The role of causal attributions in survivors’ emotional reactions to downsizing

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Abstract

Weiner’s (1986) theory of attribution was used for analyzing discrete emotions survivors of downsizing may experience as a function of perceived causes for survival. The study considered emotions not studied in previous research (e.g., pride) and their relation to organizational factors (e.g., OCB). Moreover, this analysis goes beyond previous research that studied broad affective constructs such as anxiety, by also considering positive emotions. Suggested understandings can advance research and facilitate better personal and organizational consequences of downsizing as these are reflected in HR and HRD policies and interventions.
The Role of Causal Attributions in Survivors’ Emotional Reactions to Downsizing

Companies experiencing low performance, financial losses or cash flow difficulties often implement a downsizing procedure. Downsizing can best be viewed as an organizational intervention aimed at improving organizational performance by reducing the workforce (Kozlowski, Chao, Smith, & Hedlund, 1993). Past research established that downsizing has a wide-ranging effect not only on the laid-off employees, but also on those remaining in the organization, i.e., the survivors. This research ascertained that downsizing has a strong impact on survivors’ affective lives (Burke & Leiter, 2000; Leana & Feldman, 1992; Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998; Paterson & Cary, 2002). The affect experienced by survivors as a consequence of downsizing is an important factor in the organization achieving what it aimed for in the first place when deciding to downsize (Sahdev, Vinnicombe & Tyson, 1999). Indeed, the way survivors feel about downsizing and the organization that implemented it, determines their attitudes toward the organization and their behavior in it following the action (Cascio, 1993; Noer, 1993). In particular, the likelihood that survivors would behave in ways that are conducive to the goals of the organization and engage in individual behavior that is discretionary (OCB) and promotes the effective functioning of the organization is to some extent dependent on the emotions that survivors experience following their survival. Accordingly, one of the most important challenges facing organizations that have downsized are ‘people’-oriented issues, which require HR interventions and support designed to enhance the chances that survivors’ emotions foster such reactions rather than discourage it (Cameron, 1994; Sahdev et al., 1999). Parts of such intervention have to do with training and preparing managers and employees alike to cope properly with the process of downsizing itself and the organizational era that will follow (Franco, 2006).
Understanding the determinants of affective reactions of survivors is an important step toward devising adequate HR and HRD interventions and policies that enable downsizing to fulfill its goals. Accordingly, the main goal of this paper is to offer a framework that analyzes some of the specific emotions that survivors may experience following downsizing, the antecedents of these emotions and their likely impact on survivors’ attitudes and behaviors. As is delineated below, research in the past rarely addressed this issue. We believe that the framework that we offer here will help in devising better HRM and HRD practices that can promote the effectiveness of downsizing.

Survivors’ Affective Reactions to Downsizing – Past Research

Research in the past acknowledged the significant role that survivor’s affective reactions have on their adaptation to the situation, and accordingly, the effect of downsizing on the organization as a whole (Sahdev et al., 1999). Nevertheless, up to now, most research examining survivors’ affective reactions to downsizing considered broad affective constructs such as anxiety, stress or emotional well-being (Burke & Leiter, 2000; Leana & Feldman, 1992; Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998; Paterson & Cary, 2002). These are emotional states that do not have a clear and focused object but rather involve generalized feelings about the situation (Frijda, 1986). We suggest that downsizing also leads to the experience of other more specific emotional states such as guilt or shame. These are discrete emotional states that have a narrower, clearer and more focused object such as oneself or one’s actions. These are emotions that arise from judgments of particular issues that have to do with a given situation (Frijda, 1986). Moreover, unlike previous research, we claim that survivors’ emotional reactions do not necessarily comprise only negative emotions but they may, under certain circumstances, also experience some positive emotions.
The study of discrete emotional reactions to downsizing has been relatively neglected (for the few existing studies, see Brockner, Davy, & Carter, 1985; Mossholder, Setton, Armenakis & Harris, 2000; Weiss, Suckow, & Cropanzano, 1999). Additionally, the research that can be found has focused mainly on negative emotions (e.g., Brockner et al., 1985; Brockner, Grover, O’Malley, Reed, & Glynn, 1993). This state of affairs reflects the comparative dearth of research on discrete emotions in the organizational field as a whole (see also, Lazarus & Cohen-Charash, 2001; Weiss, 2002; as well as Brockner, Davy, & Carter, 1985; Weiss, Suckow & Cropanzano, 1999 for valuable exceptions), and the fact that positive affect is an insufficiently studied issue both in organizational research (Isen & Baron, 1991) and psychology (Averil, 1980; Fredrickson, 1998). Accordingly, the scope of the present paper is to present a theoretical framework, which offers some factors that lead to the experience of specific positive and negative emotions in downsizing survivors of downsizing. Most of these emotions were not discussed in previous research in this context. We believe that this framework can advance the study and understanding of the role that survivors’ emotions play in determining personal and organizational consequences of downsizing and their relations to HRM and HRD policies and interventions.

