How to give bad news

Dealing with redundancy and unwanted change

Economic trends mean that unfortunately many of us will be living through times of increased uncertainty. Many people will have to deal with news of redundancy, and even if they are not directly affected they will know someone who is. Though this is written for use in the workplace and mainly about redundancy, these principles apply to giving and receiving bad news more generally.

The shock of redundancy

Redundancy is for many employees one of the most traumatic work-related events they can experience. Announcements of redundancies will invariably have an adverse impact on morale, motivation and productivity across the group, whether they are directly affected by it or not. Of course the impact and consequences are worse for those who lose their jobs, nevertheless, there is often a general ripple effect, particularly when details of impending redundancies or restructuring are leaked some time ahead of the actual announcements about who will be affected.

Uncertainty is a great de-stabiliser. Everything that can be done to reduce uncertainty should therefore be done during times of organisational change. This applies from the moment the first news is given, through the process of informing individuals of decisions that will affect their future. Once a redundancy programme has been implemented remaining staff must be reassured with clear information on job security, new work routines, reporting structures etc.

Typical reactions

The news of redundancy marks significant change and a turning point in many people’s lives. Redundancy may be virtually immediate or cover a period of notice, during which the employee continues in post. Some people react with deep dismay, shock and real worry for their future. Others may welcome the news with a sense of relief and recognition that there are new possibilities ahead of them. Many staff experience a roller-coaster of mixed emotions and their personal circumstances will naturally affect individual response to the news.

Some staff will appear to be coping well. Others will be in obvious distress. Individual needs and circumstances, including personal factors, will vary as well. Others will cope better and differences in behaviour will be less apparent. Awareness of likely issues can enable managers to understand and respond to staff problems, either directly or through the EAP. Managers may also feel at risk, so comments apply equally to them.

Staff will be most concerned with the immediate task of coping with their current situation and the challenge of change associated with unemployment and eventual return to work. However, there are some stages in life where people are likely to experience several transitions within a short period of time, e.g. late teens/early 20’s, the pulling up roots stage, the late 20s/early 30s, sometimes called the Catch 30 stage and the notorious mid-life crisis of the mid-40s. These periods can be distressing and the threat of unemployment adds another stress. But transitions can also become important turning points leading to new, more positive phases of life.

The problems and uncertainty caused by organisational change can cause severe stress problems for employees’ families too – partners, parents and
children. Where a major redundancy programme is planned, thought should be given to family briefings with staff and partners. In addition, managers may be able to offer practical support, such as minimising unsocial hours or travel.

**Stages of a transition**

The process of change or transition is a stressful one, whether the change is positive or negative. The reactions described below are normal reactions to abnormal situations. If you are aware of the stages, you are in a better position to understand the kind of help, encouragement or referral an employee (or yourself) needs. If you are in a transition period yourself, it is wise to reduce your commitments, especially if you are going through a crisis phase. High anxiety levels or depression may result in staff being advised to take some time off by their doctor. In many cases, a few days leave may save several months of extended sickness, resignation or family break up. Employees in crisis are likely to make serious errors of judgment or be at higher risk of workplace or driving accidents. On the other hand, if supported through a transition, employees are likely to enter a new phase of confidence and motivation, fully adjusted to their new environment. Where whole groups of employees experience a similar trauma, e.g. redundancy of colleagues or major reorganisation, the transition cycle may apply to team morale and performance. This has implications for planning ongoing operations through a period of change.

**Coping stages**

People are said to go through distinct phases when coping with difficult and challenging experiences in their lives. This is a process that allows us to adjust to change progressively as we process information or a situation that is initially difficult to accept.

*Initial shock*

Expect rapid mood swings, even if the event was anticipated. Traumatic change causes deeper shock including stunned, frozen emotion, possible delayed reaction. Remember that when hearing bad news people may not actually hear or remember all the details, so be prepared to answer questions later.

*Minimising/denial*

A window of opportunity to handle immediate tasks, to review prospects, to plan, search or train. Encourage action.

