The Survivors Nobody Talks About: What AI Redundancies Do to the People Who Stay

Why the real cost of AI-driven redundancies often turns up months later in the people you kept, and why empathy is the one part of leadership no algorithm can do for you.

There's a very particular kind of quiet that settles over a workplace the morning after a round of redundancies, and if you've ever sat at your desk pretending to read an email while the desk next to you sits empty, apart from a half-dead spider plant and an empty tea-stained mug, you'll know this exact stomach-yearning feeling.

Nobody quite knows where to look, so somebody makes a brew they don't really want just to have something to do with their hands, while a “communications” expert somewhere upstairs drafts an all-staff email that will somehow manage to fit "efficiencies" and "an exciting new chapter" into the same paragraph.

Today, more and more, the thing being thanked for those efficiencies is AI, and I want to talk about what that means, not only for the people walking out of the door with an empty heart and a box of memories, although they matter enormously, but for the people who are left behind to carry on, pick up the slack and somehow look grateful that they are still there.

This isn't a "one day" problem any more

For a while, AI taking our jobs felt like something made for Sci-Fi movies rather than an ordinary Tuesday, but the numbers suggest we've moved well past that. Morgan Stanley's research published in January found that UK firms using AI reported net job losses of 8% over twelve months linked directly to the technology, the highest of the countries it compared, and earlier this month Deloitte's CFO Survey found that more than half of UK finance chiefs (52%) expect AI to reduce their headcount over the next year. And let’s not forget that Barclays and Microsoft have recently confirmed redundancies as they adopt AI technology.

I'm not here to have a go at AI, honestly, because it's going to do some brilliant things and plenty of it will make work better for all of us. What worries me is that the business case for these decisions is usually written on a spreadsheet, and spreadsheets are great at counting the salaries you've saved and rubbish at counting what happens to the people still there on Monday morning.

The people who stay don't feel lucky

There's a stubborn myth in business that when you make redundancies, the people who survive will be so relieved to still have a job that they'll roll up their sleeves and work harder out of sheer gratitude. Let me tell you, this is rubbish. I can see why it's tempting to believe it would be convenient, but the research says almost the opposite, and I agree from personal experience.

When Leadership IQ surveyed more than 4,000 employees who'd kept their jobs after a layoff;

- **74% said their own productivity had gone down**,
- 69% said the quality of their company's product or service had dropped, and a whopping
- 87% said they were less likely to recommend their organisation as a great place to work.

When they were asked how they felt, the three words that came up most often were ***anger, anxiety and guilt***, which is hardly the recipe for a team that's raring to go.

It makes perfect sense when you look at it from where they're sitting, because they've just watched people they liked, built friendships with, trusted, and probably had a laugh with in the kitchen disappear, often with very little warning, and now they're quietly wondering if they're next.

Every calendar invite now titled "Quick catch-up" suddenly peaks anxiety and feels like a trapdoor; the work of two or three people has landed on their plate without anyone redesigning how it should be done, and on top of all that they're expected to be cheerful because, after all, they're the “lucky” ones.

When AI is the reason, there's an extra twist, because the message people hear isn't "the company is struggling"; it's "Sarah no longer adds value; a piece of software can simply do what Sarah used to do". That lands personally and emotionally with anyone whose job looks a bit like Sarah's, and it raises a hard-to-shake question: Am I only being kept on until the technology catches up with me too?

What AI can't do for you

AI can do a great many things, and in a redundancy process it can write the letters, model the restructure, draft the FAQs and probably polish the all-staff email while it's at it, but what it can't do is notice that the person who was always first to put the kettle on has stopped coming into the kitchen, or that your resident chatterbox has gone very quiet in team meetings, or that the brave face your best project manager has been wearing is getting a bit thin around the edges, or the team leader who has

the maternal instincts to tune in when there's an emotional situation and lean in with that all-important hug and reassurance.

That kind of noticing, and then actually doing something kind and useful with it, is empathy, and it's the one part of leadership that can't be automated, outsourced or bolted on with a wellbeing webinar. Despite its reputation, it's also very far from fluffy, because Catalyst's research found that **61% of employees with highly empathic senior leaders** said they were often or always innovative at work, compared with just 13% of those whose leaders lacked empathy, while 76% said they were often or always engaged.

The most hopeful finding in that Leadership IQ study is that survivors who rated their managers highly for being visible, approachable and candid were **72% less likely to say their productivity had dropped**. In other words, what protects your performance through a round of AI-driven cuts isn't the AI; it's whether a human shows up, tells the truth, and makes it safe for people to say how they really feel.

So, what do the people who stay need?

Honesty, early and often. People can cope with an astonishing amount of bad news, but what they struggle with is the sense that they're being managed rather than told. Be clear about what's changing, why it's changing, what you know and what you don't know yet, and resist the urge to polish it until it means nothing at all. Employees aren't stupid and will see through this. As a leader once told me, "You can't polish a turd".

