’ work attitudes and behaviours and emotional well-being.

“The guilt on the part of the survivors, the guilt and anguish for the managers who have to undertake the downsizing can absolutely cripple an organization.”

Their accounts also showed that they, in turn, were influenced by their staff’s reactions. Where they felt that the implementation had been flawed, they often recognized that their staff saw this too.

“You’re dealing with individuals’ lives and if you’ve sold them, let’s say they have bought into this thing from you, the leadership style, the team-building. If they have bought into that the last 10 years, they’re at best cautionary [of] those practices that you’ve put in over time. And it’s going to take time now to build that up again.”

“It basically kills your labour force, not just the 10 you are dealing with but the 100 that remain. Because everyone is looking over their shoulder, so your plan has to take that into consideration.”

Respondents spoke movingly about how being confronted by the victims’ and survivors’ emotions made the experience emotionally draining. It appeared that, no matter how well the downsizing was handled, it was a difficult experience for the downsizer.

Downsizers reported feeling a measure of guilt following the layoffs. Although downsizers’ guilt has not been extensively investigated, one study has found evidence that it exists. Kets de Vries and Balazs (1997) found that a pervasive sense of guilt was a common response pattern among downsizers following a layoff. Drawing from these findings, it would appear that guilt is a likely emotional outcome for downsizers.

The effect that guilt feelings have on downsizers is worth further examination. As executives are expected to maintain an orderly and generally cool exterior (Noer, 1993), it is likely that the tension between feeling guilty and trying to feel in control will produce emotional dissonance, the conflict between genuinely felt emotions and emotions required to be displayed in organizations (Middleton, 1989). As argued elsewhere (Morris & Feldman, 1996), emotional dissonance is likely to have a negative effect on individuals as efforts to manage and suppress these emotions come at a personal cost to downsizers. It would be useful to consider theories that examine emotion at work, such as emotional labour (Morris & Feldman) and the guilt process (Izard, 1991) in future examinations of this area.

Within the theme of confronting victims’ and survivors’ emotions, a variety of factors that served to give meaning to the downsizing experience were drawn together. Apparently, appropriate downsizing judgments and communication style centre on the perception of fairness. Downsizers seem to examine their actions to see whether they will be perceived as fair or just, and from this vantage point they reflect on the meaning of the experience.

This finding relates to a developing literature that has previously linked perceptions of fairness or justice and individual reactions to layoffs (Brockner, 1990; Brockner, Davy, & Carver, 1985; Davy, Kinicki, & Scheck, 1991). This line of research has established that survivors of downsizing examine the actions undertaken by management to see whether laid-off workers were treated fairly by the organization. It is important for survivors that the proper procedures were followed, caregiving assistance provided, adequate explanations given, and opportunities for input made available. This research shows that downsizers also appear to subscribe to this justice view. If they believed that the downsizing implementation did not go well because concerns about justice were not addressed, the demands placed upon them seemed to sharpen; conversely, addressing concerns about justice seemed to soften the personal consequences of leading a downsizing operation. We propose that perceptions of fairness and justice are important and may moderate the experience for downsizers.

Theme 3: Organizational and Social Isolation

Our respondents reported feeling extreme levels of isolation after the downsizing, both inside and outside the organization. Isolation within the organization probably stemmed from factors such as guilt; role overload, which limited the amount of time available for any social interactions; and survivors’ hostility and ambivalence. Downsizers seemed to recognize this as a natural consequence of their involvement.

“The job becomes very different. The chief executive in an organization... is much more personally isolated today even more than they were 10 years ago... No matter how well you do it, no matter how well

Revue canadienne des sciences de l’administration
Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences
15(4), 339-355

346
you communicate it, no matter how well you look after the people that are severed . . . the people who remain are afraid. So it tends to isolate whoever is at the top."

"I’m sort of a stand-alone; aside from our [regional] meetings, which occur every six weeks, I don’t talk to anyone very much."

"It’s very difficult to walk through the halls. I walk through, and I break up conversations. You know, oh, here comes X, and there’s a disappearance of six or seven people. People don’t say ‘Hi’ to me in the hallway. They’ve got their heads down. That’s tough."

To counter this intra-organizational isolation, downsizers turned to downsizers from other organizations or to downsizers from within their own management team for support.

