

Joseph Ellin's Commentary on "Informing Employees About Layoffs"

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Informing Employees About Layoffs

I

Tony is told to lay off his entire unit the afternoon before Christmas. What a mess. Naturally he's unhappy with what he's been told to do, but he fails to contest the order. He might talk to VP Arnold again and try to get him to change his mind. Arnold has not given Tony any reason for the rush; Tony has a right to know why the layoffs have to be made in such haste. If Arnold's reason is inadequate, or if Arnold tells Tony he doesn't know the reason and doesn't care to know, Tony is within his rights in delaying, and in telling Arnold he won't do it until someone explains to him why it's necessary, although to do so would risk insubordination. If Arnold has a good reason, Tony has little choice but to carry out the order.

II

What Tony decides to do is disobey Arnold's order without telling Arnold and without finding out what's behind the fast move, and naturally fate is such that things instantly go wrong. Arnold, who finds out about Tony's insubordination through a chance encounter which is also embarrassing to Arnold, is understandably irate at Tony, and Tony had better apologize and hope for the best. He can only make things worse for himself by trying to make excuses. He might ask himself why he didn't tell Arnold that he wouldn't deliver the lay-off notices? Is he afraid or disrespectful of Arnold? Is he unsure that his action is correct? Tony's action behind Arnold's back may be a sign that something is very wrong in their relationship.

III

Now things get worse and worse. Even the victims suffer from Tony's attempt to be

Mr. Nice Guy, as Shirley spends big money assuming she still has a job. The moral is that the sooner people receive bad news, the better: attempts to spare them grief may backfire since people make plans based on what they think they know. However you can't blame Tony for not being able to foresee every possible outcome. If he's entitled to use his discretion at all (which is questionable), then he's entitled to act on what is reasonably going to be best for most of the people affected. He's probably right that most would not want their Christmas spoiled by a layoff notice; but there's no guarantee that everyone will be pleased by the delay.