

Expert: Give Staff Straight News About Layoffs

Workplace: ‘Delivering Bad News for Good Results’ Eases Stress for Both Sides

BY MIKE ALLEN

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Workers on the receiving end of bad news deserve to hear the straight facts, delivered with a dose of human empathy. Unfortunately, most managers have little experience in this area, and botch the job, says Dana Bristol Smith, a workplace consultant.

Smith recently presented a seminar called “Delivering Bad News for Good Results.”

Smith said she’s been doing the workshop for about a year and is keeping busy.

Although San Diego’s unemployment rate of 4.2 percent remains below that of the nation and state, the local economy remains in a downturn, and layoffs are continuing.

This month’s seminar was presented to a group of about 20 human resource professionals and hosted by the Metro Career Center in Kearny Mesa.

“We designed a workshop to help the bearers of bad news to do it in a way that is less painful for them, less uncomfortable for the recipients, and in a way that shows empathy and concern for their situation,” Smith said.

Smith, whose company is Speak for Success, says while delivering bad news such as a layoff is certainly a difficult task, managers can ease the pain for everyone, including themselves, if they learn to follow some rules, and inject human empathy into the process.

Because it is such an unpleasant task, many managers avoid communicating negative news to groups and individual workers, which often makes the situation far worse, said Eric Kaufmann, who also was a presenter at the seminar.

“I know a lot of managers who will put off talking to an employee for months just because they don’t care for this task,” Kaufmann said. In some cases, managers sometimes ignore taking action, for example talking to an employee about their performance, which leads ultimately to the employee getting fired, he said.

Smith provided a model for delivering bad news that included providing information in a direct and empathetic way, the reasons why the change is occurring using factual information, and then give some direction on how they should respond.

Too often, managers give employees news without providing reasons for changes, Smith said.

“People want to know the big picture, how the news is affecting the company as a whole,” she said.

Communicating negative news via e-mail can be dangerous, because the medium doesn’t allow for a fuller expression of human empathy, and words can sometimes be misinterpreted, Smith said.

Far better is talking to workers personally and truthfully concerning the bad news, letting them know the company cares.

Smith said getting out the bad news all at once as opposed to dragging it out bit by bit, hoping that will minimize the pain, should be the model for managers to follow.

Using an analogy of a mother removing a bandage from a child’s wound, Smith said a mother will try to remove it quickly rather than slowly.

Likewise, if managers can get out the news to workers directly and all at once, the news is still painful, but likely won’t last as long, she said.

Further, by getting everyone to realize what has happened, and giving them the respect they deserve, employees are far more inclined to accept the situation and work cooperatively with fellow employees toward management’s desired goals, she said.

Kaufmann said delivering bad news such as layoffs to workers is essential if the company expects remaining employees to be effective in their jobs.

“The greater challenge is what happens to the people who are staying,” he said. “There are ways of presenting a layoff that will leave the remaining employees hopeful and engaged in the mission and purpose of the company. And there are ways of delivering this news that leaves them anxious and uncommitted.”

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