

Delivering Tough Messages



By Frank Handy of [Stitt Feld Handy Group](#)

We've all heard them: "I'm sorry to tell you this, and don't worry, but . . . ". Or, "I'm sure you'll look back on this and think it was the best thing that ever happened." I'm sure this kind of comment didn't sound or feel true to you, whether you heard it or felt compelled to say it. In these types of situations—dismissals, performance problems, re-organizations, etc., the challenge is to deliver the message while maintaining the best possible relationship. Here are some ideas about making this two-pronged task easier.

First, to have a hard conversation successfully, the organization needs to have created an atmosphere of respect for staff in previous situations. If the organization has not demonstrated respect for staff consistently, a challenging situation will be met with skepticism even from the "best" staff, while those who feel more at risk are likely to feel suspicion and hostility, and react accordingly. The keystones of respect for communicating with staff in a workplace are honesty, clarity of expectations, consistency of treatment, and fairness in policy and decision-making.

Second, the message should be clear and free of assumptions about reactions. Often the person delivering a tough message fears a bad reaction, and so apologizes or "sugar coats" in advance, to try to head off problems that haven't occurred. For instance, a manager might tell an employee not to worry when a performance management regime is being instituted. But trying to anticipate and head off reactions can feel like controlling or patronizing behaviour and therefore manifest a strong reaction.

Third, your message will not likely be as much of a surprise as you may have thought. People understand they are not doing well, and may react in a variety of destructive ways. Some of those ways may be part of the root of their performance issues, such as defensiveness about making mistakes and therefore not taking any chances, fear of failure or success, lack of respect for themselves or others. If the situation is not a surprise, pointing out the error can create a challenge to a person's self esteem, self-respect or commitment because it feels like a personal attack rather than a work performance correction. Your comments should clearly point out the difference.

However, being clear does not mean being harsh: it means dealing with the performance. The adage "Separate the people from the problem: be hard on the problem, soft on the people" is a good guide. As an example, listen to the difference between: John, you are a poor employee so I am going to start you on a performance management

regime and you better shape up or you'll be gone; and: John, your work performance has not been at an adequate standard; I am going to review with you a performance management regime, which is intended to create every reasonable opportunity to get your work up to a proper standard so you can continue to be employed here.

In summary: focus your message on the issue rather than the person, make the message clear, fulfill your organizational goals without apology for them (if you don't believe in them why aren't you working to change them or why are you working for that organization?) and do so with respect and concern for the impact on the people involved. Then the relationship can be maintained and take its proper place in the situation, supporting the work and communication between people in the workplace.