

DYNAMICS

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Tough times, tough messages: Managers try a little tenderness; Study finds more than half show sensitivity rather than robotically sticking to a script

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Times are getting tougher – and so is the news that managers increasingly are going to have to deliver.

And when they have to axe employees, announce that raises have been cut or curtail bonuses, most management theories would advise that the best approach is to stick to a script and check your emotions at the door.

But a study finds that more than half of managers are ignoring such advice. Instead, they are becoming emotionally involved when they have to perform such “necessary evils.”

Rather than coming across as distant and cold, they are actually carrying out the dirty deeds with sensitivity, the study finds.

“We found that a majority of managers don't want to go into robotic, auto-pilot mode. When they are able to attend to the needs of those on the receiving end, they appear to feel better about themselves,” says Joshua Margolis, an associate professor of business administration at Harvard University, who co-authored the study, which appears in the *Academy of Management Journal*.

Prof. Margolis and co-author Andrew Molinsky, assistant professor of organizational studies at Brandeis University, interviewed 111 U.S. managers in business, medicine and policing, and followed them on the job as they delivered negative messages to employees or clients.

While all of the managers were told that theories recommend putting their emotions on the back burner in such situations, 54 per cent chose to express their own distaste for the news they were delivering, offering personal anecdotes about how it affected them, and showing understanding of the difficulty the person was facing by offering their assistance and advice.

When people are able to draw on their own emotional experience, “they tend to take the time to give a ‘verbal hug,’ such as offering to help people with their performance issues or making suggestions for contacts or advice on finding a new job.” Prof. Margolis says. “These people said they found it easier on themselves and on the ones that they deliver the message to if they give it with a degree of sympathy and empathy.”

The finding suggests that organizations should urge managers to develop an approach that is the most comfortable and the least emotionally draining to them, Prof. Molinsky adds. “People have a range of ways in which they respond emotionally and it is important that organizations not inadvertently restrict people's ability to be effective, and help deliver bad news in a way that shows respect and helps the victim retain dignity in an emotionally stressful time,” he says.

Another result in the study is that experienced managers are just as likely as rookies to get emotionally involved when delivering harsh news, which is “intriguing,” says career expert Barbara Moses, a Globe and Mail columnist and author of *What Next? Find the Work That's Right for You*.

“There is an assumption that people who are veterans of delivering bad news develop a thick skin, but this paper says that when they perform an act that is painful to others, many find it better to do it with a degree of sensitivity,” she says. “No one wants to be known as the sort of person who takes pleasure in inducing pain in others. You certainly want to appear as sensitive as possible.”

Taking time to prepare how to deliver the news can do a lot to cushion the emotional blow to both

messengers and recipients, she suggests.

Managers should imagine the situation from the point of view of the person receiving the news right down to the range of emotions it might trigger, including the possibility that a person might cry, Dr. Moses says.

Doing that will help managers with their own reaction to the expression of feelings of the moment, she says.

“What happens with many managers when they are under stress is they can tend to come across as harsh and brusque.”

The message should be delivered succinctly but, to show sensitivity, you should avoid reading from a prepared speech, or sounding like you are, she says.

“What you don't want to say is 'I feel your pain or this will hurt me more than it hurts you.' That will make people feel outraged, because the pain is not equivalent if they don't have a job the next day and you do,” Dr. Moses says.

“Your message should be delivered in a way that will create the least amount of trauma and show the most respect to those receiving the message.

“They won't feel great about what they are hearing, but the goal should be to have people walk out of the meeting saying: 'He understood me and I respect that.' ”

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