

## How to Deliver Bad News

When things go wrong, how do you deliver the bad news to your people? Is it best to tell the complete truth or just what they need to know? Should you tell them immediately or wait?

Effectively communicating bad news is a challenge all leaders face many times in their careers. The decisions that you make about the timing, level of detail and completeness of information provided can have serious and prolonged consequences.

### Learning From a Nuclear Crisis

The nuclear crisis that developed in aftermath of the Japan earthquake and tsunami illustrates these communication challenges. Government officials were widely criticized as providing too little information, too slowly and hiding the true facts. Even after accounting for culture and communication style, there still appears to be significant shortcomings.

Some will argue that telling the truth and providing complete information may cause unrest, anxiety and possibly irrational behavior. They believe that people cannot be trusted with the real facts so leadership must protect them by providing comforting assurance and minimal information. I suggest that incomplete and partial information pose even greater risks. Social media networks no longer allow the truth and complete story to be suppressed.

### 3 Important Communication Lessons

Here are three lessons I've learned over the years for your use in communicating bad news.

1. Provide accurate, complete and relevant information

Tell your people what you know supported by clear and relevant facts. Keep things clear, simple and understandable. Also, tell them what you don't know and the steps you are taking to gather missing information.

2. Trust and respect your people

Communicate honestly and completely, trusting that the majority will listen and act rationally. If some panic or react badly, it's probably not because of the completeness of the information; they probably would react badly anyway!

3. Communicate Frequently

Establish trust from the beginning and maintain that trust with timely, predictable and complete communication. Provide clear complete information with updates at pre-determined times so unnecessary speculation and rumors are quashed.

### Putting Theory Into Practice

There are a couple of very memorable incidents where leaders provided a role model for effective communication.

- J&J remains the role model on how to handle a difficult and completely unanticipated situation that had the potential to destroy one of their major products. The Tylenol tampering had the potential for not only disastrous PR but also significant financial performance hit. J&J management was open, honest and completely transparent. They are still recognized for acting and communicating based on their values.
- On September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011, Rudy Giuliani, the mayor of New York, did an exceptional job balancing the delivery of bad news from the terrorist attack coupled with instilling confidence that the situation was under control. His personal involvement, visibility and empathetic communication made him a national figure. It was easy for everyone to see how special his leadership was in a time of national crisis.

In both instances, these leaders did not sugarcoat the truth or fill us with platitudes. They presented important factual information and established commanding leadership. Use them as role models when you need to present bad news or handle a crisis.