*Loss of confidence*

Increasing need for emotional support and to identify change issues. Encourage team discussions if groups are affected.

*Confusion/depression*

Maintain support activities for individuals, families and teams. Refer to EAP or for medical advice if needed. Judgment at risk on complex work problems.

*Crisis (risk of quitting)*

Expect absence or allow time off. Minimise work demands. Double-check important decisions. Refer to EAP or medical practitioner if severe behaviour problems arise. Encourage by valuing past achievements. Consider morale boosting events for groups in transition.

*Recovery*

Valuing the past helps staff let go of inappropriate expectations and work practices. Growing acceptance of the new reality, adapting ideas, behaviour. Maintain emotional support. Listen to new ideas and creative insights.

*Renewed confidence*

Regained emotional stability (even in unemployment), more energy, ‘bouncing back’.

**How to give bad news**

None of us likes giving bad news and many people are so unsure about how to do it that they actually make it worse than it might be. Common errors include being cold and abrupt, thus increasing the sense of isolation felt by the person receiving the news, or hedging so much that the result is woolly or vague. Managers may be called on to give bad news in a range of circumstances, redundancy is just one. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) says: “Managers should handle news of redundancies with sympathy and clarity (and) to ensure that a large number of employees hear the news at the same time, particular care will be needed to see that people know where to go for further advice or support.”

**After care**

When redundancies become unavoidable the immediate priority is the fair and sensitive treatment of employees who are losing their jobs. Once this has been achieved, the organisation must take steps to ensure the morale of the staff members who remain. Clumsy redundancy handling is bad for the employers business and long-term reputation. Staff
who have lost friends and colleagues may well be feeling resentment or a sense of loss, not to mention the likely changes to their working routine and even an increased workload.

A demoralised workforce, anxious about job security and critical of the handling of the redundancies of colleagues, is not likely to display commitment, enthusiasm and initiative.

Therefore, the primary objectives of management should be to:

Develop honest, clear two-way communications and give the most encouraging messages possible

- Give all staff a full explanation of the situation and explain the policies and practices adopted to those made redundant
- Demonstrate the necessity for change
- Give an appraisal of future employment prospects and details of changes in working arrangements
- Handle redundancies in a responsible, fair and effective way
- Do everything possible to minimise redundancies and support those who lose their jobs
- Provide a forward-looking, positive attitude for the future and show survivors the value of their role in that future
- Conduct, where necessary, individual discussions with remaining key workers to reassure them of their importance and employment prospects
- Ensure that managers have, or develop, the necessary personal skills and attitude to operate effectively during periods of traumatic change.

Bad news, some considerations

Nobody likes receiving bad news and most of us certainly don’t like giving it, but there are some steps that can be taken to mitigate its immediate impact. First is that the giver of the bad news considers their own thoughts and feelings about the information they are about to give out, and that they also prepare when, where and how the news will be given. Much of this is common sense, though when people become swept up in an organisational chain of events it is easy to overlook these basic considerations. All the more reason, therefore, to plan well to ensure that the process is as humane as possible.

Using a three-point approach

**Before**

Preparing for the meeting where you are going to be giving bad news is almost as important as actually giving it. For instance, where you’ll sit in relation to the other person during the meeting, how they will enter and leave the room (when you’ve just been told you are losing your job no-one wants to immediately cross a busy office under the gaze of their colleagues), how long the meeting will last and its format.

When choosing a place, you should make sure it’s quiet with little or no chance of interruption. Make sure that the location gives both of you a chance of feeling as comfortable as possible. Avoid sitting behind a desk if possible, consider an informal coffee table setting or similar. The idea is to be at eye-level with the other person with no barrier between you. If office arrangements mean that you have to work with a desk move out from behind it to greet the person as they arrive and (if appropriate) to shake hands with them as they leave. Remember that these are only guidelines, so if you have particular knowledge of how best to help a colleague feel comfortable, be guided by that.

