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The Right Way to Communicate Unpopular Decisions to Your Staff

Sometimes you have to do things your people aren't going to like. How to break the bad news

[Merge Gupta-Sunderji](#) || August 10, 2016



No matter how successful your company or how motivated your workforce, there will be times when you will have to make decisions that won't be popular with your people. Factor in the cyclicity of the economy and market demand, and the likelihood that you'll have to deliver an unpleasant message or a few goes up significantly.

Good leaders strive to minimize the fallout on their people, but sometimes doing the right thing for the company as a whole means hurting some of the individuals within it. Whether that means layoffs, reorganization, or even just a strategy shift, there are bound to be a few people who are put out by your decision. Worse yet, if you're the person who has to give the troops the bad news, you'll likely bear the brunt of their backlash.

But all is not lost. While you can't avoid making unpopular decisions, there are things that you can do to help your team understand and accept the new reality.

1. PLAN YOUR MESSAGE

An occasion on which you have to communicate unpopular news is not the time to “wing it.” Write down your intended message, in point format—what the change or decision is, why it’s being made, who and what it is going to impact, when it’s going to come into effect, and any other relevant information. Keep this document in front of you when you communicate with your employees.

In situations like this, it’s critical that you present a balanced picture. If you don’t have a written plan to follow, you can get caught up in the emotions of those around you, causing you to omit important and essential information, or—even worse—start to ramble.

2. RELAY INFORMATION PROMPTLY AND FREQUENTLY

Organizations tend to keep things confidential until the specifics of a big change or decision have been finalized. There’s no point in saying anything until all the details have been worked out, right?

Wrong. Like it or not, the rumour mill in your company is always running full-steam, and when information is scarce, the worse possible scenario will invariably dominate the conversation. Far better to tell people what you know, even if it’s incomplete. Seeding the grapevine with truthful—if partial—information creates a better outcome than letting it run wild with rumours on its own.

3. KEEP IT AS PERSONAL AS YOU CAN

Ideally, unpopular messages should be delivered face-to-face. In fact, in writing is the worst way to communicate bad news, the cowardly workplace equivalent of dumping your significant other by SMS. So why do so many companies give bad news in a company-wide memo? To ensure that everyone gets the same message, at the same time.

Your overriding aim should be to create trust, so use the most personal communication method possible. Face-to-face is better than by phone; by phone is better than in writing. You can always follow your initial message up with an email or memo, but the first communication should always be via the most personal method possible.

4. TAKE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR YOUR DECISIONS

There will be times when you have no choice but to do something that is going to be deeply unpopular. Maybe the market is forcing you to change direction, or your creditors are banging on the door. In these situations, it’s tempting to blame the circumstances. Don’t.

Take ownership of what’s about to happen at your company. Employees respect leaders who make tough decisions, come to difficult realizations, and then move forward with confidence. Be firm and professional. Your message should be that this change is not optional, and while aspects of the implementation may be open to discussion, the focus is not on “if” but how you are going to move forward into the new reality.

5. INVITE A DIALOGUE

Be open to conversations about the process and implementation. Let people ask questions, and be prepared to answer them. Your key message should be that though the decision or change isn’t necessarily ideal, it doesn’t mean that staff can’t provide input or have their voices heard.

Respect those who resist. Chances are that those who are slow to come on board probably have good information about what could go wrong if your new plan is implemented. Make it easy for these naysayers to tell you what they think won’t work, and encourage them to become part of the solution. You may find that these will be the very people who’ll roll up their sleeves and help when things inevitably go awry.

Merge Gupta-Sunderji is a speaker, author and consultant whose leadership development practice focuses on turning managers into leaders and people power into results. Through large-audience keynotes, small-group training, one-on-one mentoring, and customized consulting, Merge has given over 65,000 professionals in eight countries

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