

Don't sugar-coat the message

Delivering negative feedback to senior management

Question: What is the best way to deliver negative feedback to senior management?

Answer: OK, let's be honest. No one wants to deliver negative feedback to senior management. The anxiety could have you resuming an old nail-biting habit or inhaling that extra large bag of chips, complete with a nip or two of hard liquor. Your fight-or-flight response will shoot adrenaline and cortisol through your veins. You'll discover one million reasons to procrastinate. Not a pretty picture.

But since the senior management team needs to receive the feedback, there's no escaping it. Slow down. Breathe. Welcome the challenge. With focus and some cool thinking, you'll be able to add this experience to your resumé as a success story.

Walking into the lions' den requires a working knowledge of lion habits. In this instance, senior managers tend to be action-oriented individuals with a short attention span and limited patience. They possess sharp survival skills and loathe ticking time bombs they know nothing about. And they're highly allergic to anything that sounds even remotely like whining.

If nothing else, do not sugar-coat the message. Tell it like it is, even if the feedback pertains to actions taken by those very senior managers. HR is often perceived as wishy-washy or soft, so act to dispel that. Candour will garner respect and help you leave the boardroom with your reputation (and job) intact.

Choose the forum carefully (a regular meeting or specially-convened?) and place your item strategically on the agenda (first item? middle? last?). Avoid email like the plague because chances are your message will be misinterpreted. If you're in the same physical location, deliver the feedback face-to-face. If you're virtual, choose the best semi-personal medium available.



■ TOUGHEST HR QUESTION

SHARON BAR-DAVID

And do not procrastinate — timeliness is crucial.

Part of your prep work should be to assess how ready the group is to hear the message — the message could launch a new world war in the boardroom. If so, consider approaching allies and opinion-makers first. In an ideal situation, you will have created the productive communication channels you need through pre-crisis networking and bridge-building. Ensure confidentiality and frame your consultation with these leaders in ways that will not compromise their integrity or yours.

In order to shape the way the leadership group responds to the negative feedback, tailor your communication to their specific listening frequencies. Listening is not a linear event. It's a highly subjective process that is informed by the listener's world view, motivators, priorities, aspirations and fears. Transmit in a frequency they can hear.

Prior to the meeting, sit down and compose a detailed list. What drives, scares and inspires the leadership team and its members? In addition, put yourself in their shoes and list their possible objections and concerns.

Once you've identified the listening frequencies and potential objections, compose your message accordingly. For exam-

ple, if the group is motivated by a need to be sector leaders, frame your negative message as something that, if solved, will help secure the organization's position as number one. If they fear a hostile acquisition, begin by stating the information you bring is challenging, however, it cannot be ignored if the fight to avoid a takeover is to succeed.

Dedicating time and effort to carefully crafting the message will pay off in spades. Unprepared, the cocktail of adrenaline, cortisol and anxiety in your blood might lead you to stumble. Begin with a brief review of the big picture and context, then switch quickly to the key points. Lay out the facts in an organized fashion, zeroing in on what they want and need to know, not your own take on things. Very early on, and before they ever get a chance to raise it, address head-on the potential objections and concerns you've pre-identified during the planning process.

Most importantly, remember three things: solutions, solutions and solutions. Offer alternatives for action and state upfront you'll be doing so. Those action-oriented lions respect and welcome well-crafted and supported solutions. Stating a problem without offering viable solutions is awfully reminiscent of whining and may take things south in a hurry. And avoid meaningless expressions such as, "To solve this will require significant time and effort."

Life has put you on centre stage during an interesting organizational moment. Sit back, reflect, plan and then dive in.

Sharon Bar-David is a Toronto-based speaker, trainer and organizational consultant whose services help create respectful workplaces that boost engagement and productivity. She can be reached at (416) 781-8132 or visit www.sharonbardavid.com.