The giver of the news should always be well informed about the circumstances and process of, say the redundancy programme. This means being able to answer questions about time-scale, support such as the EAP and what it can provide, financial information and advice etc., clearly and precisely. It is useful to have this information available in written format as well as useful phone numbers, intranet and other resources, so that the staff member can take it away and study it at their convenience. They are unlikely to remember much of this additional information once they have been given the bad news.

**During**

Watching the other person’s reaction is very important while giving bad news. By observing body language or extent of eye contact, one can judge whether the other person is understanding and accepting what is being said as well their emotional responses. It is important to remember to speak clearly and slowly with the least amount of jargon. It is also worth considering how to set the scene with a brief opening statement once the initial greeting and settling in has been accomplished. Too much small-talk at this stage would add an unwelcome delay, but getting to the point too abruptly is also damaging to the relationship and makes it harder for the other person to absorb the information and respond. Getting the balance right is vital.

The aim should be to create a mutually respectful tone which is comfortable enough for the person receiving the news to ask any initial questions they may have. Be prepared for questions you may not want, or be able, to answer. It is tempting to respond to “Why me? I’ve got much more experience” etc. with an attempted answer, even though, at this point it is unlikely that any answer would be satisfactory. Be ready to validate the question without answering it. For example; “I
understand that you’d like an answer, I’m afraid I can’t respond, all I can say is that the decisions were hard to make”. Avoid getting drawn into a debate about rights and wrongs because that way lies more difficulty.

After

After you’ve given the bad news, don’t end the meeting abruptly. Ask again for questions or if they need any information repeated. Offer additional sources of information like EAP or other advice or support. Some people feel somewhat lost after receiving bad news. Ensure that, if they need it, they can go and sit somewhere quietly or take some time out to adjust. Ensure that there is some forum for following up. People often have questions once they have had a chance to review their situation.

Conclusion

News, good or bad, is simply information. Remember Shakespeare’s words “There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.” This is not to deny the gravity of any bad news, but to remind ourselves that we cannot necessarily anticipate how the receiver of the news will interpret what we are about to tell them. For example, when news of redundancies are announced in organisations, some people actually welcome the opportunity to move on. The trauma for them comes if they are not chosen to leave, and have to stay on in their job.

When giving bad news we must be as open honest about it as we can; empathy and sincerity go a long way in helping the other person feel understood and supported. Be prepared for a backlash. Disappointment and worry may flare into anger, and though the person who is giving the news may feel like the target it is not meant for them, even when delivered vehemently, so don’t take it personally.

Respond to this by listening, instead of talking. Legitimise the other’s emotions without becoming emotional yourself, and explore their perceptions before you try to define (your version of) reality. A good, empathic response acknowledges not only someone’s feelings but also the reasons for those feelings.

Finally, whatever the information you are giving, and the response it elicits, your are there to communicate an important message which needs to be heard and understood. Make sure that your attempts to do this in a supportive and empathetic way do not ‘sugar coat’ the message to a point where it is not heard for what it is.

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**WHEN GIVING BAD NEWS**

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<th>DO</th>
<th>DO NOT</th>
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<tr>
<td>Set the scene by choosing a time and place.</td>
<td>Open with an apology or a statement like ’I’m afraid...’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Give the person your undivided attention.</td>
<td>Give incomplete or inaccurate information, if you don’t know something, say so.</td>
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<td>Make sure important information is also available in written form.</td>
<td>Say ’I know how you feel...’</td>
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<td>Express regret at the end, if that is what you feel.</td>
<td>Hide behind rank or position, be a human being with humane responses.</td>
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<td>Ensure that you are sincere and accurate in all you say.</td>
<td>Attempt to close the meeting before the other person has been able to ask questions.</td>
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<td>Always give precise information.</td>
<td>Waffle or prevaricate.</td>
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<td>Offer appropriate support and signpost other useful resources.</td>
<td>Avoid your responsibility.</td>
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