The past two decades have brought a substantial growth in the understanding of the role that affective states such as moods and emotions play in human behavior. As a consequence, there is a growing acknowledgment of the important relationship among affect, cognition and motivation. This development has also had an impact on research within the organizational context so that theories and understandings suggested by affect researchers have been adopted and used in organizational research (Ashkanasy, Hartal, Zerbe, 2000; Callahan, 2000; Fisher & Ashkanasy, 2000; Lord,
Klimonsky & Kanfer, 2002; Spector & Fox, 2002; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), including in the context of downsizing (Mishra, 1996; Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998; O'Neill & Lenn, 1995). It is our contention that the study of such issues can gain by further adoption and application of theories and frameworks drawn from psychological research on affect. Hence, in the present paper we adopt Weiner’s attribution theory of motivation and emotion (Weiner, 1985; 1986), using it as a tool in our analysis. This framework enables us to analyze potential positive and negative emotional, and consequently, behavioral reactions of employees surviving organizational downsizing.

Weiner’s attribution theory focused on causal attributions -- subjective thoughts about the causes of given outcome and their link to affective and behavioral reactions. Accordingly, the emotions that we consider in the context of downsizing are expected to be a function of what survivors perceive to be the cause for their survival. This analysis offers new hypotheses and research questions related to some of the emotions likely to arise in survivors following downsizing. While some issues analyzed in the present paper are directly derived from research and theoretical accounts stemming from work in the context of attribution theory, for other issues attribution theory serves only as a scaffold for generation of ideas that go beyond it.

We begin our discussion with a brief review of Weiner’s attribution theory of motivation and emotion (Weiner, 1985; 1986) and discuss the relevance of this theory to emotions and behaviors in the context of surviving organizational downsizing. Following this, we offer an analysis of the potential link among different causes for survival, emotions and behaviors of the survivors as well as of their colleagues. Finally, we will discuss how the present framework can add to the understanding of
the affective reactions experienced by survivors of downsizing and what the important organizational implications of these reactions are especially as these relate to HR and HRD policies and interventions.

Emotions and Attributions in the Context of Organizational Downsizing

Emotions are reactions to significant and specific changes and events (Ben-Ze’ev, 2000; Frijda, 1986; 1994). Downsizing involves major changes both for the individual and the organization as a whole. Such situations are expected to lead to emotional reactions on the part of the individuals at the nexus of these changes (Mossholder et al., 2000). Emotions are considered by many theorists to result from the way a given situation is appraised or evaluated by the person experiencing the emotion (Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991; Ortony, Clore & Collins, 1988; Weiner, 1985; 1986). One type of appraisal known to contribute to emotional reactions and that is likely to play a significant role in the context of downsizing is attributional information, i.e., information concerning the reasons underlying given outcomes.

In the context of downsizing, attributional information mainly involves the reasons why an employee stayed in the organization or was dismissed. This information is most likely to be spontaneously generated by employees because significant outcomes, such as the ones considered here, tend to elicit causal thinking. Moreover, because the likelihood for causal thinking is also increased if the situation is unexpected, uncertain and/or negative (Weiner, 1985a; Weiner, 1985b; Wong & Weiner, 1981), as is often the case with downsizing (Brockner, DeWitt, Grover, & Reed, 1990), the chances for attributional thoughts in the context of downsizing also increase. Finally, rumors related to downsizing as well as formal information
Causal attributions and emotions in downsizing

provided by managers may also include information concerning the reasons for the decisions involved.

This attributional information is known to be an antecedent for different emotional reactions on the part of the person who is considering this information (Weiner, 1985; 1986). The specific emotion elicited by such attributions is partially a function of the nature of the causal information contained in the attribution. For example, an employee–knowing that she survived downsizing thanks to her skills–is expected to experience pride. In contrast, survival attributed merely to luck is not likely to elicit pride but rather fear or anxiety resulting from the perceptions of the probability of being laid off in a possible future wave of downsizing.

According to Weiner’s attribution theory of motivation and emotion (Weiner, 1985; 1986), some of the emotions that people experience as a consequence of a given situation or event are determined by the perceived causes of these events or situations. This class of emotions is termed attribution-linked affect. This means that similar outcomes can potentially evoke different emotions depending on what the person perceives to be the cause of her outcome. In addition, some affective reactions (e.g., happiness and sadness) are the direct result of the outcome in question and are independent of the inferred causes of a given outcome or event. These emotions are termed outcome-dependent affects. In accordance with this distinction, research suggests that positive outcomes such as success tend to lead to happiness whereas negative outcomes such as failure tend to lead to sadness, regardless of the reasons for these outcomes (Weiner, Russel, & Lerman, 1978). Given that in the present paper we are interested in the emotional consequences of attributional thinking, we will consider only attribution-linked affect related to downsizing.
In explaining the relation between causal inferences, emotions and behavior, Weiner’s attribution theory suggests that all causes of outcomes can be characterized according to three basic properties, labeled locus, controllability, and stability. Locus refers to the location of a cause (internal or external to the actor); controllability refers to the degree to which the cause is subject to volitional change (controllable versus uncontrollable); and stability pertains to the relative endurance of a cause over time (stable versus unstable). Thus, for example, ability as a cause of success would be considered internal, uncontrollable, and stable, whereas bad luck as a cause of failure tends to be construed as external to the actor, also uncontrollable, and unstable. It is important to note that ability, in this context, refers to one’s natural aptitude which is innate and relatively unchangeable as opposed to skill, which can be acquired or honed with training and practice (Weiner, 1986). Although the dimensional placement of a cause is a subjective reality, so that individuals may disagree with respect to a causal interpretation, there is a great deal of consistency concerning the characteristics of particular attributions (Weiner, 1986; Hareli & Weiner, 2002). Accordingly, each of these causal dimensions has unique psychological implications. We describe the psychological meaningfulness of causal dimensions in the following:

