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Young Women More Vulnerable During Layoffs*

How to position yourself to withstand the cuts at your company.

By SHELLY BANJO

As the economy takes a nosedive, the number of layoffs continues to rise across industries. Some 2.6 million jobs were lost in 2008. The national unemployment rate jumped to 7.2% in December, the highest since January 1993, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported Friday. Since the start of the recession in December 2007, the number of unemployed persons has grown by 3.6 million.

It's more important than ever to make sure your manager knows how you are contributing to the company's bottom line. For young professional women, who sometimes fail to sing their own praises or point out their contributions, that can be particularly challenging.

Promote Yourself

Women are more likely to try and 'blend in' at a company so as not to cause trouble or be a target. While this can help them to skate by, when times get tough it may mean that they should have spent the last few months making sure everybody knew what they had accomplished and advertising their achievements.

It's part of your job to show your boss how valuable you are to the company. Many young women tend to shy away or downplay their successes, where men find it more natural to promote themselves, says Wendy Alfus-Rothman, president of business psychology firm Wenroth Consulting, Inc. in New York. By contrast, women tend to "hint and assume that if they do a good job other people will notice," she says.

Women are also less likely than men to take risks in the workplace, Ms. Alfus-Rothman says, but "in this market, you need to be able to change goals, shift fluidly and take risks with gusto."

Stay Positive and Proactive

In times of stress women tend to share what is bothering them with coworkers, while men tend to keep it to themselves, Ms. Lieberman says. Airing your worries can be a bonding activity between coworkers, but it can also backfire dangerously: Portraying you as unsure, insecure and unable to help a company under stress. It can also come across as whiny and even lazy, because spending time complaining takes away from the time you can spend doing your work, she says. If you are weary about the economy, discuss your fears with a confidant or mentor outside of the office.

A positive attitude on the job will set you apart from complaining coworkers, who will seem like they are not "bringing their all to work," Ms. Alfus-Rothman says. "Managers who have to choose between two people that are both competent," most likely will "pick the person who is (lower) maintenance, has a better attitude and has great people skills."

To maintain your calm, take proactive steps to learn about what is happening within your company and your industry as a whole. Pay attention to what could impact your job or industry in the future, by joining professional associations and industry-focused networking groups.

"In this market, people tend to withdraw and stay under the radar," but now is actually the best time to "expand your universe," Ms. Alfus-Rothman says.

Consider signing up for continuing education classes or certifications in your field to not only demonstrate the value you bring to your own firm but also to stay prepared if you do, in fact, get laid off.

"Even if you have a job, continue creating opportunities for yourself" by making new contacts and expanding your knowledge base, Ms. Alfus-Rothman says.

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