Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

They Laid Off Half the Team, and I Was Left with Their Work and My Guilt

How to Cope with Uncertainty, Extra Workloads, and Survivor's Guilt After Layoffs and Set Realistic Expectations



We've got a problem. But relax. It can be solved—and we'll even have something to laugh about.

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INTRO

At 4:17 on a Thursday afternoon, your project management software sends you a notification: "You have been assigned 28 new tasks." There is no explanation, no introductory meeting, and certainly no cheerful animation celebrating your achievement. Just twenty-eight additional responsibilities, several of them marked urgent, transferred from colleagues who no longer work at the company. One task has a deadline tomorrow. Another requires approval from someone whose account was deactivated that morning. A third contains a comment reading, "Please coordinate with Daniel." Daniel was laid off at lunchtime. Apparently, the company has discovered a revolutionary business model in which employees disappear but their responsibilities remain legally immortal.

You stare at the screen, wondering how you're supposed to feel. Relieved that you still have a job? Angry that your workload has suddenly expanded? Sad about the people who left? Afraid that your name might appear on the next list? Perhaps all four, with an additional serving of guilt because you briefly felt relieved. That's the particularly unpleasant feature of surviving workplace layoffs: what should be good news comes wrapped in anxiety, uncertainty, and a strange sense that you've won something you weren't supposed to celebrate. Yesterday, you were worried about meeting your targets. Today, you're wondering whether having targets at all makes you one of the lucky ones.

And then comes the gratitude. Not necessarily the kind you genuinely feel, but the kind you believe you're expected

to demonstrate. You still receive a paycheck, so complaining seems inappropriate. Other people lost their jobs, so asking for help feels selfish. Your manager says the remaining team must pull together, and you nod because you're not the sort of person who abandons colleagues when things get difficult. Before long, you're accepting unfamiliar projects, responding to messages during dinner, and apologizing for delays caused by decisions you never made. Congratulations. You've been promoted to a new position called Extremely Grateful Person Who Apparently Requires Neither Sleep Nor Additional Compensation.

The trouble is that layoffs rarely remove work in proportion to the employees who performed it. A department loses several specialists, but customer commitments, reporting deadlines, compliance requirements, and unfinished projects may remain unchanged. Sometimes the business genuinely eliminates activities and redesigns its operations. Sometimes it simply redistributes everything and hopes nobody asks too many mathematical questions. If five people previously performed a collection of tasks, assigning those tasks to two people doesn't automatically make the work more efficient. It may create longer queues, missed details, additional pressure, and a magnificent presentation about operational transformation. The difference matters, particularly when the people responsible for the presentation aren't the ones trying to perform the work.

This is where your instincts can begin working against you. You want to prove that keeping you was the right decision. You become unusually accommodating, reluctant to admit uncertainty, and determined to solve every problem without asking for assistance. At first, the results may look impressive. Your manager appreciates your initiative.

Colleagues rely on your knowledge. Projects continue moving despite the disruption. But the organization gradually learns to expect your extraordinary effort as ordinary performance. The hours you donated during an emergency become part of an invisible operating budget. Eventually, leaving work at the agreed time feels suspiciously like going home early.

Meanwhile, the uncertainty doesn't disappear just because you're busy. A meeting invitation without an agenda becomes a potential threat. A senior manager visiting Human Resources attracts more attention than a celebrity entering a restaurant. You begin examining company announcements for hidden meanings, wondering whether phrases such as "strategic alignment" and "resource optimization" should come with hazard warnings. Some concerns may be reasonable; organizations can go through further changes after an initial round of layoffs. But constant speculation isn't the same as useful preparation. You need a way to distinguish verified information from frightening possibilities, because spending every evening predicting your next crisis doesn't prevent it. It simply allows the crisis to occupy your evenings in advance.

Then there's the guilt about your former colleagues. Perhaps someone who was laid off had more experience than you. Perhaps they had children, financial commitments, or years of loyalty to the organization. You may wonder why they were selected and whether you could have done anything differently. Those questions deserve compassion, but they don't automatically establish personal responsibility. Employment decisions can involve organizational priorities, budgets, changing roles, and factors you may never fully know. Keeping your position doesn't prove you're a better

person. Losing one doesn't prove somebody else was less deserving. And feeling fortunate that your income continues doesn't make you disloyal to people whose circumstances have changed.