**Causal Locus**

Causal locus mainly determines whether or not a given outcome will affect one’s self-esteem and related emotions such as pride and shame. If the cause for a given outcome is internal to the person, then her self-esteem is expected to be affected by that outcome. If, however, the cause for that outcome is external, self-esteem is not expected to be affected by the outcome. Accordingly, people encountering a positive outcome, which is due to a cause internal to them, e.g., ability or effort, rather than
external, e.g., luck or help from others, are more likely to feel pride, experience an enhanced sense of self-esteem and think of themselves as more competent (Weiner, Russell & Lerman, 1978, 1979). Likewise, when failure is involved, lowered self-esteem and shame are more likely if the perceived cause for failure is internal to the person, e.g., lack of ability, than if the failure is external, such as bad luck (Weiner, 1985).

Causal Stability

The causal dimension of stability mainly determines future expectations and emotions related to such expectations. Given positive outcomes that are caused by stable reasons such as ability, people are likely to experience hopefulness because they also expect future success. Yet, if the same outcome is achieved thanks to an unstable cause such as luck, then hopefulness is not an expected reaction because the person will realize that similar success will not necessarily reoccur in the future. Similarly, negative outcomes, which are the result of stable reasons such as lack of aptitude, lead to helplessness because there is little hope for a change for the better in the future given the reason for the outcome (Weiner, 1985).

Causal Controllability

Causal controllability is an important determinant of the judgment of responsibility. A person whose outcome was brought about by her own actions, i.e., actions controlled by her, is seen as responsible for it. On the other hand, a person whose outcome was brought about without relation to her own actions, i.e., actions not controlled by her, is seen as not responsible for it (Weiner, 1986; 1995). Responsibility judgments mainly determine the self-directed emotions of guilt and shame and the other-directed emotions of pity, anger and gratitude. Thus, one’s
Causal attributions and emotions in downsizing

misfortunate outcome is more likely to result in guilt if it was brought about by one’s own actions. Shame, on the other hand, is more likely to be the reaction to the same outcome if the situation was the result of something that is not under one’s control, e.g., lack of ability. That is, the mere fact that one lacks a certain ability is not something under one’s potential control. Considering another’s negative fate, pity is more likely to arise in an observer if the outcome is the result of circumstances not under the victim’s control. If, however, the negative fate was caused by something that was under one’s control, anger is a more likely reaction (Weiner, 1986; 1995). In the context of positive outcomes, one is more likely to experience gratitude if the achievement is the result of another’s controllable as opposed to uncontrollable actions (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons & Larson, 2001; Weiner, 1986).

As can be seen from the above discussion, each causal dimension has its own psychological importance in determining the emotional reactions to given events. Also, along with the emotions listed above as being determined by these causal dimensions, other emotions too are determined and affected by the same causal dimensions. In line with this assertion, recent research and discussions have suggested a role for causal attributions in determining the emotions of envy, schadenfreude (pleasure at another’s misfortune), happiness for, admiration, and contempt (Hareli & Weiner, 2000; 2002). We also consider some of these emotions here in the context of downsizing.

Recall that we are applying the framework of attribution theory to the understanding of discrete emotional reactions to downsizing. Because emotions are significant determinants of attitudes, motivations and behavior (Frijda, 1986; George & Brief, 1996; Lazarus, 1991, Weiner, 1985; Weiss, 2002), emotions that arise in the
context of downsizing can affect significant work attitudes and behaviors such as loyalty, trust, satisfaction, absenteeism, performance and OCB. Hence, the understanding of the role that such emotions play in survivors’ reactions to downsizing can help in devising HR and HRD procedures that will improve the outcomes of such a process both for employees and organizations. In particular, it should be beneficial in devising organizational policies for downsizing implementation and information provision that can lead to better downsizing outcomes. Also, it can suggest ways by which managers and employees can be trained and prepared to cope better with the process of downsizing and its consequences.

Given that survival of downsizing is the result of one or many different reasons, we restrict ourselves to considering only several defined reasons and discussing each reason in isolation. This restriction by no means assumes that our reasons are more important than or supersede others in their impact on emotional reactions. Rather, confining our discussion to the reasons given below enables us to debate the potential contribution of this framework within manageable limits. Albeit, we believe that our analysis can also serve as a foundation for further theoretical developments that go beyond the issues covered here.

