



Communicating bad news well

Understand what you're communicating

What kind of bad news is it - job losses, share price collapse, poor sales? The important thing is to clarify the impact of the bad news on the company and make sure you connect with all the different parts of the organisation. Understand that there are different types of bad news and that the best position to be in is up to speed with the business rationale of why you are communicating it.

Think about the recipients

If everyone who has to communicate bad news thought about this and this only, then communicating bad news would not have the bad press it has. The idea is to understand how what you have to say will be received by different audiences. The practice is to empathise or try to put yourself in the place of the people you are communicating with.

Plan it well

You may want to sound spontaneous and natural, but it's important to prepare in advance. Have a tight, integrated communications plan for delivering bad news. Remember, there are legislative and rulebook procedures to follow, so work closely with HR from the beginning and don't forget the legal and investor relations departments.

Say the same thing to all

Organisations often make the mistake of sounding heartfelt and contrite with employees but forward-looking and gung-ho with the City. If you give a downbeat message to employees and an upbeat one to the City, the people who deliver the brand, and ultimately the dividends to shareholders, will smell a rat. Communicate a few thoughtful and accurate business messages to all audiences in ways those audiences can understand.

Give people an outlet

It isn't enough to communicate bad news well and say you understand how people feel. You may well empathise but people have to be allowed to have their response. Give them somewhere they can go to see someone they can talk to.

Help get back to business as usual

During a time of crisis recognise that the productivity of the business is bound to be affected for a while. But the future of the organisation depends on things getting back to business as usual as soon as possible. Be totally honest and give managers the tools and support they need to get things and people working again.

Look after the survivors

In a redundancy situation, often the people that leave are well-treated, but the ones left behind are not. They can be left to cover more work, with no future guarantees or rewards in sight. Make sure that you plan in advance to look after the needs and interests of those who are left behind to make the organisation successful in future.

Tell people when it's over

Don't assume that people will know when the tough times are easing, or that they won't want to celebrate a new phase for your organisation. Celebrate the tenacity of the team in getting through the bad times. Even more important, thank everyone for making their own contribution.