

Reprinted from March 6 - 19, 2009

## Send a message

*Communication with employees is critical during hard times*

### Question:

**I've got a tough issue that I'm struggling with. My employees are running scared, due to the economy, slow sales for our company and the uncertainty of what's going to happen next. Even though I'm not much of a speechmaker, I feel the need to say something. I'm just not sure a rah-rah speech from me is going to make a difference. What should/shouldn't I say? Any suggestions for how to handle this?**

### Answer:

At the outset, let me say that I concur with your observation that you must deliver a message. This is, indeed, a tough situation. These are hard economic times.

You need to let people know what is going on in the company, what they can expect, etc. Second, I encourage you to craft micro messages at the individual level for the each employee. Let's explore each of these communication strategies in a bit more detail.

Let's begin by exploring how to deliver effective macro messages that involve unsettling information. Having a well-reasoned, thoughtful communication plan in place simply makes sense under these circumstances, doesn't it? You don't want to wing it when it comes to these kinds of communications.

The Boy Scout credo that says, "be prepared," is applicable here. Accordingly, I suggest you take a proactive stance in making your employees aware of looming risks. Making your employees aware of emerging threats builds knowledge. Knowledge leads to action. That's the point – to create an informed workforce that is armed with knowledge so that they can take more meaningful action if a risk or threat does arise in the future (and if associated bad news must subsequently be delivered).

Frankly, underestimating the hardness

have discovered that people's perceptions are influenced in the following ways:

- » Risks perceived to be voluntary are more accepted than risks perceived to be imposed.
- » Risks perceived to be under an individual's control are more accepted than risk perceived to be controlled by others.
- » Risks perceived to have clear benefits are more accepted than risk perceived to have little or no benefit.
- » Risks perceived to be fairly distributed are more accepted than risks perceived to be unfairly distributed.
- » Risks perceived to be natural are more accepted than risks perceived to be manmade.
- » Risks perceived to be statistical are more accepted than risks perceived to be catastrophic.
- » Risks perceived to be generated by a trustworthy source are more accepted than risks perceived to be generated by an untrustworthy source.

Access to information is in many ways the key to minimizing and dispelling unfounded fears or apprehensions.

Many companies are struggling. The future is uncertain. This is the brutal reality. The core issue, it seems to me, is how you communicate it to your employees.

In this column, I will offer two suggestions for how you might proceed. First, I encourage you to craft a macro message

of your people is a mistake. People can be surprisingly resilient and resourceful when they are provided with information about a risk. In fact, access to information is in many ways the key to minimizing and dispelling unfounded fears or apprehensions. Among others things, researchers

- » Risks perceived to be familiar are more accepted than risks perceived to be exotic.

So, how do you go about crafting credible communications that convey unpleasant information? Covello and Allen,

Reprinted from March 6 - 19, 2009

researchers with expertise in this area, offer the following recommendations:

- » Accept and involve your constituents as a partner. Your goal should be to produce an informed constituency.
- » Plan carefully and evaluate your efforts. Different goals, different audiences and different media require different actions.
- » Listen to the concerns of your constituents. People often care more about trust, credibility, competence, fairness, and empathy than about statistics and numbers.
- » Be honest, frank, and open. Trust is difficult to regain once it has been lost.
- » Work with other credible sources. Conflicts among sources confuse people and erode your trust and credibility.
- » Meet the needs of the media. The media are there to report the story – work with them, not against them.
- » Speak clearly and with compassion. Never let your communication efforts keep you from acknowledging the human side of the situation.

In order to effectively communicate with employees on sensitive issues, you will also need to communicate on an individual basis. This is the micro message component that I mentioned earlier. To be effective here, you will want to engage in a supportive process to help your employees define and work through their reactions to the evolving situation.

Follow up on the broader message that has been offered. Schedule individual meetings with each of your employees. Explain how what is going on might impact them, now and in the future. Encour-

age them to share their reactions/feelings/concerns with you. Listen to what they have to say. Provide candid responses to their comments and questions.

Importantly, observe and monitor their behavior as things unfold. Watch their performance. You must understand that not all employees are equally hardy. Those who believe they can control the events in their lives normally cope better than those who feel events are beyond their control (i.e., internal vs. external locus of control). When appropriate, make use of your employee assistance program (EAP) by referring employees who appear to be struggling or having difficulty coping.

Ultimately, employees rely on their employers to keep them informed, particularly when it comes to high stakes issues and concerns (e.g., Will there be a layoff? Are we reorganizing?). Employees are not mind readers, nor are they empathic. So, help them out by letting them know what's going on. Craft and deliver macro and micro messages that give them information upon which they can act.

Sending clear messages to your employees during the tough times will engender their trust. It will let them know that you genuinely feel, "We're all in this together."

This is the kind of esprit de corps that just might be what will enable your company to weather this storm. ■

**Daniel A. Schroeder**, Ph.D. is a principal and co-founding partner of Brookfield-based Organization Development Consultants, Inc. ([www.OD-Consultants.com](http://www.OD-Consultants.com)). He can be reached at (262) 827-1901 or [Dan.Schroeder@OD-Consultants.com](mailto:Dan.Schroeder@OD-Consultants.com).