

Delivering Bad News:

An Intercultural Management Communication Activity

Abstract: This activity allows students the opportunity to consider how they might communicate bad news to their employees and/or clients by participating in a challenging, intercultural scenario provided to them in class. It also helps students anticipate how the recipients to their message might respond to the bad news. As designed, the activity encourages group discussion and debate, along with physical movement around the classroom. Each of these steps facilitates engagement and deep discussion on topics such as cultural expectations, employee motivation, and tone in management communication.

Keywords: management communication, intercultural management, organizational culture

Introduction

One of the most challenging aspects a manager faces is delivering bad news, as “life in organizations is punctuated with bad news” (Beis, 2013, p. 136). This activity allows students the opportunity to consider how they might deliver bad news to their employees or to customers, and to anticipate the reactions their messages might generate on the other end. This activity could successfully be introduced in courses on management, leadership, and management communication.

It works well with any student body (undergraduate, graduate, tradition, non-traditional, etc.). Due to its cultural implications, it would be especially useful in a course emphasizing cross-cultural management. The activity, as described below, is designed for an in-classroom session. However, this activity could easily be modified for an online or blended learning environment, as well.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

This activity is modeled after the 3-part framework for delivering bad news as proposed by Beis (2013). The three parts of the model are *preparation*, *delivery*, and *transition*.

This activity applies all 3 areas of the Beis (2013) model. As described in the Exercise Overview section, students prepare to deliver the bad news by writing the bad news message in small groups and anticipate possible reactions. Second, they practice delivering the message through the means of email. Lastly, they students practice the transition phase by receiving a second message, this one from the recipient of the original email in which bad news was delivered. This transition phase addresses the public relations concerns of the bad news message as well as allows for an appeals process (Beis, 2012).

Learning Objectives

The primary learning objective in this activity is to help students practice how they might deliver bad news to their teams or clients. This is accomplished through the case study described in the following section. The case study we describe could easily be altered or modified; however, we have found this particular case study sparks rich discussion on topics such as cultural expectations, employee motivation, and tone in management communication. A possible second learning objective is to help students identify the role that organizational culture plays in the effectiveness of delivering bad news (French & Holden, 2012).

Exercise Overview

Management students are first taught the phases of delivering bad news (Beis, 2013). Following this brief introduction, they are shown the following fictitious business scenario to consider and are encouraged to determine how these phases can be implemented and applied:

Imagine you work for a company with offices in several other countries. One of the international offices is located in a country that will celebrate an important national holiday next week. The employees in that country expect to have 2 days off to celebrate this holiday. However, your supervisor has just informed you that the international team must instead must report to work on these 2 days. Your task is to write an email to the manager of the international team informing him of this news. Write your email on the whiteboard. Make up details of the situation as needed.

For Step 1 of the activity, students then break into small groups and position themselves at one of the whiteboards in the classroom. The small groups then discuss how they will address

the scenario. One student in each group acts as scribe and writes the email to the international team manager on the whiteboard that the group collectively composes.

Students are highly engaged in the activity throughout Step 1. Frequently we hear comments in their groups such as, “Whoa—I would not want to be delivering this news” or “I hope I never have to deal with this kind of situation in the future.” Their engagement increases dramatically with Step 2, however, when we ask all students to rotate one group to the right. No one has anticipated this shift. Each group now positions themselves in front of emails they did not write. We now ask them in Step 2 to read the emails written by the previous groups and to then collectively write the response email they believe the manager of the international team would send as a result of receiving the previous email.

What works especially well in Step 2 is that students do not write the response to their own original emails. They now observe and analyze other approaches to deliver bad news. Also, because they did not compose the original message in front of them, their responses on behalf of the international team manager feel more genuine. A different student from each group acts a scribe and writes the response on the whiteboard in a different color of pen so it can be easily distinguished from a distance in the classroom.

Following Step 2, all students return to their seats except for one student from each group who acts as spokesperson and reads the original email and the response out loud. At this stage, we facilitate class discussion about the way each group chose to handle the provided scenario. Invariably, groups differ on their approach. For example, some groups often decide to provide incentives or accommodations to the international team as a result of the unplanned work days while other groups take a heavy-handed, top-down communication style.

We typically ask each group who wrote the original bad news email to justify why they chose the approach they did. In like manner, we ask the group who wrote the response to explain their approach and what emotional reaction the original email created for them. We often “cold call” on students not from either group to explain how the messages could be improved. This helps the participation ratio in the class to increase during the discussion phase. Throughout the post-activity discussion, we often make comments and marks on the emails on the whiteboard using a third color of whiteboard marker.

The only equipment needed for this activity are whiteboard markers and whiteboards. Whiteboards could be substituted with large sheets of paper that are hung on the wall. The different colors of pen make the activity more visually appealing and the responses much easier to read from across the room. For this reason, we don’t recommend using blackboards and white chalk. We typically teach this activity to a class of 25 students, dividing students up equally across 5 or 6 whiteboards. This allows all groups to have 4-5 group members. We have found that students in groups larger than this tend to be less engaged. Step 1 and Step 2, along with the class discussion that follows, can be accomplished adequately in one hour.

Session Description

If selected to present, we would run the activity as outlined above. If the classrooms at Ramapo College do not have multiple whiteboards (or use blackboards) then we would solicit large sheets of paper and multiple colors of whiteboard markers. The activity could be completed in 60 minutes. All participants would be assigned to one of the small groups and would be involved in the whiteboard discussions as well as crafting the email responses. Thus, all participants would be actively engaged in the activity the entire time.

References

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