

How To Deliver Bad News

By Sandra Egli & John Whiteside

“It is with deep regret that I am forced today to announce the closing of this plant.” With these words a manager begins a final countdown for the employment of several hundred people in his plant. Concurrently, although at a different company, a Human Resources Manager prepares the documentation to meet with an employee who is being put on probation.

These managers appear to be in quite different circumstances, one facing the elimination of an entire manufacturing facility and the other conducting business as usual. There is a similarity in that both find themselves faced with the disagreeable and perhaps even dreaded need to deliver bad news. Whether the bad news is public, (as with impending layoffs) or personal (administering discipline) makes little difference. They would rather avoid being the source of a message the other person doesn't want to hear.

For most managers, their dislike is strong enough that they have at some time delayed or avoided altogether delivering a negative message. While this is not surprising (what sane person wants to bear bad tidings to another?) it would be valuable to examine our background assumptions about bad news. The next example will help to further analyze this aversion to communicating bad news.

The example company is a lumber mill that cannot keep up with the demand for product. Here, the managers have decided together to give in to the union demands to add two people to the production line because it is easier and will avoid a confrontation that could threaten production volumes. At the same time, on the plant floor, a union steward has signed what he believes is a frivolous grievance rather than face an angry union brother.

What makes bad news bad is a simple lack of respect for the person who will be receiving the message. There is an unspoken judgment that the receiver is not "up to it" that labels news as bad and motivates everyone to sidestep hard communications.

Respect for Others or Insult?

These are common responses that have been repeated in many different plants. Both managers and union officials avoided communicating bad news. What may be surprising is the insult concealed in the actions of the managers toward the union and the steward toward an individual.

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This aversion may be a misguided attempt to protect others from unhappy events or even to protect oneself. Nonetheless, it signals disrespect for the person or people who are about to receive the so-called bad news. The underlying message is - "I don't believe you are capable or willing to change your behavior," "I don't believe you are mature enough or care enough to find a solution to business threats," "I don't believe you have the skills to land another good job if the one you have disappears."

The undercurrent of disrespect is communicated clearly although it is unspoken. At the lumber mill the managers did not expect the union to care about the company so they backed down. In retaliation, the union

pressed for ever more concessions and management continued to back down. Concurrently, productivity went into a downward spiral. Ultimately the mill was sold because the corporation no longer chose to tolerate the problem. Most likely no one understood why productivity was so poor when the workers were getting everything they wanted.

What would make a difference is respect for and belief in the capability and intelligence of the workers and the pride people want to have in their work. Consider your own history. Very likely, you can recall no finer hour than when you have been called forth to beat an unbeatable challenge (as in this next example).

In this company, a food processing firm, management called a plant wide meeting when they were faced with a major downturn in business. With no solutions other than to lay people off, the managers asked workers for ideas. There were a lot of them and one was a winner - to contract the employees out to local competitors who were trying to hire. As a result of management's willingness to initiate this idea, no one was out of work and 6 months later, the company was able to regain nearly all of their "employees on loan." It proved to be a positive experience for everyone.

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Considering this kind of evidence, calling bad news bad is a misnomer at least. For many people, bad news may be the best news they've had in a long time (best in the sense of excitement and opportunity for growth, best in the sense of being fully alive).

What if bad news was not something to be feared?

A good relationship can pay surprising dividends. One company announced the closing of a plant three months before the shutdown. That plant already led the company in every measurement for product quality. Yet, during those 90 days, quality continued to improve. Schedule reliability remained at 100%, work transfers from the IAM union workers to non-union plants were achieved ahead of schedule. There was no loss of equipment or any form of vandalism. The order of layoffs was determined by union and management based on the needs of the business. These workers gave their top level performance to the last day, without reward, because they chose to do so.

If you would like to move past a reluctance (if not fear) to share unpleasant news try this simple exercise. Suppose that you have some monumental and unexpected bad news to deliver. Play it out in your mind. How will you deliver the bad news? What reaction will you receive? Based on what you have imagined, what can you conclude about the relationship? Is it strong enough to turn a monumental problem into an immense opportunity? If so, congratulate yourself (!) and keep the relationship strong. On the other hand, if there is a deficiency, set a plan to address the problems. You can transform the relationship.

It is a sure bet that you will frequently be called on to deliver bad news. The time to build bad news wherewithal into your relationships is now.

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After the Teambuilding

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Tips for Maximizing Change Efforts

Having Difficult Conversations Emergency Procedures

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To truly become expert in the art of delivering what is generally considered bad news, you should work on developing strong relationships all the time. How you relate to the listener in the case of disciplining your assistant or letting the boss know about a problem with a customer is the most important single element in the success of the conversation. But so often we find ourselves in situations in which we have not developed the relationships that will easily weather bad news. How do you deal with it then?

