

training

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Reaching Consensus: Delivering Bad News...in a Good Way

by Deborah Zarsky

Due to the economy and recent cutbacks, I won't be able to promote Chris, one of my best team members, as planned. I'm not only worried that she'll get angry when I break the bad news, but I'm also concerned that she might quit upon hearing it (before I have the chance to promote her next year). Any advice?

Being the bearer of bad news is neither fun nor easy.

However, the words, tone, and medium we use to communicate bad news can have a profound effect on the way the information is received. They can make the difference between peaceful acceptance and indignation.

While many are inclined to work up to the matter at hand by engaging in small talk and by beating around the bush, you will probably have more success by being direct (although not harsh) right from the start. You want to avoid your employee feeling tricked and caught off guard – one minute thinking that everything is wonderful, the next being shocked with disappointment. Ease her into the conversation by alerting her that bad news is to follow: “I have some disappointing news to share with you.”

Once you have prepared her, you should proceed by sharing three pieces of information. The first is your relationship with her. The second is the news itself. The third is how you feel about the news. In your case, you might consider, “I really value you as a member of our team and would like to see you grow with the company. Nevertheless, I will not be able to give you the promotion we talked about this year. I really feel bad and I wish this weren't the case.”

Now, rather than giving the reasons behind the decision, you might express some empathy and solicit her reaction, “I'm sure this comes as a shock, and is disappointing. Tell me, what's going through your mind?”

Now comes the hard part. Sit quietly and listen attentively as Chris responds.

When she is done speaking, fight the urge to explain the decision. Instead, acknowledge everything that Chris said by repeating it, including implied emotions, and asking if you understood her correctly and if you have missed anything. This process will help Chris feel heard and, in turn, should de-escalate the situation. You want to get the point that Chris tells you that you have completely captured her side of the story including the emotions she's feeling.

One of the hazards to be wary of in this type of conversation is the “co-mingling” of your relationship with the decision at hand. For example, Chris might say, “If you really appreciate me as a worker, you would promote me.” Should you encounter this type of co-mingled allegation,

be sure to address both aspects of the assertion, albeit separately – each should be addressed independently.

Start by addressing the relationship component (e.g., you must not appreciate me as a worker) until the matter is resolved. Try something like, “I do appreciate you. I’m sorry if I haven’t done enough to express that appreciation. I have tried, though, and will continue to try. Have there been other times that you haven’t felt appreciated?” By allowing Chris to respond, you might find that this current disappointment is part of a bigger relationship issue (one that the promotion would not have solved). Or, more likely, Chris will realize that you have indeed demonstrated your appreciation throughout your time together.

With the relationship aspect behind you, you are ready to discuss the matter at hand. This is your opportunity to explain the factors underlying the decision. Again, give Chris the opportunity to ask questions – you want to ensure that she thoroughly understands why the decision was made, since understanding generally leads to acceptance.

The conversation should close with you restating any empathy (i.e., I’m sorry that this is how things played out), you sharing any genuine hope you have for a change in the situation (e.g., once the economy rebounds in the coming months, I expect to promote you), and, most important, you extending an invitation for Chris to come back to you with further questions or thoughts on the topic.

Feeling heard and appreciated is what leads to loyal, engaged employees.

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