

OPINION

How to communicate unpopular decisions and changes

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Workplace change is endless. Shifting expectations, advancing technology, moving targets and toss in a pandemic for good measure – change fatigue is not only real, but often also debilitatingly painful. Is it any wonder then that so many of the people you work with resist change? Even worse, you may often find yourself charged with communicating or implementing decisions that you don't agree with yourself. Yet, ceaseless change is a workplace reality.

So how can you communicate decisions and changes that you know will not be liked or accepted while still maintaining trust and your credibility?

Thoughtfully. Deliberately. With honesty and openness. Which means that you must focus on six things as you craft and deliver what needs to be said and done.

ARTICULATE YOUR MESSAGE

Plan what you are going to say. In writing. Don't improvise or make it up as you go along. If you know the decision is going to be unpopular, a balanced message is critical. And if you don't have written points to refer to, you run the risk of getting caught up in the emotions that you will inevitably see and hear from others, which increases the likelihood that you will omit critical

information. So write down what you intend to communicate, in point form, and in order. What the change or decision is, why it's being made, who and what it is going to affect, when it's going to come into effect, and any additional relevant information. Get all of these down in writing. And then use your plan when you communicate.

TELL THEM WHY

Even if the decision wasn't yours (or one that you agree with), take the time to understand the reasons behind it. And then share it with others. Even if you believe they won't be in agreement. When you take the time to tell people why, often, surprisingly, you'll discover you will secure their buy-in and commitment. And even if you don't get them on board, they'll still be more likely to at least tolerate the change. Because you told them why.

STAY ON POINT

When you deliver the message you've carefully crafted, don't ramble. Use the written points you developed earlier to keep on track. And then, once you've said what you need to say, stop talking. Embrace the silence. It's easy to stray from your key points and embellish just to make things seem less negative than they are. So resist the temptation of saying something just to fill the gap. Stick to your plan.

RELAY INFORMATION PROMPTLY AND FREQUENTLY

If you want to be recognized as trustworthy and credible, then don't fall into the trap of holding till "things are finalized." When significant change is under way, everyone is aware that something is afoot. So waiting until all the details are ironed out (and all the i's are dotted and the t's crossed) only kicks the rumour mill into overdrive. If you delay, people discuss every possibility, and the conclusions they settle on will invariably be the worst scenarios. So share information early, even if it is partial and subject to change. And do it repetitively, even if there have been no significant alterations from the last time.

COMMUNICATE IN THE MOST PERSONAL METHOD POSSIBLE

When you have an unpopular message to communicate, always try to do it in the most personal way possible. In writing is your worst option. Conveying bad news via e-mail is the cowardly equivalent of breaking up a relationship by text. Over the telephone is better than e-mail, and face-to-face (in person, or if necessary, via video) is better than by telephone. You can always follow up your message up with an e-mail or a memo, but the first communication should always be via the most personal method possible.

BE FIRM AND PROFESSIONAL

It is important that you strike the right tone with your message. On the one hand, be clear that the unpopular decision or change is not optional, nor is it open for negotiation. However, it is just as essential to balance that with a willingness to consider aspects of how the change can be managed and the decisions implemented. Overall, your message needs to be: “This is happening, but let’s work together in determining how to put it into action.”

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