



Communicating Difficult Information

Description:

This tool offers steps to follow when communicating difficult information.

How it can be used:

Communicating difficult messages is an inevitable part of being a leader in any organization. It can be especially hard in smaller communities where everyone knows everyone, and you know how it will affect people that you care about. The quality of your communication is important when relaying tough messages. Below are some good practices on how to share difficult information.

1. Prepare yourself

Decide the best time and setting to deliver the news. Put yourself in your team's/community's shoes. Think about what you would want to know about the decision being handed down and anticipate any questions and reactions. Perhaps discuss with a colleague or trusted Elder, what questions you may receive and how to respond. People are likely to ask such questions as: Why was this decision made? When does this new decision take effect? How will it impact our team/the community? Should we be worried about our jobs/program/services etc.? Prepare your answers, being careful to eliminate judgmental or critical words from your responses.

Prepare any paperwork you'll need to hand out (e.g., a new organizational chart).

2. Be honest

Tell the truth, as hard as that might be. Your goal should never be to tell half-truths as this misleads and undermines trust. Instead, seek to be transparent. Don't understate the severity of the situation but empathize with the reality of people's experiences in the light of your message and be honest with the details that are available.

3. Maintain respect

Always talk about the decision of the guiding group (e.g., Health Committee, Board, Chief and Council, etc.) with respect. For example, you may say something like, *"I know this was a difficult decision for them. Several options were discussed, and it was decided this was best for the overall sustainability of the program."*

4. Be clear and precise in the communication

Often with good intention, it's easy to soften the message too much, leaving grey areas and space for false hope. Avoid such mixed messages and focus on being clear, precise, and to-the-point. Grey areas and false





hope lead people to push boundaries that aren't negotiable, and this can lead to more damage. A good leader should be explicit about what the choices are – and where there are no choices available.

5. Be specific

Provide as many details as you can to explain the decision and how it will affect your team or your community.

6. Give time and space for a response

When communicating tough messages to individuals or to a group, you must give time and space for a response. Whether the questions are about next steps, requests for feedback, or even the ability to ask for reassurance – you need to give adequate opportunity to respond, and for you to respond in turn.

7. Allow expression of emotion

Depending on the severity of the message, an emotional reaction is a natural part of bad news, disappointments, and tough messages. If your team/community members are comfortable enough to share their feelings, give them space to do so. Unless you are physically in danger, another person's emotional reaction won't hurt you – and expressing it can do them a lot of good. Allowing expression of emotion shows that you care – closing it down too quickly distances you from the people you're leading.

8. Share your own feelings

Sharing your own feelings can be a powerful way to show empathy and build trust, although you need to be careful here. Expressing your concern for people and acknowledging the reality and validity of their reactions is powerful and positive. Talking about how bad you feel or how the situation is impacting you negatively, isn't helpful. This isn't about you – it's about the people you lead or the community members you serve. And never blame the mythical "them" for the bad news – distancing yourself in this way is unfair and unprofessional.

9. Follow up as needed

Your team or community may ask questions you hadn't anticipated or may need details that are not yet finalized. Avoid the temptation to create an answer on the spot if you don't know for certain. It's perfectly okay to say, *"I hadn't anticipated that question; let me look into it and follow up with you."* After you give the information in person, it's then okay to email details that need to be in writing, such as changes to programs or complex policies.

