

By Regina L. Ruben

The new tissue culture

I am well acquainted with tissue culture as a laboratory technique. It was an integral part of my research throughout my doctoral training and during my early years in the pharmaceutical industry. But it wasn't until later in my career that I was introduced to an entirely new form of tissue culture: being offered a box of tissues as I'm told that I'm going to lose my job. It's an experience I would have preferred to avoid. But now, after repeated lessons, I recognize it as part of working in industry. And, in hindsight, I realize that I should have been better prepared.

My introduction to this new type of tissue culture came after 19 years in a job I loved at a small pharmaceutical company (although in this first case no one actually offered me any tissues). Having been at the company for such a long time, I felt I had some job security. But I found out how wrong I was when the company was sold. Part of me understood that losing my job this way was “just business,” but I still felt a deep professional and personal loss. Nevertheless, I determinedly set out to find a new job, where I hoped I would have an equally long and satisfying tenure.

I landed a job that I was excited about, a director position at a large pharmaceutical company. I genuinely enjoyed it and was looking forward to my future at the company. But, late one afternoon, about 2 years after I had started, the medical director and human resources (HR) representative escorted me to the HR office. The walk, in silence, felt funereal. When we arrived, the HR rep pushed a box of tissues across the desk in my direction. I knew this was going to be bad. She explained that my position was being eliminated in a reorganization.

I was caught off-guard. Again, a decision made without my knowledge, and about which I could do absolutely nothing, took my job (and my income) and impacted my career. The HR rep assured me there were no problems with my performance and encouraged me to apply for other positions in the company. I was “too valuable to lose,” she said. I was stunned, indignant, and frustrated. In the months I had remaining at the company, I conducted another job search and moved on.

Next, after I had spent 5 years as a senior director at a midsized pharmaceutical company, the HR rep came to my office one morning and led me into a conference



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room occupied by the vice president and executive vice president. I was shown a seat at the head of a large table. I spotted the box of tissues. “This can’t be happening!” I thought. The HR rep explained that there were no problems with my work, but the company was reorganizing and 200 positions—including mine—were being eliminated. I was annoyed and frustrated at being powerless and caught by surprise—again. But I was also wiser. I had come to realize that being employed was inherently precarious, regardless of performance or length of service.

Later, I was a director at a small contract research organization for 7 years when I heard a rumor about the company being disbanded. Months later, the chief medical officer called me into a conference room where the HR rep was seated. In front of my designated spot was another lousy box of tissues. I knew what was coming and braced for it. Thanks to the rumor, the event brought closure, not shock. The chief medical officer haltingly read from his laptop, careful not to look up. The process felt perfunctory, and I was already thinking about my next steps.

Over the course of my career, reorganization—and the accompanying tissues—became part of pharmaceutical company culture. Knowing what I know now, I would have advised my past self to be prepared for the unexpected, understand that it’s not about you, and think about your next job even as you are starting your new job. There’s nothing you can do about reorganization. Just be on the lookout for the box of tissues. ■

Regina L. Ruben is a consultant in drug safety and risk management in Wilmington, Delaware. Send your career story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.

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