

When Leader's Must Bring Bad News: Essential Rules For Delivering Information to Teams

The culture of many helping organizations includes some distrust of the “Administration” by the employees doing direct service work. Because of this, how a Leader—at any level in the organization—delivers decisions or mandates from “above” is a critical moment in the hopefulness of a team. A Leader will spend days or months in efforts to reclaim team hopefulness when mistakes are made in their initial delivery of the news. Remember: You, and you alone, will eventually have to fix any mistakes you make, so careful attention to skillful delivery of these messages is important.

Before Delivery:

Clarify with YOUR supervisor or Board:

1. Specific reasons for this decision, including vision, policy, fiscal, programmatic.
2. Possibility for influencing decision.
3. Possibility for adaptations.
4. Is this time-limited or permanent?
5. Timelines, essential outcomes...get as much information as you can.
6. Assure them of your clear intention to follow through with implementation of their decision.

Delivering the News:

Delivering the news to your team is 10% about the news and 90% about their perception of your reaction to the news. Keep your body language neutral, your voice inflection neutral, and choose your words very carefully so they do not cause escalation of emotion in your team members.

1. Specific reasons why, including, if appropriate, vision, policy, fiscal and programmatic rationales.
2. Be clear about whether the decision can be influenced.
3. Be clear about whether any adaptations to the decision can be considered.
4. Be clear about your commitment to follow through with the decision.
5. Most importantly, do not “take sides” by using language pitting “us against them.” If you are part of the leadership team that made the decision, be sure to include yourself in that group by using the term “we decided”, rather than saying “they decided.” Most leaders have the desire to separate themselves from any decision that may be disliked and align themselves with the people receiving the news. This will create a divisiveness that will make your job, and the implementation of the news, more difficult.

After Delivery:

1. Provide a period of time for statements from employees about agreement and/or disagreement with decision. Do not problem solve during this period of time. Start this conversation with a question like, “What are your thoughts or feelings about this decision?”
2. Provide a period of time for clarifying issues related to implementation of decision. Start these conversations with a question like, “What are the implementation issues we will need to figure out to successfully do this?”
3. Follow-up at further meetings with implementation questions. Do not allow “complaining” or other conversations that are not directly related to problem-solving implementation issues.

If they ask about your agreement/disagreement with the decision:

1. Your tone of voice and word choice is 90% of what they will hear in your response.
2. Keep body, voice, and language neutral.
3. State briefly your agreement or disagreement with either the decision-making process or the content of the decision.
4. Again, clearly re-state your intention to follow through.