Accordingly, in analyzing employees’ reactions to surviving downsizing as a function of causal information, we consider four possible reasons for such an outcome. These are: ability, effort, help from another person and luck. Prior research considered these causes as important factors in determining workplace behavior (Hart, Bridgett, & Karau, 2001; Struthers, Weiner & Allred, 1998). Reactions to downsizing are considered as a function of each of these reasons. The first two causes are internal to the individual, yet, whereas ability is stable and uncontrollable, effort is unstable and controllable. Help from others and luck are likely to be perceived as located
externally to the individual and unstable. Help, however, is controllable by the other while luck is uncontrollable. Thus, these four causes represent a range of causal properties, and hence, their expected psychological consequences are expected to vary as well. It is important to note that we refer to each cause from the survivor’s subjective point of view and do not assume that this cause has any objective status other than that. First, we consider the emotional and behavioral consequences of each cause separately and then present a discussion that compares the different causes. Although we restrict ourselves to these four causes, we manage to cover a large array of different emotions that survivors are likely to experience in the context of their survival. These are: pride, enhanced self-esteem, hopefulness, anger, gratitude, admiration, resentment, guilt, hopelessness, envy, shame, feelings of indebtedness and decreased self-esteem.

Survivors’ Emotional Reaction to Downsizing as a Function of the Perceived Cause of Survival

Here we consider the emotional reactions of survivors as a function of their perceived cause of their survival.

*High Ability*

High ability is a cause that is likely to be perceived as internal to the individual, uncontrollable and stable. Given that high ability is an internal cause, if survival is attributed to it, the fact of having survived is likely to have a positive impact on one’s self-esteem. This frame of mind may, in turn, lead the employee to believe that she is wanted by the organization, thereby further enhancing her self-esteem. Likewise, the worker will most likely feel proud of herself. Survival due to high ability is also expected to lead to hopefulness. This expectation is due to the fact
that ability is a stable property of the individual and hence expected to last across time and contexts. The hopefulness is, accordingly, likely to lead to the employee believing that her future is relatively secured within the same organization and that she is a core employee (Osterman, 2000). Being a member of such a group often means being at the center of the organization’s HR system’s focus. This frequently results in special HR treatment (Leapak & Snell, 1999). Moreover, this perceived high human capital also increases one’s employability in other organizations – which in turn is also likely to increase one’s sense of security. Consequently, one important research question is to determine under what circumstances a survivor, who attributes her survival to high ability, is more likely to actively search for another job rather than remain within the present organization that values her skills. It may be that the more that employee trusts the organization, the less likely she would be to seek other job opportunities (Brockner, Tyler, & Cooper-Schneider, 1992; Brockner, Wiesenfeld, Reed, Grover, & Martin, 1993; Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998). An additional way to increase the likelihood that the employee will remain in the organization may be to invest in that employee’s personal and professional growth (Piotrowski & Plash, 2006). Nonetheless, other views may exist.

Proposition 1. A survivor who attributed her survival to her high ability is expected to experience enhanced self-esteem, pride and hopefulness.

High Effort

High effort is an internal, controllable and unstable cause. Because effort, in the same way as ability, involves an internal attribution, if given as the cause, it is expected to boost self-esteem and elicit pride in oneself. To the extent that investment of effort at work is perceived as a lasting feature of one’s behavior – that is, a stable
cause rather than an unstable one – the expected emotional reaction of such a worker may also involve hopefulness, as in the case of ability. That is, effort on a short term basis is likely to be seen as unstable, but effort invested permanently is likely to be seen as stable.

**Proposition 2.** A survivor who attributes her survival to investment of considerable efforts is expected to experience enhanced self-esteem and pride.

The assumptions in the context of pride are in line with research that documented the link between pride and internal attributions for success (see Lewis, 1993; Roseman, Antoniou & Jose, 1996; Van Overwalle, Mervielde & Schuyter, 1995). Research on pride in the organizational context considered pride mostly in terms of satisfaction with the fact that one is part of an organization that is considered to have a high status (see, for e.g., Tyler, 1999; Tyler & Blader, 2002). However, few researchers have considered the role of pride when it refers to a transitory emotional state stemming from one’s achievement—the perspective of the present context. The absence of such research in the organizational context is surprising, especially in light of the fact that employees do report feelings of pride in the contexts of achievements (Hodson, 1998; Seider, 1984).

The research that did examine the role of pride resulting from accomplishments in the workplace found that pride is positively correlated with many aspects of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). Moreover, pride is a better predictor of OCB than job satisfaction, which is typically considered a strong predictor of OCB (Hodson, 1998). More specifically, Hodson’s (1998) research indicated a positive relation between OCB aspects such as extra efforts and cooperation and pride and a negative relation between pride and misbehaviors such as
absenteeism and theft. Accordingly, also in the context of survival of downsizing, when it results from internal causes such as ability and effort, we may expect a similar relation with OCB. That is, as pride increases so do positive aspects of OCB. This relation may be even further strengthened by the fact that under these circumstances the employee is likely to perceive the organization as acknowledging her merits (her capabilities or her vigorous efforts). This latter perception can also increase trust in the organization because under these circumstances the organization’s decision to keep this worker is likely to be viewed as deserved and just. Such a connection is expected from the relation between justice and trust (Aryee, Budhwar & Chen, 2002; Brockner & Siegel, 1996; Tzafrir, Harel, Baruch & Dolan, 2004).

