

A man in a dark suit and tie is carrying two large cardboard boxes. An axe with a yellow handle and a silver head is positioned diagonally across the boxes. The background is a dark, solid color.

Avoiding the Hatchet Man

Practical Advice for the
Employed and Unemployed

P A T R I C K
C O N N O R

Avoiding the Hatchet Man

PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR THE EMPLOYED
AND UNEMPLOYED

By

Patrick Connor



Eloquent Books

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this undertaking to my family who has provided me with endless support and encouragement. Specifically, my wife (Tina) and our four boys (Mitch, Grant, Reed, and Kent) have been inspirational to me during difficult times and significant travels. They have made my life rewarding in every respect. When they reflect back on their lives, I can only hope that I played a role in helping them to have a rewarding life as well.

I additionally dedicate this book to my extended family. Each has shown me in everyday life the meaning of words that otherwise would have only been terms in the dictionary. Madlyn, my mom, exemplifies compassion. Bill, my father, stands for integrity. My brother, Bill, personifies zeal. Marge, my mother-in-law, models composure. Last but not least, my father-in-law, Charlie, demonstrates perspective. Thanks to each of them for being who they are.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Admittedly, my line of work can leave a bad taste in the mouths of some or evoke scorn and contempt from others. However, I believe my professional approach, coupled with an empathetic attitude, allows those involved to retain their integrity, self-worth, and confidence. They can walk with their heads held high and can continue to consider themselves as valuable to the job market. This is comforting to me because bad things often happen to good people through no fault of their own.

I have always lived by the credo that if you don't continue to develop your skills, you will vanish into extinction like the dinosaurs. Therefore, in my professional career, I sought out individuals I knew I could learn from. The fact that they were mentoring me was sometimes clear; at other times, it may not have been as apparent. Each was responsible in his or her own way for advancing my knowledge, skills, and abilities to the next level. More importantly, each shaped my softer skills, including my attitude, work ethic, communication skills, and overall professionalism.

I have worn many hats in my career as I meandered in and out of virtually every sector of business. In each sector, I was fortunate to work with several individuals who shined through as the best of the best. I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge them here, as they have helped me become who I am today.

In the nonprofit field, I would like to thank Joe Burke, George Hansen, Rich Jackson, Claudia Kurianowicz, and Al Madden. They showed me how integrity and compassion play a significant role in dealing with others in the workplace, particularly when making decisions involving individuals or businesses that are already experiencing difficulties.

In the governmental sector, I need to thank Dan Fewkes and Ken Zuhlke. They demonstrated what it truly means to be a public servant. Despite enormous workplace pressures that resulted when the State of Illinois failed to approve a budget because of feuding legislators,

Dan and Ken were rock solid in their attitude and performance. The government would be wise to appropriate funds to clone these two gentlemen.

As for the public sector, Warren Grayson, Mia Igyarto, and Patty Sellergren taught me how the fields of employment law and human resources can be combined to create a tapestry of art. They helped me understand how this combined art could then be used to promote fairness for the workforce and profits for the shareholders.

For the private sector, William Cavanagh, Amy Doan, and Mike O'Leary are business owners who keep me energized and optimistic. They have each marked a place in their communities and beyond through smarts, hard work, guts, and true grit. For me, these individuals are figuratively the face of the American spirit. Like other business owners across the country, they are passionate about their companies. They awake each day ready to tackle the challenges of running a business 24/7/365. A new word should be coined to describe business owners; the innocent and whimsical word *entrepreneur* seems almost insulting.

Last but not least, I thank Ed Matushek for being my first mentor in my professional career. Without his abundance of confidence in me so early in my career, I am certain that I would not have been such a risk taker throughout my entire life. He shaped my career more than he will ever know. In fact, I probably owe to him that I even wrote this book.

All the individuals named above earned and deserve my respect. However, because they were not involved in the writing of this book and will read it for the first time simultaneously with the general public, I take full responsibility for any ideas you might disagree with.

Finally, I would like to thank several public libraries for offering me a quiet haven to work on this book. Each of them is staffed with extremely knowledgeable and friendly librarians (with a special shout out to Bill Black and his keen sense of humor):

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EPILOGUE

THE HATCHET MAN COMETH

CHAPTER 1

LAYOFF HAPPENS

The global economy is in trouble. The United States economy is suffering. According to the television news anchors, radio talk show hosts, and newspaper headlines, the economic downturn remains stubborn, and unemployment will continue to climb for at least the foreseeable future.

Hitting closer to home, the company you work for is in turmoil as well. You and your peers have been required to take unpaid furlough days. The words “bonus” and “raise” are no longer part of the company vocabulary. The last time a peer mentioned these taboo words at a meeting they were met with a quick and decisive response from management. The response was “you’re lucky you have a job.” Since that day, no one at your company has dared to mutter those words again. Now there is a disturbing rumor circulating that there will be layoffs on Friday. You hope it is just a rumor. Your manager will neither confirm nor deny the veracity of the rumor.