"[I turned to] two or three friends, who are in similar positions, people who are isolated in their own organizations, but we can talk to each other. So that is what has changed in my life, is that you spend more time talking to people like that in other organizations."

"We had lunch together, we had coffee together in the morning, we talked at night, and we had dinner together at night. It just became my world. Believe me, there was nobody else to talk to because your staff wasn’t talking to you."

Respondents also noted that this isolation was not limited to the work situation. They also experienced some degree of social isolation, probably as a function of the work overload, the emotional overload, and the fact that in some cases they carried knowledge that could not be shared with anyone. Hence they felt it was just easier to isolate themselves.

"Before I’d go home at night and we had a . . . social life . . . then I’d go home at night and I’d get home at 8:30, 9:00 or 10:00 p.m., whatever, one, my husband started doing the grocery shopping, only because he was starving, and two, I’d go home and say, ‘Did anybody call?’ You know what his comment was every time I would say that after a while? ‘Why? We don’t have any friends left!’"

"We really struggled. I don’t want to get into too much detail, but there were some pretty serious problems that I had to deal with outside of work . . . you start to become more isolated and you start to lose balance in your personal life."

Downsizers described how the experience of downsizing served to isolate them from their staff, friends, and families. The factors that appeared to promote this isolation were an increase in job duties (with a corresponding increase in time commitment), a need to conceal information from their colleagues, and their attempts to further manage their emotions. Downsizers felt that it was always a little lonely at the top but, as a result of organizational downsizing, it was getting lonelier.

One of the consistent lessons from social and behavioural research in the 1980s is the importance and potentially positive role played by social support for personal well-being and functioning (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Despite this, the respondents in this study pointed to a tremendous decrease in social networks and support. What might have added to their negative experience of the downsizing is that they began to seek their support from individuals in similar situations, i.e., from other downsizers. When this occurs, the content of the discussions is invariably associated with downsizing. As is the case with unemployed individuals, however, this may be counterproductive (Jackson, 1988), as individuals in stressful situations such as this need to have access to less intense relationships and discussions.

**Theme 4: Personal Well-Being**

Respondents frequently and adamantly described the personal strains they experienced as a result of downsizing others. They spoke movingly about how emotionally draining this experience was and of the psychological, emotional, physical, and behavioural strains they had experienced. First, their comments about their own mental health are worth noting.

"I have struggled personally, it has been very difficult for me in my personal life, the family has suffered, and this has not been a time that has been a lot of fun."

"I took up smoking again . . . It was very tough, and it was very stressful. It grinds you down."

"So, it’s not that I needed to get away from that but . . . it’s work that can become very emotionally draining."

"I’m a bit of a different person in that when you go through three [downsizing] you’re perhaps a bit more callous than you were before."

"I know how painful this has been for me personally. I do not want this to happen again."

"It was more dark than light."

Undoubtedly, part of the personal strain was a function of the fear that the victims’ emotional reactions inspired. It would be difficult to participate in downsizing and remain unaware of the violence that has sometimes followed layoffs (Barling, 1996).

"It was very, very difficult, and she came back three different times planning on suing me, she’s already got a lawyer. [She] came in with her husband, I truly thought I was going to be physically abused."

"I think there is a lot of cynicism in the workplace. I think there is an incredible amount of stress and anger, and I think we’re going to see more violence in the workplace as a result."

Revue canadienne des sciences de l’administration
Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences
15(4), 339-355
Respondents also frequently voiced concern for their own physical health:

"Stress was so great earlier this year ... I didn't know what was happening. I ended up having to go to a doctor, and I had to take a mild sedative for about 5 months ... I'd wake up through the night, and I thought I was having a stroke or something. The doctor said no, it's acute stress. He said you'd better be careful, you're on the verge of burnout."

"I mean I can't believe I survived that. It was horrible, just horrible. I really got concerned about my health, a couple of times I thought I was going to have a stroke and you have to remember that I am 47 now. I was only 37 years old."

"That's when it started [after the downsizing disclosure], the sleep disruptions, numbness in my hands, numbness in my legs."

In other words, there appeared to be a link between being involved in leading a downsizing and decreased personal well-being. Some respondents voiced that after the downsizing they were taking mild sedatives in order to sleep; many complained of being physically exhausted from work; others mentioned that they were smoking and drinking more; most complained about feeling poorly. The respondents indicated that they felt there were personal health risks associated with being an executive, but undertaking layoffs had increased this risk.

