When your client contact gets the pink slip

Making sure that your nurtuing and relationship-building stay intact.

By Anne Scarlett, first printed in PSMJ's *AE Rainmaker*

In these unpredictable economic times, it is not unusual to discover that one or more of your client contacts has been transitioned to a different role or even right-sized (aka 'let go'). This can be awkward, sensitive, and personal. You may be tempted to give the contact some breathing room, and try to catch up with him again once he lands in a new position.

Think again. Put yourself in the shoes of the contact.

Cindy was a real estate professional at a Fortune 100 company. Every year, Cindy was the coveted client to spend time with at the big conferences. She was pursued by AEC owners and business development professionals, all of whom sought to get more business with her firm. In a mass layoff a few years ago, her position was eliminated. Once she was in job transition, Cindy experienced a shift in the dynamics. At that point, she discovered which relationships were sincere, and which ones were built for the sole purpose of accessing her ability to select service providers.

Regardless of the reason for your client/prospect's departure, it's a delicate matter requiring thoughtful action steps. Whether your contact leaves voluntarily, or gets the pink slip, you need to do two things: 1. Continue to nurture the relationship, and 2. Mobilize quickly to identify their successor or another contact with the same level of decision-making weight or higher in the client organization.

1. CONTINUE TO NURTURE EXISTING RELATIONSHIP. Even if their new position will not overtly nor directly 'serve' you from a business perspective, continue to treat contacts-in-transition just as you would treat every contact in your pipeline. And as always, monitor the frequency and nature of your touches.

When they depart involuntarily:
It may seem like a no-brainer, but your contacts will appreciate well-intentioned outreach. Even though they will be processing personal feelings and you will want stay within professional boundaries, it's certain that they will remember your consideration and attentiveness for years to come.

- Do you have talents that you could provide during this process? Perhaps a second set of eyes for resume review, or offering people from your network with whom they could set up informational interviews.
- Offer a monthly toast/boost to keep their spirits and energies high. Or, serve as a sounding board for them to express frustrations. {Note: take care to uphold your own boundaries; you are not obligated to become the go-to person every time they have a mini-meltdown.}

When they depart voluntarily:
- Acknowledge congratulations with a handwritten note or phone call; propose a celebratory get-together.
- Place a welcome call or gift once your contact enters their new position. Anything I can do to help you get settled and acclimated in your new role?

2. MOBILIZE TO IDENTIFY AND CONNECT WITH A NEW CONTACT AT THE CLIENT FIRM. If your firm has approached the client organization strategically from the onset, then you will have mapped out multiple relationships between your own firm and their buyers, influencers, and informants. In that case, it will be straightforward to continue the business-to-business relationship with the client organization.

If, however, you placed all of your energies into just a single decision-maker who has now departed, what will you do? This is particularly worrisome if you think the replacement will bring over favorite firms and/or will want to handpick 'new blood.' But never, ever, let go of a prospect/client without a fight!

- If your contact is laid off, take some time before asking them about their suggestions on how you can remain in contact with their former firm. When the initial emotions have subsided, and when you sense your contact will continue to trust your intentions, then let him know that you will be contacting their former organization. Ask if he has any advice or insight that he'd like to share, but do not push. Be prepared that you may be on your own in terms of forging ahead. This may be particularly true if it's a prospect rather than a full-fledged client.
- Voluntary departure is typically a more palatable occasion. Directly ask your contact for inside scoop on the best people to stay connected with at their former firm. Who will be taking over your responsibilities? Will you be replaced, or will your responsibilities be distributed to existing staff? And, is there anything I can do to help them to secure a new person? Remember, if you are deeply intertwined in your contact's industry, then you could add great value to their former organization by sourcing a replacement.

Even if your prospect or client contact doesn't land into a position to give you business or to return the favor, keep in mind what we already know as seasoned business developers: what goes around does eventually come around.

One last thing: insincere touches will be transparent, almost insulting. Put aside any of your own discomforts with the situation (do not let your personal deficiencies in dealing with disappointment or conflict get in your own way of doing what's right). Take on these suggestions only for positive reasons: to demonstrate empathy and to exhibit best practices in nurturing your network. Over time, you can certainly hope for— but do not count on— prosperous, fruitful returns for your kindness and attentions.