On Thursday morning, your manager calls everyone in your department into the training room for an impromptu meeting. This development results in you immediately experiencing adverse physical reactions. Your stomach starts to gurgle, your neck stiffens, and your chest twinges with tightness. You leave the crowd walking down the hall and turn into the bathroom momentarily where you experience the dry heaves. As you try to regain your composure, tears well up in your eyes, and you begin to shake with nervousness. Thoughts of panic flash through your mind, including how to tell your spouse that you were laid off and how you won’t be able to pay your rent or mortgage. If only you had a rainy day fund to fall back on. As you hurry down the hall to catch up with your peers who are turning into the training room, you begin to grow angry. It just isn’t fair for the company to let you go. You recall things that you have done in the past that showed your loyalty. Just last year, you rescheduled a planned vacation when the company landed an unexpected, large customer order. Additionally, you always finish

your projects on time—well, almost every time. You never took so much as a company pen home without permission. You’ve done nothing to warrant this treatment.

You enter the training room, and the air is thick with stress and nervous perspiration. Your manager is standing in the front of the room next to the company’s human resources director, who is sitting. The meeting begins with your manager saying in a shaky voice, “All right, everyone, sit down and let’s get this over.” Your stomach flips again. The employee next to you groans, and your work partner of five years, who is sitting behind you, says in a low but clear voice, “Oh, shit!” The human resources director stands slowly and speaks in a firm voice. She states, “It has come to management’s attention that a rumor is circulating about layoffs.” The room gets deftly quiet. She continues on to note that the rumor is beginning to hurt productivity and that it must stop. After everyone realizes that the meeting is not a layoff announcement, the tension in the room starts to subside. You and your coworkers sigh in relief and basically tune out the remainder of the human resources director’s comments.

The human resources director stops speaking and asks if there are any questions. The youngest employee in your department is bold and speaks up. He challenges the human resources director for more information and asks point-blank if there is any truth to the layoff rumor. Your manager steps in and says, “Even if it is true, do you really think the company will tell you before it is ready?” While you and your peers are not content with that answer, you all know that what the manager said is true, and no one pushes further for an answer. The meeting ends, and everyone is told to return to work. The hallway talk on return is somewhat upbeat. After all, if layoffs were imminent, the meeting certainly would not have been held. You go home that night and tell your spouse and friends about what occurred that day, and you share your cautious optimism about having job security.

The next day goes just like every Friday since you started working there. That is, until your work partner stops by a half hour before quitting time and says, “Let’s go. We’ll be late.” “Late for what?” you respond. “The meeting in the training room,” he replies. You stare at him with a clueless face. With a look of terror, he responds, “Weren’t you told to attend this meeting?” As you shake your head to indicate no, you see half of your department coworkers heading down the hall toward the training room. You swallow to

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moisten your parched mouth. In the most upbeat tone that you can muster under the situation, you tell your partner, "I am sure you will be fine. Call me tonight when you get home."

No call comes that night. You call him Saturday morning, and your beliefs are confirmed. Half of the department, including your work partner, was let go. They were required to clean out their personal belongings last night. You try to comfort your friend. With feigned sincerity, you note that he is probably better off without the company because the job wasn't that good in the first place. You state that the layoff is probably a blessing in disguise, and you're confident that he will find a position with a better company. Several minutes later, you hang up the telephone. Your mind goes into overdrive. Your coworker was as good a worker as you, perhaps even better. Why is he gone, and you're not? Will you be so fortunate as to survive the next round of layoffs? Is there anything you could do to better position yourself to survive another wave of layoffs? What should you be doing just in case you are called into the training room next time? What would you do if you were laid off? What would happen to you and your family's health insurance benefits? You are riddled with questions but have no answers.

After the shock wears off, you start to reflect on whether there was something you did differently than your peers. Your work productivity, ethics, and loyalty to the company don't seem to set you apart. Nonetheless, there has to be something that allowed you to be spared from the wrath of the hatchet man. If you could pinpoint what it is, then you could duplicate it and perhaps increase your chances of avoiding the hatchet man when the next round of layoffs come.

Your thought process is correct. You did do something to save your job. However, unless you are an expert with layoffs, people management, human nature and employment laws, it is highly improbable that you will analyze the situation correctly so that you can repeat your efforts. This is where I come in. I am a professional hatchet man and have been for more than twenty years. My role is to oversee the integrity and legal compliance of company layoffs. In other words, I need to ensure that the individuals identified for a layoff are selected fairly and according to objective criteria so that the company's action is legally defensible. Over the years, I have seen an infinite number of ways that business leaders and managers attempt to get around the objective criteria and hand pick which

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employees keep their jobs. Nonetheless, I have found that there is a predictable method to their madness. I explain their madness and offer suggestions on how to use it against them and heighten your chances of keeping your job. This book will serve as a road map for individuals like you and your laid-off work partner to follow during the nerve-racking journey. This book begins with tips for avoiding the hatchet man and ends with advice about fighting your company for what is rightfully yours if the hatchet man should catch you.

In the next chapter, I explain how the discussions that are presently occurring in your company's boardroom concerning job eliminations are virtually identical to those that I have been involved with in companies scattered throughout the United States over the past two decades. It is irrelevant whether the job eliminations topic is driven by poor economic times or by a financially struggling company in prosperous times. While companies consult with professionals proactively to ensure the integrity of the job elimination process, the process is never truly bulletproof because there are people involved. Where there are people, there are human emotions and fears and, thus, a weak link. In disclosing closely held secrets, I discuss how you can exploit the human emotions and fears of your manager to influence the job elimination process and potentially save your job.

Rule of Thumb

You don't survive a round of job eliminations based on luck. While layoffs happen every day, you need not be a sitting duck and wait for your turn. You need to develop and implement a plan of action to influence your destiny and increase your chances of staying employed.

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