Levinson (1981) suggested that when faced with excessive challenges, executives will first experience a "slow fizzle" condition, and then, if pressures do not change, they will reach a state of emotional burnout, as suggested by the respondents quoted above. He characterized the work circumstances of the pre-burnout condition as occurring when executives were exposed to risks of attack for doing their jobs, were faced with deep emotions, carried enormous burdens, and felt that no one really knew, let alone cared about, the price they were paying. Downsizers who continue to work long hours under unremitting pressure and are continually faced with conflicting interests run the risk of burnout.

Other research supports these findings; Kets de Vries and Balazs (1997) found that downsizers suffered decreased well-being following a downsizing. Respondents in their study reported feeling dizzy and anxious; some felt they were going insane; and many had disturbances in their sense of time and space. Some complained of suffering from insomnia; weight loss was common; and sexual interest decreased. Research on organizational survivors has found that they also experience negative health consequences following a layoff, such as headaches, stomach problems, increased drinking, and greater frequency of feeling unwell (Burke, 1984; Jick, 1979; Warr & Payne, 1983). Thus theories that examine health and well-being would be useful in developing a conceptual framework for the effects of laying others off.

**Theme 5: Family Functioning**

Lastly, but by no means least in terms of importance, respondents spoke about the difficulties the downsizing experience caused at home. There is a large literature showing that work and family interact; when work experiences are negative, family functioning can be affected. Given the stressful nature of laying others off, we expected to find some negative effects on family functioning. What we found was that the respondents themselves realized that their involvement in the downsizing had negative effects on their families.

"I try to keep the weekends free, but I don't have the energy to do all the things that we planned. I'm drained at the end of the week. So we don't go out on Friday nights."

"The last 4 years have been very tough on myself and my family."

Respondents were also aware that the downsizing had considerable effects on the families of the primary victims.

"Yes, this is a very, very stressful year for me anyway. Extremely stressful and mostly from the human side of things ... I had to write two letters this morning to individuals who were being uprooted ... It's stressful because you know you're impacting their lives. Not only that individual but their families are involved in the community, be it swimming or violin lessons or whatever they are into. It's been very difficult that way."

"You have stories of little kids who went out and tried to sell their toys to raise money and all that sort of stuff."

"You cannot hide from it. You have to work with that individual; you have to be as open as you can. You have to realize that his wife and family are going to think less of you."

This study found that stress brought on by the downsizing carried over into downsizers' family roles. Respondents said that after the layoffs they had less time to spend with their families, and even when they were home they had less energy and enthusiasm to do the things they used to do. Some felt that the layoffs had contributed to a relationship breakup.

Some work in this area has made a theoretical and practical link connecting work and family roles (Barling 1990; Kopelman, Greenhaus, & Connolly, 1983). Much has focussed on the inherent conflict between work and family roles and the relative costs associated with this pressure (e.g., family disruption, burnout, marital functioning, and life satisfaction). Work and family interact

Revue canadienne des sciences de l'administration
Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences
15(4), 339-355
either as spillover (where one context affects the other), in compensation (where the individual attempts to compensate in one environment for what is missing in the other), or independently (they operate in mutually exclusive terms). There is research supporting all three approaches, but most literature supports the spillover effect, with work experiences affecting family functioning (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Conley, 1991; Bartolome & Evans 1980). Thus, while there is in general a link between negative work experiences and family functioning, changing employment relations and changing organizational realities may be heightening some of the negative effects of work stress on the family as well as raising new questions (Barling & Sorensen, 1998), such as the unintended side effects of layoffs on other family members (Barling, DuPre, & Hepburn, 1996). This theme therefore suggests that theories dealing with work-family conflict may be useful in the development of a conceptual framework.

This study used interviews held with 10 downsizers in order to gain an understanding of what the post-decision effects have been for downsizers. The central focus was to uncover the collective experience of the respondents in the form of applicable and consistent themes. It is clear that this experience has a negative, long-term effect on downsizers.