**Proposition 3.** A survivor attributing her survival to high ability or considerable efforts, and hence feeling proud of herself, is more likely to be engaged in OCB rather than misbehavior.

The above analysis suggests that both ability and effort are expected to elicit pride. However, pride appears to be most experienced when success is ascribed to effort (Nurmi, 1991), whereas ability, typically, is regarded as more internal to the person than is effort (Weiner, 1986). This paradox raises an interesting question. Do perceptions of control also play a role in intensifying pride? If so, this suggests that survivors who attribute their survival mainly to their own efforts will have a greater sense of pride than those who attribute their survival mainly to their ability. Consequently, a higher degree of OCB is expected from survivors who attribute their situation to their considerable efforts than those who attribute it to their high ability. This likelihood is further strengthened by the fact that able employees may view their
situation as more stable within the organization (at least for the short term) than the very active employees and hence feel that they need to do less for future survival. Able employees may also perceive that they have more options outside of the organization than do employees who have remained owing to their exertions. This is especially true if we consider that proficient employees typically need to invest less effort to succeed than employees with less ability (Hareli & Weiner, 2002; Weiner, 1986). Hence, survivors who remain due to their efforts may feel less secure and fear future dismissal and its consequences more than talented employees having high ability. Finally, pride experienced by employees in the context of downsizing is also expected to have a more durable positive effect by increasing job satisfaction (Hodson, 1998).

This analysis implies that, in order for an organization to gain the most from its survivors, survivors should feel a sense of pride from the decision to let them be the ones to stay in the organization. The means to achieve this goal is by helping survivors perceive the reason for their remaining as an internal one, i.e., due to their ability or effort. The close to ideal situation from the points of view of both the employee and the organization would be a combination of these two attributions – as each cause has its own added value. This is certainly a plausible option given that ability is often insufficient for positive performance because one has also to be motivated and invest efforts when using a given ability. These ideas should certainly be incorporated into HR policies that will foster such attributions in the relevant employees.
Help from Other/s

When considering a survivor who remains in her job thanks to another’s help, a few scenarios come to mind. For example, help could come from a person of high status within the organization who decided that the employee should remain despite there being other reasons for letting her go. Help could also come from a colleague who is helping her accomplish her duties in the organization and hence enhancing the employee’s effectiveness for the organization. Finally, the survival may be the result of the organization being attentive to unique circumstances related to the employee (e.g., recent death in the family or severe economic hardship) that lead to a decision to let the employee remain in the organization.

In all of these cases we assume that, if not for the help given to the employee, she would have had to leave the organization. Regardless of the question of who is the helper and what the reason for help is, help from another is a cause that is external to the individual, controllable by the other and unstable. In other words, in the future help is not necessarily guaranteed. Considering such an attribution, one likely positive emotional reaction expected on the part of the survivor is gratitude. Gratitude represents the moral memory of mankind and is a mechanism for social cohesion (Hareli & Weiner, 2002; McCullough et al., 2001). For the survivor to feel grateful toward a particular person, the cause of a given positive outcome, such as survival, must not only be external to the actor but must also be controllable by the help-giver, with the resulting outcome intended by that helper. In addition, help giving must not be perceived as motivated by personal benefit accruing to the helper resulting from the help (McCullough et al., 2001; Ortony et al., 1988). For example, if a colleague helped another because she was “forced to” by her supervisor, then the employee receiving help is unlikely to be grateful toward the help-giver (but may feel gratitude
Causal attributions and emotions in downsizing

toward the manager; see Teigen, 1997; Tesser, Gatewood & Driver, 1968). Likewise, gratitude is less likely to occur if the colleague offering help acted the way she did only because she knew she is likely to be rewarded for her act.

Proposition 4. A survivor attributing her survival to help from another, who acted this way out of her own goodwill, is expected to experience gratitude toward the helper.

Overall, gratitude is a positive emotion directed at another person, which is expected to lead to positive attitudes and behaviors toward the helper. This prediction is in line with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). Social exchange is based on the norm of reciprocity that dictates that we help and not harm those who help us (Gouldner, 1960). This norm establishes the expectations that help, empowerment, investment in human assets, and other positive actions on the part of others will be returned. Therefore, gratitude expressed toward a certain individual can be seen as a sign of one’s intention to cooperate and offer help in return. If the help is seen as coming from the organization, then gratitude expressed toward the organization is also expected to lead to OCB and increased trust and loyalty. Expressions of gratitude tend to lead to positive moods and better physical functioning as well (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). These are factors that may also produce a better functioning employee (see also Isen & Baron, 1991).

Along with gratitude, help from others may also elicit admiration toward the helper (Ortony et al., 1988). Admiration is most likely to occur if the helper is perceived to have a certain desirable quality such as very high ability. Moreover, under these circumstances admiration is more likely to occur if the other is not arrogant about her desirable quality (Hareli & Weiner, 2000; 2002). For example, if the other person does not make explicit remarks that the help is the result of her
unique abilities. In addition, the mere fact that a certain individual took the initiative and helped out, and thus, is seen as a positive person can also serve as an antecedent of admiration. Admiration, like gratitude, is also expected to enhance social cohesion and cooperation. When admiration is expressed toward a colleague, it can also lead to imitation or adoption of desirable behaviors on the part of the helped employee and thus both the employee and the organization can benefit. This suggests that managers should encourage and reward help among colleagues as long as this does not mean that one worker does another’s job.

