



And now the bad news

How you communicate bad news can affect how you move on from it

Let's face it; in business as in life, things aren't always a bed of roses. Mistakes, lost contracts, poor sales and lay-offs are all par for the course in the world of work. This is bad news for all involved, but the way such news is communicated can take the sting out of the circumstances, or add to the pain. I'd suggest that the former is the preferable option.

Clarify the issue

Whatever has happened, or is about to happen, you need to be clear about what the impact will be and clear about the message you're going to communicate. The issue may be the need for redundancy, for example, so what will that mean for those losing their jobs – and those left behind?

People not processes

Any business, from technology to manufacturing to services, is really about people. You're delivering a product or service to people and your staff are people too. Yes, that's stating the obvious, but it's worth stressing again and again. Your communications should acknowledge what the recipients will be feeling; think 'upset', 'angry' and 'anxious' and you probably won't be far wrong.

Plan

You'll need to plan – and involve other parts of the organisation – before saying anything. These 'other parts' are likely to include the Directors, HR and those with a stake in the announcement. Planning will also help to ensure consistency; you need to say the same thing to all of your audiences or confusion and the grapevine will reign. When that happens, your future communications will lack credibility because people won't know what or who to trust.

Give people a voice

You can be as empathetic as you like, but people will still want a chance to let off steam. Face to face communication is vital: you need to tell it like it is and give people a chance to respond, ask questions and let off steam. Some sort of forum for people to express their views and feelings is a good idea.

Think it through

There's no denying that any bad news will put a dent in morale. It's also true that through the bad times, you have to keep on delivering for your clients and maintain 'business as usual'. This isn't easy and you need to be honest about it.

Thinking it through, just about everyone will be involved in some way. Clarifying the issues and remembering it's about people – as noted above – will help you here. If redundancy is the issue, those not losing their jobs may be just as anxious as those who are. Will I have more work? What's going to happen to the department? These are just a couple of questions people will be asking.



Thinking it through, you'll need to ensure that everyone receives the same open and honest communications as those who are directly affected through job loss, or whatever. Those left behind are the ones that will help you to move on and, hopefully, to succeed.

Moving on

Once the implications of the bad news have been fulfilled – people have been made redundant, part of the operation has been shut down, or whatever – you need to move on.

Communications has an important role to play here, too. Some sort of recognition for a job well done through a difficult time could be in order. In other words, being clear that the bad news has come to an end and the business has now entered a new phase. This can help to draw a line under the problems and focus on the present and what lies in store.