



BY RUSS JONES

## Suggested Steps for Handling Employee Separations

It is no secret that operating a healthcare organization is more difficult today than ever before. Each year healthcare professionals are asked to do more with less. Unfortunately, reducing employee head count as a result of reduced operating revenue and profit margins is an increasingly common activity. Terminating an employee is perhaps one of the most difficult decisions an individual makes in his or her career. Once the decision has been made to separate an employee, the next step is to consider how to carry out the task. While handling this difficult situation, we must maintain compassion for the employee, be sensitive to remaining employees and the community, and have concern for the possibility that the employee may "fight" the separation through legal action.

The following suggestions should assist you in establishing in advance, a consistent, clear-cut procedure for handling employee separations.

- If the separation is for "cause", make sure the termination is defensible. Review the employee's file and case with legal counsel to ensure proper preliminary actions have been taken and discrimination does not exist.
- Schedule the termination. Check the employee's calendar to make sure he or she will be in the office, and make sure termination does not conflict with prior scheduled meetings.
- Select a private office or conference room to ensure privacy and confidentiality. Remember, timing of the meeting is important. Early in the day is better than later in the day, and earlier in the week is better than later in the week.
- Commence the meeting with a statement such as, "I would like to share with you some recent business decisions that will affect our organization." Then, proceed to give an overview of the decision and why it was made.
- If this action is part of a downsizing, be specific as it related to the individual. You can say "These decisions are going to affect several individuals - one of them is you."
- Regarding the reason for the separation, that is, if it is part of a downsizing, be sure to give the same reason to each individual, as separated individuals will compare notes. Keep the phraseology in the broadest terms, for instance, "This is a business decision that has been made by the organization."
- Keep the meeting brief (5-10 minutes).
- The separation meeting should be conducted in a monologue form rather than a dialogue; it is not a subject for further debate or discussion. Offer to schedule a follow-up meeting to discuss reasons at a future date. Handle it with dignity. The immediate superior should conduct the meeting in a private office or conference room - preferably not in the employee's department.
- Maintain good eye contact. Failure to look at the person will project an evasive image.
- It is important to remember that as soon