Nevertheless, a survivor could equally well experience envy rather than admiration toward the helper. Envy is more likely to occur if the desirable quality of the other reflected by the act of help is a characteristic that is central to the survivor’s definition of herself. This prediction follows the lines of Tesser’s self-evaluation maintenance model (Tesser, 1988). This model predicts that a social comparison resulting in an observer’s perception of herself as being disadvantaged as regards a self-relevant dimension leads to decreased self esteem and bad feelings (Salovey & Rodin, 1984; Tesser, Millar & Moore, 1988). Envy could increase work motivation by motivating the employee to close the gap between herself and the other employee but it could also lead to negative consequences. Among other things, envy could lead to hostility (Smith, Parrot, Ozer & Moniz, 1994) and a propensity to leave the organization (Vecchio, 2000) or hamper the work of the other as yet another way to close the gap (Tesser, 1986). Awareness and attention to these possibilities could help managers channel workers’ motivations toward ends that are beneficial rather than destructive.
Proposition 5. A survivor attributing her survival to help from another and who views that help as resulting from the other’s desirable qualities is expected to experience either admiration toward the helper or envy depending on how relevant this quality is to the survivor’s view of herself.

As in the case of envy, help may also lead to other negative emotions on the part of a survivor. People occasionally see the help they receive from others in a negative light because it poses a threat to their self-esteem. This claim is in line with the “threat to self-esteem model” suggested by Nadler and Fisher (1986). This model predicts that help will lead to negative reactions toward helpers if the help somehow implies that the helped person is inferior or incapable. This may lead to anger, resentment and even shame, which will result in negative attitudes and behaviors toward the helper and/or the organization. Furthermore, if the fact that one was helped becomes public and because of that the helped person is regarded by others as having a low ability (Graham & Barker, 1990), the employee may end up feeling shamed and humiliated and may decide to leave the organization. Finally, as mentioned earlier, help from others tends to evoke the norm of reciprocity (McCullough et al., 2001). This could make the survivor feel indebtedness and if she thinks she cannot reciprocate, the result may be increased negative emotions such as guilt for accepting the help and shame for needing the help in the first place. Guilt may also result from comparing one’s situation to that of similar others who were not helped and hence were dismissed. This analysis suggests that under certain circumstances help from others can backfire and that in offering help one has to be cautious and sensitive to these different factors.
Proposition 6. A survivor attributing her survival to help from another, who perceives that help as a threat to the self, is expected to experience negative emotions such as shame, anger, resentment and guilt.

_Luck_

Luck is typically construed as external to the individual, uncontrollable by her and unstable. This means that luck is likely to be seen as a cause not attributable to personal factors or to more stable situational factors (Weiner, Frieze, Kukla, Reed, Rest & Rosenbaum, 1971). Hence, an employee who believes that her survival was due to luck is unlikely to experience positive emotions such as enhanced self-esteem and pride. Given the unstable nature of luck and the fact that downsizing transmits a message of organizational difficulties that can lead to other waves of dismissals, employees attributing their survival to luck are likely to experience fear of future layoffs.

Proposition 7. A survivor attributing her survival to luck is expected to experience fear of future layoffs.

Research indicates that people tend to explain positive outcomes by referring to luck particularly in situations in which a negative alternative outcome is perceived to be close at hand (e.g., Teigen, 1997, 1998). Consequently, the decisive factor for perceiving oneself as lucky is not the actual outcome itself, but rather the counterfactual outcome – what could have happened. This research further indicates that the worse the potential alternative outcome is perceived to be and the more probable it is, the luckier the person sees herself to be when the opposite occurs. Given the substantial personal implications of layoffs and the fact that downsizing often involves high degree of uncertainty (Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998), these are two
factors that enhance survivors’ inclination to attribute their survival to luck. Moreover, given these antecedents, they may see themselves as extremely lucky. This may even lead to higher levels of fear and stress in survivors.

Proposition 8. High levels of uncertainty and greater personal implications of layoff are likely to increase the chances that the survivor will view luck as the cause of her survival.

Although luck as a cause for survival seems to lead to negative emotions that result from worries about the future, survivors may also experience a positive emotion of gratitude. Research on luck has noted that people who see themselves as lucky because they barely escaped a negative fate are likely to experience gratitude (Teigen, 1997). Hence, in the present context too, it is expected that the more a survivor feels lucky that she remained in the organization, the higher the level of gratitude she experiences. However, given that luck is not controlled by anyone, the type of gratitude one is likely to experience in this case is different than the gratitude experienced toward a helper. In the present case the object of gratitude can be God, any other superior power or a general entity such as nature etc.

Proposition 9. A survivor who thinks that her survival is the result of being lucky is likely to experience gratitude toward a supernatural force or nature.

