

# Communicating Tough News in Tough Times

**By Deborah Folka**

When you have difficult news to communicate, do it like removing a bandage: swiftly and completely.

How you and your business cope in tough times is a reflection of true character. How you communicate during those tough times reflects your values. It may be instinctive to duck and run for cover when things look bad, but just like your mother told you, it's best to stand up and face the music.

If you have bad news to tell your staff, make sure it's not 'out of left field.' Regular employee briefings are essential, making them aware of the state of business, how things are going in the industry, what the competition is up to and what the company is planning are all important pieces of information so everyone is pulling in the same direction. They won't feel blindsided if you've kept them apprised all along.

Plan the dissemination of bad news meticulously. Carefully plot out each step, craft each message and go over the timing and the ways in which you will communicate as if you're organizing D-Day all over again.

Make sure your management team has full information first so they can follow up with potentially shell-shocked employees. When it's really stunning news – like a closure or layoffs or severe financial losses – people tend to stop listening after the first shock. They need to be able to go back over the details of the news with their immediate supervisors.

In preparing to make tough news announcements, craft key messages and “potential questions-suggested-answers.” These will be the same points you use in speeches, meetings, media interviews and news releases. Do a brainstorming session with your senior management to uncover worst-case scenarios and role-play how you will handle things as they unfold. Don't avoid any issue. Now is not the time to pretend no one knows where the bodies are buried.

Tell everything you know and tell it fast. Today news really does travel faster than light – thanks to the Internet and mobile phones – so don't dally. Gossip and innuendo quickly fill any information vacuum you leave.

Tell as many people as possible in person. That gives them a chance to ask the questions that matter to them and gives you a chance to give human expression to the news. Whether it's sympathy, encouragement, empathy or comfort, they will take away an impression of leadership when you've spoken to them face-to-face and added the human dimension. To paraphrase Maya Angelou: long after people have forgotten what you said, they remember how you made them feel.

Impart the tough news with the gravitas it is due. Don't try to minimize it, don't dismiss fears or speculation and for heaven's sake, don't try to make jokes. Think of it as imparting the news of a death. When someone's job is at stake, it can be a life-or-death experience for that person.

Make sure everyone in the organization has someone at whom to vent. I will never forget the face of the CEO who stood up before 50 employees in a branch plant he was closing. He told them why and when it would happen and then he answered their questions. He stood at the door and shook each employee's hand as they left. It was a draining, difficult experience, but they respected him for it and they conveyed that respect in the stories they told to their families and in the community.

If you are eliminating positions and re-organizing staff, do as much as you can to support employees in transition to other employment. Make sure the rest of the staff know what is available and all that you are doing.

Make sure everything about the tough news you've announced is also available in written form. People need something to refer to when they've left the workplace and likely will not remember all you said in your speech. Put everything you can on your website or the employee-only Intranet. Understand it becomes public the minute you do, so be careful with your words.

Make sure your employees, shareholders and other close stakeholders know before the media. Nothing is so disenfranchising and disheartening as finding out you lost your job because of the headline on the front page of this morning's newspaper. It is a betrayal of your employees' trust and makes your organization look inept at best and unscrupulous at worst.

Tell everyone the same story. Don't embellish or minimize or put a 'spin' or different emphasis on it in anyway for anyone. Stick to the facts and you won't have to remember anything else. As Mark Twain said, "If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything."

Expect...indeed plan for...the unexpected. You're dealing with human beings after all, not just "market forces" or "human resources," so be prepared to adapt to rapidly shifting circumstances. Maybe a strike, a job action or even a violent incident may result from your news.

Take good care of your remaining employees. If it has been a lay-off or closure situation, remember those still employed will be nervous and in need of as much comfort, honesty and information as you can muster. Keep them informed and keep listening to them.

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