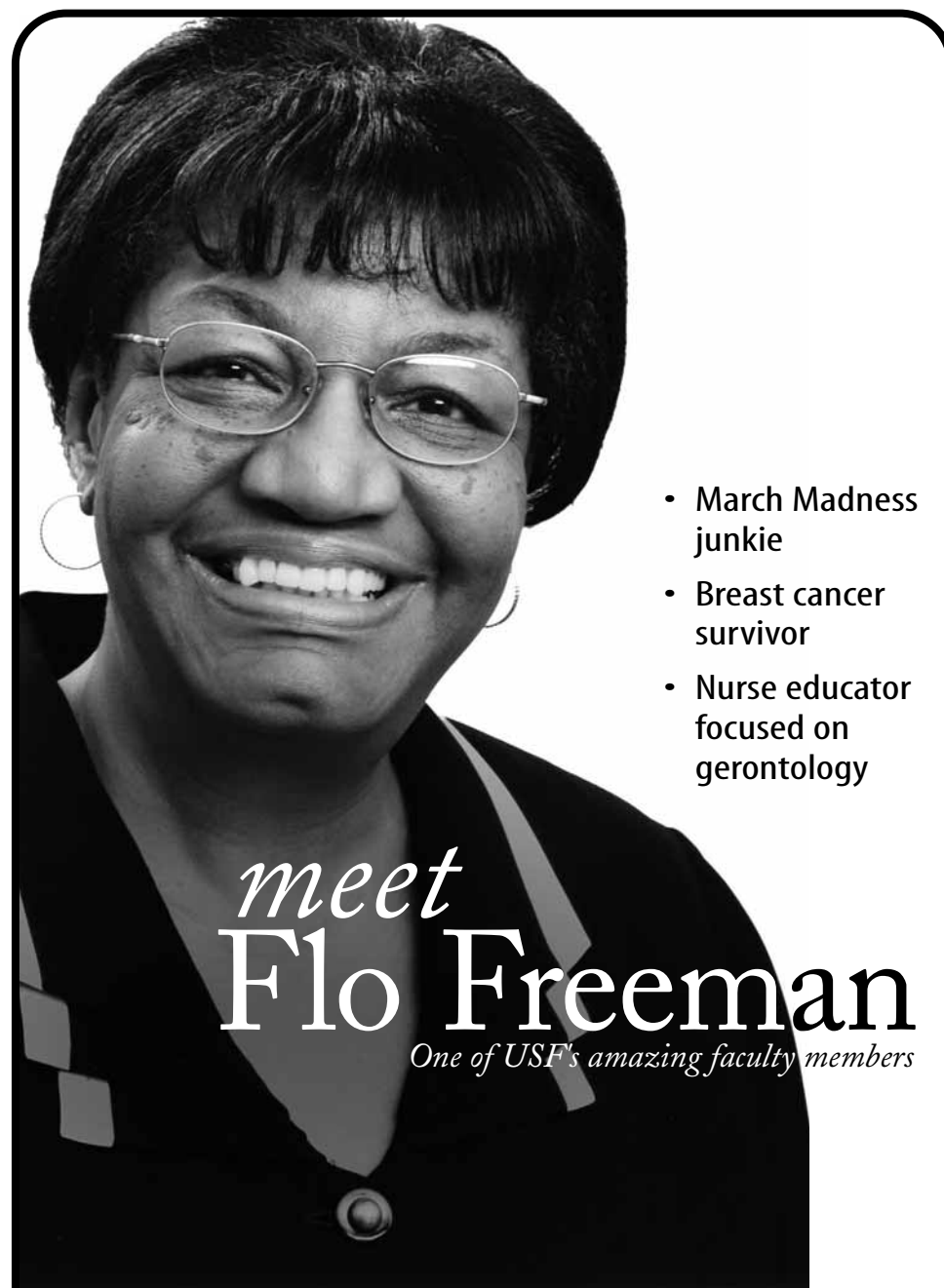
as the communicator or supervisor says "You are going to be separated," it will be fortunate if the employee hears 25 percent of the remainder of what is said.

- Be positive. Convey that it is in the best interest of the individual to seek new employment opportunities.
- Offer support. If at all possible, offer to provide positive professional reference. Letters of recommendation are not advised and will be of little, if any, value to a job seeker.
- Protect the employee's image. Allow "resignation" if applicable, i.e., cause/separations.
- Handle the communications. Review what will be said to the secretaries, receptionists, other staff, and the "outside world."
- Define the severance package. Provide a written summary, including the following items:
  - Severance period and payment resolution in the event a position is found while severance is in force.
  - COBRA: Insurance benefits coverage period and cost to employee; outline conversation privileges.
  - Credit Union.
  - Stock option rights and maturity provisions; stock ownership payouts (privately held firms).
  - Profit sharing, retirement and pension plan options.
  - Vacation compensation/ PTO
  - Company car, clubs, and other perquisites.
  - Office and phone use and coverage.
  - Career transition (outplacement) support.
- Make provisions to transfer the work load, and retrieve company credit cards, laptops, cell phones, PDAs, office keys, etc. Settle expense accounts or any other unpaid balances, and change computer access.
- Prepare for the unexpected. Evaluate medical records. Have medical or other necessary assistance available. Evaluate security needs and any special transportation considerations.
- In handling questions, remember there is no uniform reaction to separation. Some individuals may be too stunned to ask questions, others may react with a plethora of questions. If the communicator does not know the answer, he or she should not be afraid to say, "I don't know, I'll get back to you." Avoid phrases like, "I'll see what I can do," which might imply preferential treatment or give false hope that the employee's position might be saved.
- To disengage themselves from the meeting, communicators or supervisors should simply stand up and ask the separated employee to walk with them to human resources, where he or she is introduced to the human resources person who will discuss the severance benefits and how to file for unemployment compensation and the amount the employee is qualified to receive.
- Offer to establish a time after hours or on a day when other department workers are

off duty to assist in removing personal items from their work area.

While employee separations are difficult, having a plan to treat individuals in a consistent, humane, compassionate manner will yield the best outcomes—for the employee, their families, remaining employees and the community.

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