Overall, a survivor who feels that she was lucky to be retained by the organization may try harder to maintain her job and hence take her work more seriously and invest more effort. However, such a worker is also justly as likely to show a more negative attitude and behavior toward work. After all, she was almost laid off this time and another wave of downsizing is liable to take her with it. The extent to which one type of attitude and behavior is more probable than the other one
depends, among other things, on the reasons why the survivor thinks that luck was the cause for her outcome. If the employee thinks of the organization as a place where arbitrary and unfair procedures dictate the order of things (an external cause), then she will also think that things are not under one’s control and hence a negative attitude is more likely. In such a case levels of trust and loyalty are expected to be low and the likelihood for negative behaviors such as turnover and absenteeism will be high. This idea is in line with studies and discussions suggesting a strong link between justice, trust and survivors’ reactions to downsizing (Brockner, Tyler et al., 1992; Brockner, Wiesenfeld et al., 1993; Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998). However, if the survivor thinks that she was lucky and despite her low ability and/or low efforts (internal causes), the organization decided to let her stay, then the consequences of attributing survival to luck may be different. If the employee believes that she is able but did not invest enough effort, then positive attitudes and behaviors are more probable. If, however, lack of ability is apparent, then hopelessness may dominate one’s reaction and the survivor’s functioning may be low and undesirable.

Overview and Comparative Analysis

Table 1 summarizes our main assertions concerning the emotions, attitudes and behaviors likely to arise in surviving employees in the context of their survival as a function of the perceived reason for survival. The table presents positive and negative potential reactions separately; emotions are described in separate rows. This table also serves as the basis for a comparison of the consequences of different causes for survival.

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Table 1 about here
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The above analysis suggests that survivors are expected to experience a few different emotions as a function of their perception of the causes for their survival. Some emotions are positive (e.g., pride and admiration) and others are negative (e.g., envy and fear). Also, whereas some emotions have the self as their target (e.g., fear and pride), for a few emotions another person is the target (e.g., envy and gratitude).

A closer look at Table 1 reveals that, while internal causes for survival are expected to lead to positive emotions, external causes are associated with both types of emotions. However, it seems that the weight of external causes for negative emotions is greater than that of internal causes. The reason for this is that if a survivor survived due to an external cause, then by inference she should have actually been laid off, considering her personal attributes and behavior and their value to the organization. To elaborate, unlike in the case of internal causes for success, the implications of external causes for emotions, attitudes and behaviors depends on additional factors that are associated with the circumstances of survival. Some of these factors can be seen as second order causes for the outcome. Considering help, important information in this context is why did this survivor need helped and why help was given to her. Likewise in the case of luck, an important question involves why the survivor needed to be lucky in order to survive. Accordingly, here too it seems that what determines more specifically the emotional reaction is an internal cause that stands behind the external one. The question becomes, for example, was one’s ability insufficient or did one not invest enough effort? Or, alternatively, is the organization blind to one’s merits and investments? As the analysis implies, these factors can further determine what the personal and organizational implications of these external attributions would be.

On the whole, our analysis implies that in order for a downsizing procedure to be effective, organizations must be sensitive to the fact that managerial decisions and
behaviors can have a bearing on the emotions, attitudes and behaviors of the remaining employees. This suggestion is in line with several studies that indicate the contribution of employees’ emotions and attitudes to successful downsizing. For instance, using a sample of recently downsized hospitals, Chadwick, Hunter and Walston (2004) found that showing consideration for employees’ morale and welfare during downsizing was positively related to financial performance and the perceived success of downsizing. In addition, Amundson, Borgen, Jordan and Erlebach (2004) noted that “…the negative moods of other employees contributed to their own negativity” (p. 262) and “…survivors who reported positive feelings had made a conscious effort to maintain a positive attitude during the downsizing” (p. 263).

We further argue that managers must take steps to moderate the negative influence of downsizing (Mishra, 1996) and foster as many as possible settings that generate positive emotions. Another practical implication of our analysis is that in order for an organization to gain the most from its survivors, it should work on making survivors take personal pride in the decision to let them stay in the organization. Among other ways, this can be done by helping survivors perceive the reason for their remaining as internal, i.e., ability or effort. As already mentioned above, it seems that the best attribution both from the point of view of the employee and the organization would be a combination of these two attributions. Accordingly, it is not only that hard working and capable workers are more likely to be better workers; they are also more likely to survive the downsizing better if they understand the real reason for their survival. Further investment, both professional and personal, in such employees can help in convincing survivors that the organization indeed appreciates their merits and efforts and hence it is willing to invest in them despite the circumstances that brought about the downsizing.
In contrast, the situation for employees who remain due to help from others is more complex. As explained above, this could lead to positive emotions such as gratitude and admiration but also to negative ones such as envy and resentment. Hence, organizations should carefully consider under which conditions they offer help to survivors and how that help is offered. We believe that under conditions where the help is deserved and given that the reason for survival is not stressed, help could work to the benefit of the organization rather than hurt it. Here also HR policies must be clear and well defined so that the decision to help an employee would seem fair and justified. For example, if the decision to retain the employee comes from the organization, the procedure that brought about this decision should be inherent to the process of deciding who should survive and who should be laid-off. This idea fits the general rules for procedural justice suggested by Leventhal, Karuza and Fry (1980).

