

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Surviving a Layoff \*

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Many of us are worried about employee layoffs in industry, like the one occurring at AT&T. We are usually more concerned with those who have been laid off. However, the remaining employees – the **survivors** – are also under stress. How these survivors cope affects their employability. It also affects the company's efforts to restructure and increase its productivity.



A recent study was done in Canada, when a telecommunications company had a layoff. Six weeks later, the survivors – 200 technical employees – were asked to complete a questionnaire during working hours. They ranged in age from 32-63 years. Three-quarters of them were male. To supplement questionnaire information a dozen technicians and ten supervisors were given in-depth interviews.

The study focused on the coping strategies of those who remained with the company. A **control strategy** focused on problem-solving. In contrast, an **escape strategy** focused on emotional reactions. Researchers wanted to know how each strategy affected the employees' commitment, job preference and turnover intention. The control strategy emphasizes dealing with the problems, while the escape strategy highlights avoidance responses.

Survivors who used control strategies to cope made more plans and set more goals. They were more committed to the organization. Their job performance was better, and they were less likely to think about leaving the organization. In contrast, those who emphasized escape tactics were more likely to distance themselves from the problem – ignoring or rejecting thoughts about the problem. Escape copers had more discouraging outcomes. Their job performance was poorer. They were more likely to leave the company.

Other variables influenced these strategies – having an optimistic outlook, a general sense of mastery, and social support. If they already have a personal sense of overall mastery, survivors are more likely to use a control strategy.

When any transition occurs, **supervisors' support of the workers** is a critical factor. Workers need to have supervisors who are willing to listen and provide both emotional and practical support. When this occurs, both job performance and commitment to the organization among the workers are higher. If companies want the commitment of their employees, it would help to train their supervisors to provide support for the workers.

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**If employees have a control strategy for coping,  
it helps them — and their company.**

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There are other recommendations that developed from the study of Canadian layoff survivors. Employees should be offered counseling to deal with stress management that emphasizes control-coping skills. When reductions do occur, the workers – both those laid-off and those retained – will benefit from developing control-coping skills. In the long run, having workers with these skills will benefit the company too.

However, there is a note of caution. The study was done on technicians – "*blue collar*" employees. We don't know if the same is true for "*white collar*" or management level employees. Research on "*white collar*" employees could be helpful. AT&T, are you listening?

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\* Adapted from "Transition at work – how layoff survivors cope," *The Menninger Letter*, September, 1995, pages 1 and 7.