Before definitive conclusions can be reached, it is critical to determine whether our interpretations of the interviews are accurate. To do this, we conducted a “member check” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), i.e., we attempted to get respondents’ comments on the validity of our interpretations. Of the 10 respondents, we made contact with 5. (Of the 5 we could not contact, 4 had left their organizations and no forwarding address was available to us, and 1 was on an extended vacation.) All 5 strongly supported our interpretations and made comments such as: “The paper covered the territory quite well,” “The paper captured the experience absolutely,” and “It was really amazing to see that others felt exactly the way I did.” Three of the 5 indicated that they had shared the paper with others who had undergone similar experiences, and that these people also supported our interpretations.

Discussion

This research, while answering the question “What lingering or long-term effects does the act of making a downsizing decision have on the downsizer?” found there were in fact several long-term effects that influenced downsizers in a similar and meaningful fashion. Several themes consistently emerged, suggesting that downsizing others is professionally demanding and leads to role overload, a search for meaning, social and organizational isolation, a decline in personal well-being, and conflict between work and family roles. It is evident that downsizers fundamentally change their work environment and personally suffer as a consequence.

As the scientific community is driven by a search for knowledge, primarily through uncovering cause and effect linkages, what do the findings uncovered in this study signify? To answer this question we provide a conceptual representation that models the experience of being a downsizer. This research has found that downsizers in a downsizing experience are connected by a shared story, in which conflict and strong emotions provide them with vivid and similar memories. We suggest

Revue canadienne des sciences de l'administration
Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences
12(4), 339-355
that implementing an organizational downsizing provides a similar outcome “script” for downsizers. Although it is recognized that the events prior to the downsizing are important (it is assumed that the pre-decision period is also a difficult and taxing time for downsizers), this model must have a starting point. As such, we limit this conceptual discussion to the events that occur as the downsizing decision is announced and in the periods that follow. It is suggested that the act of downsizing others involves three sequential “felt demand” steps that model the personal consequences experienced by downsizers following a layoff (see Figure 1).

In the first step, two outcomes affect the downsizer after being the bearer of bad news—guilt and role overload. After publicly conveying what they themselves have known privately for some time—that layoffs will occur in their organization—sonsizers come face-to-face with the individuals whose lives they are about to drastically change. They see the victims experiencing a gamut of emotions—anger, gratitude, numbness, devastation, denial, worry, and fear—and attempt to manage their own emotions. They feel they should get it over with quickly, be empathetic, but hastily move onto the next victim. Downsizers remember the experience vividly, as if it had happened recently—“Even to this day I can tell you names, yes, I can still see the faces.” They are profoundly affected by this experience, describing that they went on their own “emotional roller coaster” ride. At the end of this ride, one emotion weighs them down more than all others: guilt.

As described previously, downsizers feel guilty for several reasons. First, they feel guilty for laying off good performers—they recognize that many of their victims lost their jobs through no fault of their own. They also feel guilty for laying off poor performers—they realize this was a convenient way of handling difficult employees. They feel guilty because they know this decision affects not only the victims but their families as well—“You hear stories about little kids who went out and tried to sell their toys to raise money.” They also feel guilty because as leaders in the organization they wonder whether they should have been able to do something to change this outcome. Finally, downsizers feel guilty because they were on the “inside” of the decision process, and because of that they survived. Long after the downsizing, downsizers still feel guilty because they are often reminded of this disclosure experience just “walking through the halls at work.”

In this first step, downsizers go through a period that has been described as “more dark than light.” They are suffering. Tension evoked by the encounters introduces a personal fight or flight reflex. They want to distance themselves from the experience, and they begin to “run” (work harder). They run fast to escape the guilt they feel, hide from their emotions through their work, and/or escape the fear that they might be the next one to be let go. They work harder and longer than ever before. The pace of their work lives increases as “I find I start a thousand things, and I don’t complete them” or “I am getting used to the idea that [working] 60 hours a week is now normal.”

Their pace has quickened for several reasons. Downsizers feel they must complete everything that they did before, but now they have expanded duties. They have more people directly reporting to them, more tasks cross their desks, and demands for productivity increase even though resources have declined. Downsizers also feel that they owe it to those departed to continue to get their work done—“psychologically you have to . . . the feeling is that you owe it to the people you let go to ensure that all their jobs get done.” Long after the disclosure, downsizers are still running hard. They feel they must. The first step concludes at this point. Downsizers started the experience with their layoff announcements. Within a short period they have affected many lives: the victims and their families, the survivors, the lame ducks, and their own. All downsizers experience many things, but what they feel most is guilt for the course they have put others on and overburdened by the course they have selected for themselves.