You can care about former colleagues without turning your own life into a prolonged apology. You might offer a genuine recommendation, share a relevant opportunity, or simply ask whether someone wants to stay in touch. What you cannot do is reverse a corporate decision by refusing every pleasure available to you. Skipping a family celebration won't pay a former colleague's rent. Exhausting yourself through unpaid extra work won't make their experience more just. Compassion becomes more useful when it leads to thoughtful actions rather than a private competition to see who can feel the worst about circumstances neither person chose.

This book is about finding a more workable response. You'll learn to recognize when your responsibilities have expanded beyond realistic capacity, how to discuss conflicting expectations without turning every conversation into a confrontation, and how to make decisions when your manager doesn't have the answers you need. We'll examine the uncomfortable territory between professional commitment and personal sacrifice. That includes the problems nobody puts in an official restructuring announcement: missing knowledge, unspoken responsibilities, strained relationships, promises made to customers before the layoffs, and temporary arrangements that acquire permanent residence in your calendar.

The practical starting point is understanding what you can reasonably own. Imagine being asked to complete two urgent projects by Friday when each requires three full

working days. Your enthusiasm cannot manufacture the missing time. You can establish what each project needs, explain the conflict, and ask which outcome takes priority or what resources can change. The decision may still be difficult. Your manager may disagree, delay, or face restrictions of their own. But there is a meaningful difference between taking responsibility for your work and silently accepting responsibility for an impossible combination of demands. One is professionalism. The other is an organizational planning problem disguised as a personal character test.

Nor will I pretend that everybody can simply resign and pursue a happier career whenever work becomes unreasonable. People have mortgages, families, healthcare needs, limited savings, and local job markets that don't necessarily resemble an inspirational recruitment advertisement. Sometimes staying while preparing alternatives is the sensible choice. Sometimes changing employers becomes necessary. Sometimes a workplace improves, and sometimes it does not. You'll need judgments that respect your actual circumstances, not grand advice from an imaginary person with unlimited savings and no dependents. Where health, employment rights, or contractual obligations are involved, general guidance also has limits, and qualified professional advice may be necessary.

Above all, you don't have to become indifferent to be sensible. You can remain ambitious, helpful, and genuinely invested in your team's success. You can feel sadness about the layoffs while protecting your own wellbeing. You can appreciate having a job without accepting every new demand as the price of admission. Your employer may need

to reorganize. It may need to make difficult decisions. But those realities do not transform you into an unlimited supply of human labor.

You're allowed to do good work and still have an evening. You're allowed to care about colleagues and still make plans for your future. And when somebody announces that the remaining team must now accomplish everything with half the people, you're allowed to ask the question that should probably have appeared on the restructuring presentation in the first place:

"Which half of the work are we no longer doing?"

Chapter 1 - The Morning After, When the Office Suddenly Feels Like Someone Else's Workplace

The first thing Hannah noticed was the silence. Not a dramatic silence, the kind that follows terrible news in a movie. This was considerably more awkward. Nobody was discussing weekend plans near the kitchenette. Nobody was complaining about the temperature. The usual argument over whose turn it was to replace the coffee supplies had apparently been suspended indefinitely. On the office noticeboard, a flyer still advertised a team-building event featuring the smiling faces of several people who had been laid off the previous afternoon. Someone had removed their names from the company directory but forgotten the photographs. The organization had managed to eliminate their access privileges faster than it could cancel a bowling reservation. Efficiency, apparently, was not entirely dead.

Hannah had survived the layoffs, although the word survived made her uncomfortable. Nobody had been physically harmed, and comparing employment decisions to an actual disaster seemed excessive. Yet something important had changed. She had spent years learning how her department operated, building relationships and developing a sense of what tomorrow would probably look like. Now familiar routines felt unreliable. The colleague who normally checked her figures was gone. The manager who used to settle disagreements had been transferred. Several projects still existed, but nobody could explain who would make decisions about them. The building was familiar, the furniture hadn't moved, and her computer still recognized

her password. It was the invisible structure supporting everyday work that had suddenly become uncertain.