Sandra Egli and John Whiteside, in their article "How to Deliver Bad News¹" discuss the importance of the relationship between the speaker and the listener when there is a challenging conversation to be had. Hesitating or avoiding it challenging conversation is, in some ways, insulting to the other person. Dealing with the issues in a straightforward manner indicates that you know they are "up to it."

In an emergency situation, though, when you find you don't have that kind of relationship you have to act fast. You have to design the relationship in the moment. Here is a set of questions that will enable you to perform relationship triage

Emergency Procedures: when you have to do it now!

- **What result do you want to produce in the meeting?**
- **What decisions have you made about the listeners?**
- **Are these decisions necessarily true?**
- **What reaction do you want?**
- **What really happened?**
- **Give the other person the benefit of the doubt.**

1) What result do you want to produce in the meeting?

You might think that you simply want to inform the other person of the news. This is doubtful. Usually one is delivering bad news because the situation is not tolerable any longer and something needs to change.

The next thing you might think of might be a "knee-jerk" reaction. If you are disciplining your assistant Joe and have some complaints, you may find that your first inclination is to make him wrong. You might resent him for "forcing you" to have this conversation

¹Egli, Sandra, and Whiteside, John, "How to Deliver Bad News" published on their Website, www.industrialrelations.com. February, 1998

with him. You might think, “I want to make him pay.” This is an unproductive result to try to produce. “Making him pay” is based on the assumption that he did something intentionally to upset you and that is only accurate in a small number of cases.

If the meeting went really well, then what would the result be? Would you have come to an understanding about the circumstances? Would you have an agreement from the other person that he or she wouldn’t do it again? Would you have several new ideas for handling an undesirable situation? Would you want to let the person know how his or her actions have impacted other people? If you can sort out the intended result and distinguish it from your “knee jerk” reaction, you are well on your way to having a more productive meeting.

2) What decisions have you made about the recipients?

This follows Egli and Whiteside’s contention that not wanting to deliver the bad news is an insult to the recipients. Are they a bunch of “low-lives” that don’t deserve your time? Have they reacted badly in the past to other news? Have you heard about them and how they deal with things? Do you think that talking to them won’t make any difference? Are you assuming they are at fault in the situation? Clarify your thoughts about the person or persons who will be listening to the bad news. It is important to realize what decisions you made so you can be clear about any prejudices you may have going in.

3) Are these decisions true?

Think about it. Is it possible that the evidence you have for the decisions you have made could also have lead to a different conclusion? I am not suggesting that you are wrong in your conclusions, just that you consider the possibility that you might not be right. They might not react the way you think they will. How much of the reaction you get from them is a self-fulfilling prophesy? We will never know, but what if your approach *does* have something to do with how they react?

4) What reaction do you want?

What do you want from the listener? I am reminded of a comedy act I once heard. A sales manager was responding to a customer who complained vehemently about a sales clerk. In addition to the usual refund the sales manager offered to “publically humiliate the sales

clerk before I fire her, and blackball her from the industry for life. Will there be anything else?” This kind of reaction to your complaint might be satisfying to your ego, but it is really workable only in the most drastic of situations. Define the reaction that you really want.

5) What really happened?

Don’t tell your colleague Sue, that she did something wrong. Tell her that you heard that XYZ happened or that you saw ABC event (or heard something, or saw a report, etc.). Make sure you distinguish between the events and the assessments that have been made about the events. Ask the her to add to the events from her perspective, and continue to distinguish the events from the assessments. Give it back to her. (“You did this, then he did this, then you did this and then he started yelling at you and you reacted by walking out of the room. Do I have the events straight?) Once the facts are clear, and are distinguished from the assessments and reactions,

you are operating from the same information. Even if you disagree about something that happened, you can at least be clear about where you disagree.

6) Give the other person the benefit of the doubt.

Ask for partnership in the matter. Assume that he or she is just as interested in a workable situation as you are. This does not mean you won’t be confronted with knee-jerk reactions from the recipient. You should expect them. But if you are willing to be a partner in the situation, you can let the reaction happen and let it go by the wayside in the interest of the result you want to produce.

Whereas this does *not* replace long-term relationship building, it should help you to sort out your assumptions and reactions from the facts of the situation. This is not about winning or losing, but about finding a solution to a problem This exercise should help you honor the recipient of your communication as a partner rather than an adversary.

Do you need coaching?
Are you confronting a situation you find difficult?
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