The second step begins with the development of several new and interrelated outcome experiences. Downsizers start to experience conflict between their work and family roles as well as emotional exhaustion and a decrease in general well-being. Guilt and role overload, experienced in the first step, now play a guiding and causal role in the second; downsizers’ lingering guilt at work begins to spill over at home. Engaged by this negative emotional state—where guilt is experienced as tension, anxiety, depression, and remorse (Stein, 1969)—downsizers’ general outlook takes on a dark view. Family members, confronted by negativity, pessimism, and/or withdrawal, are initially confused; in time, however, they begin to challenge the downsizer’s actions. They seek resolution and understanding, but because of the downsizer’s emotional state he or she is not in an accommodating mood. Family relationships thus suffer. One downsizer stated, “I have gone through relationships partially because of this.”

Downsizers’ workloads—“60 hours a week,” “12-hour days,” “[getting] home at 8:30, 9:00, or 10:00” are hard on family relationships. This extra time at the office comes at the expense of time spent with family, and opportunities for families to interact decrease. Even if there is time available, often the downsizer is too drained physically to do anything; “I don’t have the energy to do all the things we planned.” This period is
very tough on the downsizer and his or her family. Because of lingering guilt and added work pressures, conflict develops between work and family roles.

In the second step, guilt feelings and role overload, now added to work-family conflict, result in emotional exhaustion. So far these individuals have faced deep emotions (guilt), carried enormous burdens (role overload), and have been left wondering if anyone cared about the price they were paying (work-family conflict). After the downsizing their lives are more problematic. Downsizers feel disheartened about their working and family worlds, and they feel extra pressure that weighs heavily on them. First they resisted, but now they are beginning to tire: feelings of exhaustion start to surface, and the extra burdens they carry become troublesome. Collectively, these burdens push them towards emotional exhaustion, which, if left unchecked, ultimately leads to burnout (Levinson, 1981).

Guilt feelings and role overload combine with work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion to create feelings of decreased well-being. Downsizers are reduced to taking mild sedatives to sleep, experience physical exhaustion from their work, resort to smoking and drinking more, and complain about feeling poorly. They are experiencing emotional and physical strains, and their well-being is suffering to a point where their health is at risk. At this point, downsizers continue to suffer from guilt and role overload, but now they are also feeling added pressures brought on by home and work conflict; they are suffering from emotional exhaustion and are encountering health strains. Their world has just become more complicated and more personally hazardous.

The third step begins with downsizers experiencing a sense of distance from others that, in turn, leads to a deep sense of isolation. The preceding steps have caused guilt, overload, work-family conflict, emotional exhaustion, and decreased well-being. These feelings now evoke in the downsizers a sense of detachment—they must separate themselves from the events at hand in order to be able to “hang on” psychologically, emotionally, and physically. Emotional exhaustion especially triggers a need for distance from others, away from the demands placed on them, all in an attempt to replenish themselves. A desire to be left alone surfaces, and downsizers remove themselves from centre stage whenever and however they can. They are also pushed away from this position by others. Either out of fear or malice, other workers tend to avoid downsizers: “I walk through [halls], and I break up conversations . . . people don’t say ‘Hi’ to me in the hallways.” Downsizers also find it difficult to confront survivors and thus retreat from interacting with them. They retreat into their offices and resort to discussing matters with other downsizers. Collectively, these actions all help to isolate them profession ally. Partially through their own choice and partially through others’ actions, work becomes a lonely place for downsizers.

Because of unresolved conflict, these individuals also tend to withdraw at home. Downsizers are tired; tired of the challenges at work and too tired to tackle problems at home. They are too tired to do much other than withdraw; in return, their closest companions respond in kind. Family members get on with their world and leave downsizers to stand on their own. Without support at home, they begin to experience an even deeper sense of social loneliness.

The third step is now complete. Downsizers have been involved in choosing a path for their organizations that involved laying others off. Unbeknownst to them, they have also chosen a path for themselves, with the tension created from laying others off circumscribing a personal outcome pattern.

