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Straight Talk From Leaders In Tough Times

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straight talk in tough times ICONS8-TEAM-YTWXPL05HAA-UNSPLASH

By Dianna Booher—

We're just finished a bathroom remodeling job in the home we built more than two decades ago. The designer and project manager

promised that the project could be finished in 7-10 days.

“That’s astounding to me. Seven to 10 days? How in the world can you do so much in such a short time?” I probed.

“Each subcontractor has a team of people. And they’ll just work around each other. While one team is laying tile in the primary bath, another team will be changing the countertops in another bath. You’ll see.”

“That’s great—because I have a party already scheduled 14 days from now.”

“No problem. We’ll be totally finished and out of here by Monday at the latest—4 days before your party.”

You guessed it. The project manager miscalculated—again. We’re now starting week 13 of the remodel—and *again* running up against the rescheduled monthly party date. Not only did the project manager not mention these delays; she ignored the mounting bad news all along.

Real leaders don’t keep silent while allowing bad news to develop—that is, and still keep their job.

So what’s the good news in delivering bad news?

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Bad news breaks on the horizon all too often nowadays. You may be announcing layoffs, informing your top performer that she won't be getting the promotion after all, letting a client know that you can't deliver what you promised, or telling the team that they're likely to see a cap on salary increases for the next year.

To salvage a situation—and even thrive as a team leader—consider these principles for communicating reality in a reassuring way:

- **Break the silence:** Start talking. Just because you're not talking about a situation doesn't mean others aren't talking about it behind the scenes. Silence just means you, your information, your viewpoint, and your positive influence are not part of the conversation. In the absence of accurate information, your team members may assume wrong conclusions, make bad decisions, and take inappropriate actions.
- **Stop the sugarcoating:** By this, I don't mean that you must agree with the doom-and-gloom tone and demeanor around you. It just means that others will likely reject glib comments and platitudes. (i.e. "We'll just need to make lemonade from these lemons.") Instead, stop the

sugarcoating means simply to tell things like they are and invite other team members to do the same. Create a safe environment so that others can openly express their fears in front of the group. Otherwise, they'll be expressing those fears, concerns, hesitations, and complaints on the parking lot, in the cafeteria, and on social media.

- **Acknowledge mistakes and misjudgments—your own and those of your organization.** Clearly articulate how those mistakes and misjudgments have contributed to the bad situation. People respect honesty and humility, and they'll go the extra mile to “fix things.”
- **State the reality of an unknown future.** Let others know that you clearly understand that things may or may not work out for the better. Nobody knows what the future holds, and you'll lose credibility to pretend that you do. Acknowledging the chance that things can go either way sends the message that you're dealing honestly with colleagues and staff—talking with and reasoning as adults, not children.
- **Outline positive choices to deal with the news.** State your faith in your client organization or your team members that they are competent, committed people. Acknowledge the risk and the difficulty—and then the rewards of overcoming the bad situation with the positive choices they can make to improve the situation.

Communicating frequently, directly, clearly, and completely creates a climate of trust. And that trust pays big dividends in a competitive environment.

Dianna Booher is the bestselling author of 50 books, including *Communicate Like a Leader (Axiom Award winner)*. She helps organizations communicate clearly and individuals increase influence with a strong personal presence.

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