This logic, on the whole, suggests that understanding and considerate organizations are expected to profit more from downsizing than inconsiderate ones. The former will more likely enjoy not only benefits such as decreased likelihood of negative emotions, and increased positive emotions but also matching attitudes and behaviors such as increased trust and loyalty and higher rates of OCB (Tzafrir et al., 2004).

Finally, the most risky attribution from the points of view of both the employee and the survivor is luck. Organizations should make every effort to avoid the likelihood that their survivors will attribute their staying to luck. Luck is strongly associated with arbitrariness, which has detrimental implications both for employees and organizations as detailed above. The organizations that wish to benefit the most from downsizing have to explain with sensitivity to employees why they survived
We believe that the above insights can help develop HR and HRD interventions and policies that make a difference in a period of downsizing. If organizations wish to benefit as much as possible from downsizing, they need to prepare both employees and managers for the process of downsizing itself and for the post-downsizing era. The better such preparation is, the higher the likelihood that downsizing will fulfill its goals (see also Franco, 2006). Accordingly, an understanding of the determinants of the emotions and accompanying behaviors of survivors is a crucial tool in crafting adequate HR policies and appropriate interventions aimed at preparing managers and employees alike for successful downsizing.

Our analysis gives a few ideas as to how this can be achieved. Among other things, management must make employees aware of how their merits and efforts contributed to the decision to keep them in the organization. In addition, HRD efforts should be devoted to preparing managers to help survivors cope with the situation in a way that maximizes the likelihood that the emotions and behaviors of the latter will be as much as possible conducive to the reorganization process. Similarly, such efforts should be geared at preparing the managers themselves to cope with the psychological consequences of this process. This can be achieved only if there is an understanding of the emotional consequences of downsizing and what determines them. Our analysis, we believe, is one example of such an understanding.

Although in our analysis we constrained ourselves by considering only a few reasons that downsizing survivors may view as the reasons for their survival, and just one perceived reason and one emotion at a time, we do not deny that in reality the reaction may be more complex. Indeed, often emotional reactions combine more than
just one type of emotion simultaneously or at least in close temporal proximity. Also, survivors may oscillate between different causes as being the reasons for their survival or attribute it to more than just one reason. We believe that even if this is most likely the case, the way to start to understand the phenomenon is by dissecting it into bits that are manageable, such as in the way we did it in our analysis. Certainly, despite this restriction, we managed to cover a relatively large set of different potential emotions that survivors are likely to experience in the context of downsizing (see Table 1). We also believe that the predictions stemming from this analysis must be put to empirical tests both under controlled conditions in the lab and real-life field research. Only after this is done, can we move further and get a more complex understanding of the issues in questions by considering more emotions and causes at once.

In all events, we believe, in accordance with previous analyses (e.g., Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998), that only research that is driven by sound theoretical considerations based on well established frameworks, such as the one we used here, can be effective in advancing understanding of complex issues such as emotional reactions to downsizing. Once erected, as we have done, this then can serve as a scaffold for developing HR policies and HRD interventions geared at bettering the prospects of downsizing succeeding—as often it fails because of the way survivors feel following their survival (Cascio, 1993; Noer, 1993). We think that our analysis suggests that undesirable feelings and behaviors associated with downsizing are not entirely an unavoidable reality (see also, Morrall, 1999) and that there are ways to improve survivors’ feelings or make them work to the benefit of all the stakeholders involved.
Causal attributions and emotions in downsizing

References


Stamford, CT: JAI Press.


Causal attributions and emotions in downsizing


Causal attributions and emotions in downsizing


TABLE 1
Potential reactions to survival of organizational downsizing as a function of perceived cause of survival

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause for survival</th>
<th>Reaction</th>
<th>Ability</th>
<th>Effort</th>
<th>Help from others</th>
<th>Luck</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Internal, Stable, Uncontrollable</td>
<td>Internal, Unstable, Controllable</td>
<td>External, Unstable, Controllable (by other)</td>
<td>External, Stable, Uncontrollable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Emotions</td>
<td>Pride, Enhanced self-esteem, Hopefulness</td>
<td>Pride, Enhanced self-esteem</td>
<td>Gratitude toward helper, Admiration</td>
<td>Gratitude toward superior power (e.g., God)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Emotions</td>
<td>Anger, Resentment, Guilt, Hopelessness, Envy, Shame, Feelings of indebtedness, Decreased self-esteem</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Attitudes and Behaviors</td>
<td>OCB, Trust, Loyalty, Low absenteeism, Enhanced sense of employment security, Job satisfaction</td>
<td>OCB, Trust, Loyalty, Low absenteeism, Job satisfaction</td>
<td>Social cohesion, cooperation, OCB, Trust, Loyalty, Improved physical functioning, Motivation</td>
<td>Increased effort</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Attitudes and Behaviors</td>
<td>Hostility, Intention to leave, Misbehavior</td>
<td></td>
<td>Low trust, High absenteeism, Misbehavior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>