However, one element not discussed, yet important in this model, is the concept of justice or fairness. There is one glimmer of hope: the downsizers’ own belief that they have been just throughout the layoff process. Have they done everything possible to be fair in their deliberations, behaviour, and deeds? Armed with the defence of fairness, downsizers may be able to deflect some of the distress associated with this experience. If they feel they have been just in their actions and treated everyone honestly and honourably, downsizers may be able to cope better with this destructive experience. The feeling that they have been fair could lessen the negative effect of the downsizing experience and change the way this pattern is played out.

This representation demonstrates that the themes uncovered in this research can be connected to tell a credible story about the collective experience of downsizers. We have suggested that laying others off is professionally demanding and produces guilt, role overload, work-family conflict, emotional exhaustion, decreased well-being, and loneliness. Similarities and differences in whether downsizers felt they acted fairly have also been highlighted. We propose that these factors combine to give this experience a common meaning for downsizers.

Conclusion

We believe that these interviews accurately capture the experience of downsizers. We argue that the stereotype of downsizers as “axemen,” “corporate killers” and “executioners” with “blood on their hands” (Sloan, 1996) simply does not do justice to the experience of the majority of downsizers. Instead, they are affected negatively by their activities. Engaging in downsizing is a
professionally demanding as well as socially and emotionally draining experience that affects not only the individuals concerned, but also their families.

If this is indeed the case, several questions emerge. First, what are the similarities and differences in the emotional experiences of downsizers and survivors? While both these groups are negatively affected, their specific experiences may differ; for example, survivors feel more anger, a greater desire to seek retribution, and some hope (O’Neill & Lenn, 1995), while this study has found that downsizers feel overloaded, guilty, and personally and professionally isolated.

Second, further research on downsizers would benefit from differentiating among those people who make the decisions about who gets laid off but are not the bearers of bad news themselves, those who bear the bad news but are not responsible for the decision, and those who are involved in both activities. The differences between these groups’ experiences and outcomes can be likened to those between members of a jury and executioners. While executioners might be able to attribute responsibility externally (“I was only following orders”), they still have to deliver the news personally and may therefore be more vulnerable to negative effects than jury members. In contrast, jury members’ higher levels of personal control of the situation would buffer them from the negative effects of stress (Barling & Kelloway, 1996). Further research should assess the similarities and differences in consequences for these groups.

Third, the question of how best to help downsizers to cope with the emotional consequences of downsizing needs to be addressed. The literature on how individuals cope with work stress suggests that social support generally acts as a significant buffer against work stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Winnubst & Schabracq, 1996). Participants in our study commented on the support they received from various sources both during and after the downsizing exercise. They were uniform in pointing out that they received no support from their companies. Instead, their primary source of support came from talking to people outside the organization who were also involved in laying off other people. This should not be surprising, given the social isolation they experienced within their organizations. Indeed, we found that during the member check process the respondents were both amazed and comforted by the knowledge that they were not alone, and that others had endured similar negative consequences. One respondent indicated that he wished he could have read the manuscript 3 years earlier when he was in the midst of the layoffs. Thus, organizations need to begin by acknowledging that the people charged with the responsibility of laying off other people need some form of assistance. We suspect that organizations and their members would benefit from formalized social support mechanisms such as training in how to conduct downsizings before they take place and support for downsizers and their families afterwards.

Fourth, if downsizing others is so emotionally draining, why have the survivors attracted so much research attention and the downsizers so little? Several factors might account for this anomaly. Perhaps the relatively smaller size of the downsizing group compared with that of the survivors could account for the lack of attention given to downsizers. We believe, however, that a more profound factor is at work, and that is the negative portrayal of downsizers. A recent cover story in Newsweek, for example, referred to downsizers as “corporate killers” (Sloan, 1996). Why would any compassionate person be concerned about, or sympathize with, “corporate killers,” “axemen,” or “executioners”? These stereotypes may have blinded us to the potential negative effects on the downsizers of downsizing others. Our interviews suggest that downsizing others is experienced as an intensely negative event. Thus, because these people suffer negative consequences and because their organizational functioning may well be impaired, it behooves organizations and researchers alike to address the issue of how downsizers’ well-being can be preserved and their organizational functioning enhanced. The neglect accorded to this group for so long can no longer be justified.