This is one of the least appreciated consequences of layoffs. People tend to focus on the employees who leave and the workload inherited by those who remain. Both deserve attention. But there is another loss: the assumptions that made ordinary working life predictable. Before the announcement, you probably believed you understood your position within the organization. You knew which promises were credible, which meetings mattered, and whom to approach when something went wrong. A sudden restructuring can weaken that confidence. You may no longer know whether a manager's reassurance means anything, whether your responsibilities will change again, or whether another announcement is approaching. Your job description may be identical, but your relationship with the workplace is not.

The emotional response can be surprisingly untidy. You might miss a colleague who frequently irritated you. You might feel relieved that a difficult project has been canceled, then immediately remember that the cancellation cost several people their jobs. You may resent executives while recognizing that some of them were responding to circumstances beyond their control. There is no requirement for these reactions to fit together neatly. The temptation is to decide which emotion is morally acceptable and suppress the others. Unfortunately, emotions don't operate like expense claims. They cannot be rejected because the supporting documentation is incomplete. Recognizing several conflicting feelings doesn't mean endorsing every thought they produce. It means acknowledging that the situation has affected you.

Hannah discovered that ordinary conversations had become difficult. When someone asked how she was doing, she didn't know whether to say she was fine. She wasn't entirely fine, but she was employed, healthy, and able to pay her bills. Other people were facing much greater immediate difficulties. Saying she felt terrible seemed self-indulgent. Saying everything was wonderful seemed disrespectful. Eventually she settled on "It's been a strange week," which had the advantage of being both accurate and unlikely to trigger an unexpected seminar on resilience. You don't need to compete with your former colleagues for the right to feel unsettled. Their losses and your distress are different experiences. One does not invalidate the other.

At work, however, there is often pressure to return to normal before anyone has established what normal now means. A manager may sincerely believe that maintaining routine will reassure the remaining employees. Meetings continue, targets remain visible, and the calendar fills with familiar activities. Routine can certainly provide stability. The difficulty arises when continuing business as usual requires everyone to pretend that essential relationships and responsibilities have not changed. If a decision formerly required three people and two have left, the old process may no longer work. Asking who now has authority is not dwelling unnecessarily on the past. It is identifying a present operational problem. The office may look normal, but that does not make its previous instructions automatically valid.

Uncertainty also changes what attracts your attention. Hannah found herself noticing which executives visited the office, whether meeting-room doors remained closed, and how quickly her manager replied to messages. A vague announcement about "future operating requirements"

occupied her thoughts for most of an afternoon. She began interpreting neutral events as possible warnings. This response has an understandable logic. When something significant happens unexpectedly, looking for early signs of another disruption can feel protective. But increased vigilance isn't the same as improved prediction. You may detect more unusual details without learning anything useful about future decisions. An executive carrying a folder is not necessarily planning another restructuring. Sometimes an executive carrying a folder is simply an executive who has discovered paper.

The most useful distinction at this stage is between what happened, what you think it means, and what you fear might happen next. Suppose the company announces a review of departmental spending. That is an observable development. You might reasonably interpret it as evidence of continued financial pressure, especially after layoffs. You might then worry that your position will disappear. These thoughts belong to the same situation but do not possess the same certainty. If you treat the final possibility as established fact, you may begin making sacrifices and commitments based on something that has not happened. If you dismiss the concern entirely, you could overlook a legitimate reason to prepare. A more grounded response makes room for uncertainty without promoting it into a verified announcement.

Consider writing down one particularly troubling workplace event in plain language, followed by your interpretation and the decision it might require. "My manager has scheduled individual meetings next week" is more useful than "The second round starts Monday." Ask whether you have reliable information supporting your interpretation and

whether further clarification is realistically available. If the meeting concerns your responsibilities, you may be able to request an agenda. If the question involves confidential decisions that management cannot yet discuss, you may receive no definite answer. That's frustrating, but it is still different from receiving confirmation of the worst possible outcome. The purpose isn't to persuade yourself that everything will be fine. It is to avoid responding to invented certainty.

Rumors make this harder. After layoffs, information travels through organizations with remarkable speed, although accuracy rarely keeps up. A remark overheard near a meeting room becomes a theory about departmental closure. By lunchtime, someone knows a person who supposedly saw a confidential restructuring plan. By Thursday, employees are discussing a spreadsheet that may not exist. Even well-intentioned colleagues can contribute to the confusion because sharing a warning feels helpful. Before passing along a claim, ask where it originated, whether the source could actually know, and what another person would be able to do with the information. Unverified rumors about individual employees are especially damaging. Speculating about why someone lost their job can injure their reputation when they are no longer present to respond.

