If that headline does not apply to you, keep reading. Someday, it might. Many people who are escorted out of cubicles or off of manufacturing floors have been warned. Others say they never saw it coming. Either way, when your number comes up, make sure you leave with the grace of someone who could be rehired someday and the finesse of someone who knows how to capitalize on a tough situation. In other words, when your boss says you're done, you are just getting started.

When you are laid off, you can't ask for your job back; you can't expect someone to change his mind and send you back to your desk. You cannot expect to keep phones, lap tops or hats if these were paid for by your employer. However, you can negotiate on a few key points which will make your life better and your next job search successful.

You can request time. If you are asked to sign termination documents, ask for time to speak with a lawyer, or for time to read everything over. Explain that this has come as a surprise, and make an appointment to come in the next day to go through termination documents. This gift of time will ensure you have a chance to read and understand what you're signing.

You can request a good reference. Ask if you will be eligible for rehire in the future. Even if you hope never to step foot in the place again, if you are eligible for rehire, this reflects positively on you and your work. If not, that's a different reflection. Will your manager write a recommendation letter on your behalf? The sooner you find another job, the sooner she stops being penalized by your unemployment claim. A simple letter of reference is not too much to ask.

You can request health insurance coverage. You should continue to have any coverage you have paid in advance. But ask about extending coverage beyond that. Will the company cover a month or two while you look for work? Will they carry you on their plan if you agree to pay for it yourself? If your company has more than twenty employees, you may be eligible for a Federal program, COBRA, which allows you to keep your insurance for a while after leaving.

You can ask for a payout of unused vacation days. Some companies pay out accrued vacation and sick time when a person leaves the company; some do not. Your boss can say no if that's the company policy; you have nothing to lose for asking.

And you can ask for your last paycheck. Fired? Under MN law, employers must issue a final paycheck immediately or within twenty-four hours of your request for payment. If you quit, your employer has more time.

A layoff often leaves people in shock. As you leave for the last time, help yourself: act upbeat, say polite goodbyes, avoid anger and violence, keep quiet if you must, and know you have a right to ask for what you need, even if your employer no longer needs you around.

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