To conclude, we believe that we have captured our respondents’ experiences and reactions with as few of our own biases as possible, and our member check supports this statement. If we are indeed correct, then the message for organizations from this research is clear: Senior management continues to ignore downsizers to its detriment. The message to researchers is equally clear: Downsizers are worthy of empirical scrutiny because of the effects on both their well-being and their functioning within their organizations.

References


Barling, J., DuPre, K., & Hepburn, C.G. (1996). Effects of par-
ens’ job insecurity on children’s work attitudes and beliefs. Manuscript submitted for publication, School of Business, Queen’s University.


Revue canadienne des sciences de l’administration

Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences


Notes

1. These numbers reflect the announced layoffs and not necessarily the number of employees who will be or actually were laid off.

2. Within this group of 200, an additional 75 executives agreed to take part in a related study of the effects of downsizing, but they declined the invitation to be interviewed. Overall, more than half of the executive sample indicated that they had direct experience with downsizing.
Appendix

Review of the Long Interview Format

McCracken (1988) proposed a four-step method of inquiry. These steps were: (a) a review of analytical categories and interview design; (b) a review of cultural categories and interview design; (c) an interview procedure and the discovery of cultural categories; and (d) an interview analysis and the discovery of analytical categories. Each of these steps will be clarified in greater detail and then addressed as they relate to the current study.

Review of Analytical Categories and Interview Design

McCracken recommended that the researcher first become familiar with previous scholarship related to the research question. Although there is literature that proposes that this stage be omitted lest other work distorts the qualitative researcher's vision (cf. "bracketing" in phenomenology), we concur with McCracken that a review of related literature is necessary, as it connects the researcher with the research community. McCracken maintained that this connection helps stimulate necessary critical thought, makes the researcher aware of "personal conscious and not-so-conscious assumptions" (p. 31) and aids with the construction of the interview questionnaire. McCracken argued that this review will give the researcher the opportunity to create distance by allowing the research data to take issue with theory as it is presented in the field.

From this perspective, McCracken's approach is very similar to grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For McCracken, theory may be generated initially from the data, or, if existing or grounded theories seem appropriate to the area of exploration, they may be adapted or modified as data is critically played against them. The goal of this constant comparison is to create and/or elaborate on theory while explicitly linking the process to data generation.

Review of Cultural Categories and Interview Design

This second step is primarily introspective, as it is designed to foster researchers' awareness of their own experiences with the topic. The goal is to sharpen the self as an instrument of inquiry and develop an awareness of one's own biases. McCracken recognized that many researchers may have a long-lived familiarity with the research topic that might dull their critical ability. McCracken recommended that researchers undertake a personal examination of the associations and incidents that surround the issue for them. This step will assist the researcher in constructing the questionnaire as well as in seeking out relationships in the interview data.

The Interview Procedure and the Discovery of Cultural Categories

The key aspect of this step is the development of the interview questionnaire. As McCracken indicated, the first objective of the interview questionnaire is to allow respondents to tell their story in their own style. Questions should thus be framed in a general and nondirective manner and provide the opportunity for the respondent to open the conversation. Drawing from Spradley (1979), McCracken called these "grand-tour" questions, as they allow the respondent to specify much of the substance or perspective of the interview. McCracken also recommended that a series of "planned prompts" be asked at the end of a question category. These prompts, culled from the literature, should be held back until after the respondent has told their primary story.

Interview Analysis and the Discovery of Analytical Categories

McCracken recommended that a five-stage analysis process be followed in order to discover underlying analytical categories. The first stage in this process involves isolating each utterance or answer on its own and ignoring its relationship to other segments of the text. McCracken recommended that researchers seek the meaning held in each individual segment of text before trying to connect segments together. In the second stage, the researcher allows these utterances to develop and take on additional meaning by examining them in the context of the rest of the text and comparing them to previous research and the researcher's own cultural review. In the third stage, the researcher examines the connections between the second-stage observations with the focus of attention moving away from the transcript and towards the observations made by the researcher. The fourth stage involves drawing a number of general themes and patterns from the observations. The goal is to search for intertheme consistency or contradiction. In the final stage, these general themes and patterns are drawn together and then subjected to a final process of analysis. This process involves moving from the individual text to the collective observation, and from the dissected text to the reflected meaning. At this point, McCracken commented: "Fully possessed of general and abstract properties, the investigator's observations are now 'conclusions' and ready for academic presentation" (p. 46).