There is also the question of what to say to the people who left. You may have received a brief goodbye message or watched someone leave before you had an opportunity to speak privately. Perhaps you were friendly but not especially close. Perhaps you worked together for years. The relationship matters more than any universal script. A straightforward message expressing concern and offering a specific form of assistance is usually more meaningful than

an elaborate statement about how everything happens for a reason. Avoid promising that someone will quickly find a better job when you cannot know that. If a former colleague asks for a reference and you can provide an honest one, that may help. If they prefer distance, respect it. Your wish to make the situation less uncomfortable shouldn't become another responsibility they must manage.

The remaining employees may respond very differently. Some will become unusually productive, others withdrawn, and some openly angry. A colleague who suddenly stops making suggestions may be concerned about drawing attention to themselves. Another may volunteer for every visible assignment, hoping to demonstrate their importance. Those possibilities do not give you permission to diagnose everyone's motives. People also have ordinary reasons for behaving differently, including pressures outside work that you know nothing about. It helps to approach unfamiliar behavior with curiosity rather than immediate judgment. If a working relationship is affected, discuss the practical issue. You don't have to solve a colleague's emotional life to establish how the two of you will share information and complete a project.

Hannah encountered this problem when her usually talkative teammate Marcus stopped contributing during planning meetings. She initially assumed he was angry with management. When she asked whether something was wrong with their shared project, he explained that he no longer understood who could approve changes and was reluctant to suggest ideas that might create additional work for everyone. His silence wasn't evidence of indifference. It reflected uncertainty about the consequences of speaking. Together, they identified the decisions requiring clarification

and brought those questions to their manager. The conversation did not restore the old team or erase Marcus's worries. It did remove one source of confusion that had been interfering with their work.

Managers can help enormously by communicating what they know, what remains undecided, and when further information may become available. Yet managers are not always given those answers themselves. You may ask whether there will be more layoffs and receive a response that sounds disappointingly cautious. "I don't have confirmation of any further changes" isn't the same as a guarantee that nothing will happen. A responsible manager should avoid inventing certainty, just as employees should avoid treating every cautious answer as proof of hidden disaster. Focus questions on decisions that affect your immediate work. Who approves an urgent exception? Which activities should continue? When will responsibilities be reviewed? Clear answers to these narrower questions can make the next week substantially more manageable.

Be especially careful about commitments made during the first few days. The desire to appear cooperative can encourage you to agree to responsibilities before understanding them. Someone asks whether you can temporarily look after a departing colleague's clients, and you say yes because the alternative feels disloyal. Nobody has explained how many clients there are, what agreements exist, or whether you possess the necessary system access. Before long, your willingness to help is treated as evidence that the transfer has been completed. A more responsible response is to agree to examine the work and identify what can safely be taken on. That keeps you involved without

pretending that enthusiasm has supplied the missing information.

The early days are also a poor time for irreversible judgments about your entire career. You might be furious enough to resign immediately or frightened enough to promise that you'll never leave. Neither emotion necessarily describes what you will want after you understand the new circumstances. There may be urgent reasons to act, particularly where safety or serious misconduct is involved. But when no immediate decision is required, allowing yourself a short period to gather information can prevent unnecessary consequences. You can review your financial position, update professional details, and consider alternatives without deciding that the company is either your permanent home or your sworn enemy. Both conclusions demand more certainty than you probably possess.

Outside work, the upheaval may continue to occupy your attention. You might replay conversations while trying to sleep or discover that you are distracted during activities you normally enjoy. A difficult adjustment doesn't automatically mean something is clinically wrong. Nevertheless, persistent distress, significant sleep problems, or difficulties functioning deserve attention, and professional support may be appropriate. You do not have to demonstrate that your situation is worse than somebody else's before seeking help. Equally, you don't need to impose an ambitious recovery schedule on yourself. Ordinary meals, familiar activities, supportive conversations, and adequate rest still matter, even when the organization is behaving as though its latest restructuring announcement should take precedence over the rest of human existence.