A proper look at the work, not just the headcount. If the plan is for AI to absorb the work of the people who've gone, check that it genuinely has, rather than quietly assuming it, because otherwise you've simply handed that work to the survivors and you'll find out about it in your absence figures six months down the line.

Allow managers the time and permission to be human. Your line managers are the ones having the difficult conversations (let's be honest, sometimes they lack the knowledge or empathy), often while worrying about their own jobs, so give them real support, some breathing space in their diaries and explicit permission to slow down and check in properly with their people.

Room to grieve. It might sound like a strong word for a workplace, but people genuinely grieve colleagues who've gone and pretending nothing has happened only makes it worse. Acknowledge the people who left by name, thank them properly, and let the team say goodbye, remembering that everyone who stayed is watching very closely how you treat the people who didn't, because they're working out how you'll treat them.

Ask, and then act on what you hear. A quick, honest check-in a few weeks after the changes will tell you far more than waiting for the annual survey, but only if people can see that what they tell you leads to something of value.

The bit no machine can do on your behalf

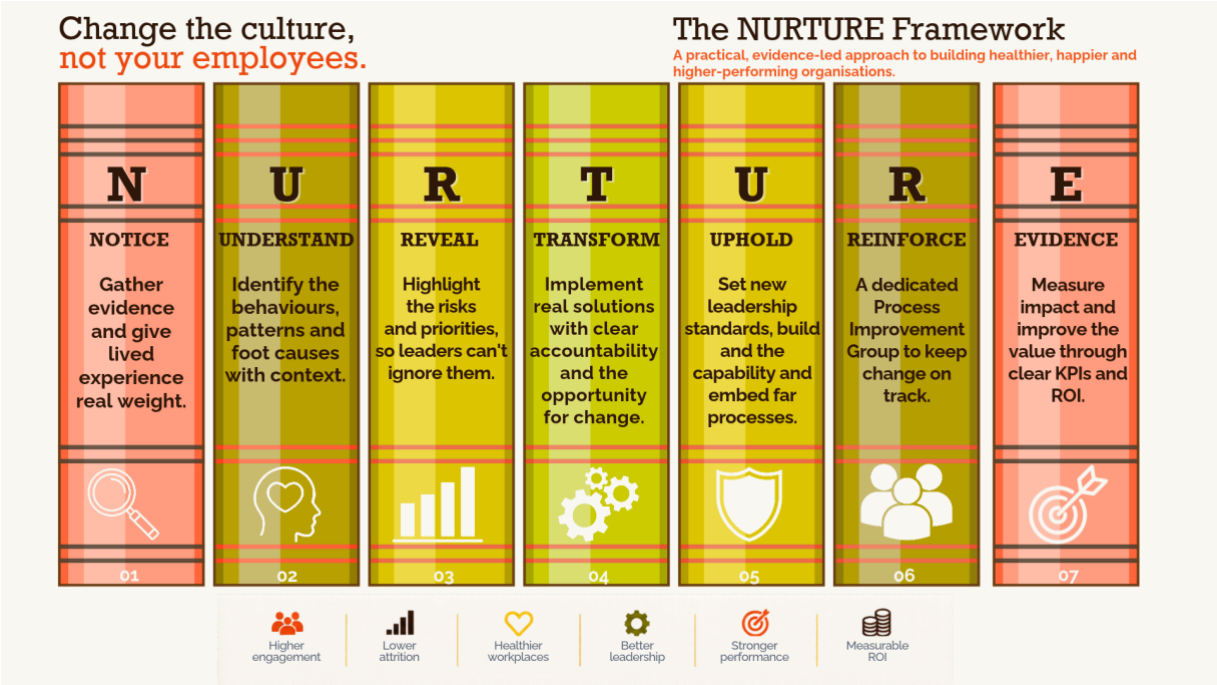
The businesses that come through this AI wave in good shape won't necessarily be the ones with the cleverest technology, because before long everyone will have more or less the same tools. They'll be the ones whose people still trust them, still believe their voice counts and still want to give their best on a Monday morning, and that comes down to something no algorithm can do on your behalf.

So, if you're planning an AI-driven restructure, or you're already knee-deep in one, the question I'd ask you to sit with is this: who in your organisation has been given the job of looking after the people who stayed, and do they have the time, the skills and the backing to actually do it?

If the honest answer is "erm, HR, probably?", it might be worth putting the kettle on and having a proper conversation about it. This is exactly the kind of moment I built the NURTURE Framework for, and I'd be very happy to be part of that conversation, so send me a message here on LinkedIn or email me at **joanne@joannepagett.co.uk**.

Jo

#FutureOfWork #Leadership #WorkplaceCulture #AI #EmpatheticLeadership



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