Eventually Hannah stopped trying to answer every question at once. She still disliked the uncertainty and missed the people who had left. She still suspected that management had not fully understood the consequences of its decisions. But she knew which immediate responsibilities had changed, which questions needed clarification, and which fears remained possibilities rather than established facts. That was enough to start working without treating every unusual sound from the corridor as evidence of approaching unemployment. The morning after layoffs rarely offers a comforting return to normal. What it can offer, if you resist the pressure to pretend everything is settled, is the beginning of a more accurate understanding of the workplace you're actually in.

Chapter 2 - The Headcount Shrunk, but the Work Didn't Get the Memo

There is a peculiar moment in corporate restructuring when someone discovers that a person's job can be deleted without deleting any of the things that person was doing. The employee disappears from the organizational chart. Their salary disappears from the budget. Their responsibilities, meanwhile, remain scattered across twelve systems, nineteen recurring meetings, and an impressive collection of deadlines. Management calls this a streamlined structure. The surviving employees occasionally use a less technical description, usually while staring at their calendars in disbelief. The fundamental question is simple: what happens to the work when the people who performed it are no longer there? Unfortunately, many organizations appear to regard this as an advanced philosophical problem best addressed after the restructuring has already been completed.

For employees, the difficulty begins when work is described in terms that conceal its actual size. You might be asked to "take over supplier coordination," which sounds like a single responsibility. In practice, it could involve monitoring deliveries, resolving invoice discrepancies, updating forecasts, handling complaints, reviewing contracts, and answering questions from people who have never met the suppliers concerned. Each activity brings its own deadlines, decisions, and dependencies. The phrase that appeared so manageable during a planning meeting suddenly contains an entire working week. Before accepting an expanded role as a straightforward addition to your

existing job, you need to understand what the words actually represent. A responsibility is not a unit of time, however convenient that assumption might be for spreadsheet designers.

Take the fictional example of Oliver, an operations specialist whose department has recently lost two experienced colleagues. His manager asks him to take responsibility for a monthly performance report previously prepared by Grace. Oliver knows the report. He has read it, discussed its conclusions, and even suggested improvements. He expects the work to take a couple of hours. When he opens the reporting folder, however, he discovers that the final document depends on information from four departments, an export from an unfamiliar system, and a set of calculations nobody can clearly explain. Grace had quietly resolved discrepancies before publishing each version. Oliver inherited the finished product but not the knowledge that made producing it possible. By Friday, he has spent most of two days recreating something previously described as a routine monthly task.

This is why workload cannot be assessed by counting job titles or visible outputs alone. A finished report may conceal considerable effort spent collecting information, checking assumptions, correcting errors, and obtaining approvals. A completed customer request may include several conversations that never appear in the official tracking system. Experienced workers also perform preventive activities that others barely notice. They clarify requirements before mistakes occur, recognize unusual figures, or contact the right person before a small difficulty becomes a serious one. When those people leave, the hidden work doesn't necessarily disappear. It becomes visible through delays,

confusion, and the additional effort required to reconstruct their decisions. The organization may have removed an employee while accidentally retaining their entire collection of unwritten responsibilities.

Oliver's first instinct is to work harder until he understands everything. This seems reasonable because learning a new process always requires effort. But he soon discovers that his usual responsibilities haven't become any smaller. He still manages daily operational issues, attends mandatory meetings, and responds to customer requests. The monthly report now competes with those activities rather than replacing them. Worse, he has begun spending time investigating old discrepancies that Grace understood immediately. His manager sees a report that used to take an afternoon and wonders why Oliver needs several days. Oliver sees a maze of missing instructions and wonders whether everyone has dramatically overestimated his competence. Both perspectives overlook the same issue: the conditions under which the work is being performed have changed.

A useful workload assessment therefore begins with actual activities rather than department labels. Identify the recurring work you already perform, the additional responsibilities you've inherited, and the duties that arise unpredictably. Note how often each activity occurs, when its output is required, and what must happen before you can complete it. Some tasks can be estimated reasonably well from previous experience. Others should be marked as uncertain until their complexity becomes clearer. Avoid turning unknown effort into zero effort simply because the planning system demands a number. If nobody knows how long an unfamiliar process will take, that uncertainty belongs