

PICKING YOUR BAD NEWS SPOKESPERSON

Choosing the right person to communicate during downsizing is vital to minimise damage to the company, and to ensure focus stays on the future.

by Rob Shimmin

World leaders and CEOs gathering in the snow of Davos this year might have experienced a little extra chill at the sheer weight of pessimism on display. The United Nations captured the mood by choosing that platform to predict a global 'worst case scenario' of more than 50 million job losses in 2009. Whether you are an optimist or a pessimist, the likelihood is that you will be calling on senior executives to deliver bad news this year, internally and externally.

The communication of bad news such as the loss of jobs through downsizing requires slightly different skills to those used when getting the good news out there. As you consider who should take the microphone, here are five interesting questions to ask yourself:

1. *Is your strategy right?*
2. *Who should talk?*
3. *Do they have all the right skills?*
4. *Can coaching build any missing skills?*
5. *Can I tell the boss to take a back seat?*

STRATEGY The slickest, most silver-tongued orator will struggle if the basic strategy upsets its audiences. UK laws allow for some very short notice periods, especially where contract workers are concerned. A strategy that fully takes advantage of those short notice periods may come under fire from the media, even though they are operating completely within the law. That is the cost of the strategy; it does not necessarily make it the wrong strategy. Now, a great spokesperson can bring balance to that emotion, but never quell it completely. So, as the strategy emerges, an

element of realism is necessary when considering what can be achieved by spokespeople in managing reactions to what is inevitably distressing news.

They say the devil is in the detail, but it is often timing that causes the real headaches in strategy development for major downsizing projects. Works counsels need to be consulted in different time frames. Laws on retraining differ hugely from country to country. Opportunities to sell parts of the business as going concerns can create divergent strategies within one global approach. If things started with the communications strategy then life would be easier, but of course they start with the tough structural decisions around what is best for the business. The communications strategy is there to minimise any damage to the brand and to get the very best performance out of those colleagues remaining.

WHO SHOULD TALK? To an extent, this depends on your audience. Rebecca Markovits, Head of HR for BT Benelux, has a clear rule for the process of telling someone they are to lose their job: "You have to have the line manager there, supported by someone from HR. There are



very specific skills needed to do this well. For example, we need someone who can get straight to the point as people demand and deserve clear communication at a time like this. The softer aspects like redeployment or outsourcing follow and are there to remind the person that they still have a good future. We're there to help them identify and act upon any opportunities that can arise from a major change like this."

Ongoing performance is the best possible protection against further job cuts, making remaining colleagues an incredibly important audience. Are you clear as to who is best placed to communicate with them? Often the organisation chart will make it obvious who should be speaking but the sad truth is that communication skills do not automatically improve with seniority.

There is a complex duality of message to be conveyed in any downsizing. Leaders need to communicate sympathy, compassion and gratitude to those departing as well as a clear explanation of actions taken. They also need to deliver a rallying call to those remaining, boosting motivation and awareness of what actions

are needed to avoid further cuts. Some spokespeople are great at the rallying call, but just cannot do the softer stuff. Others, for the first time in their career, find themselves dissolving in the face of all that emotion when standing in front of their colleagues. They leave the stage long on compassion and sympathy, but short on direction and a way forward. The tough bit is figuring out how your potential spokespeople will cope in these uncharted waters and then managing upward when your recommendation is that they either get coached or take a back seat. External consultants can be extremely useful in this regard.

Markovits feels you need to consider both skills and seniority when choosing your spokesperson. "Most executives have a pretty good grasp of their strengths and weaknesses, making it a little easier to suggest another spokesperson should a better skilled person be available. That choice has to take into account internal and external expectations of the required level of seniority in delivering grave news."

DO THEY HAVE THE SKILLS? Any MBA student will tell you to find out what you do well and hone it to a razor sharp edge, making it your personal point of differentiation in business. Get weaknesses to a level where they will not hamper you, and surround yourself with talent to compensate.

There are some skills where weakness is acceptable and smart executives may even flag them as a foil to their strengths and an illustration that they are 'human'. It could be argued, however, that 'weak-communicator' is a deal-breaker for the career of an aspiring executive. On the other hand, if your executive is senior enough to be a likely candidate to communicate big news, he or she is



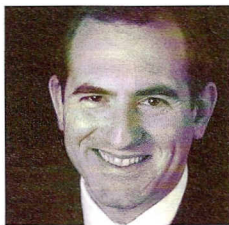
unlikely to have a blanket weakness on communications. What is more likely is that the HR Director and Communications Director feel that only certain skills are lacking. These concerns may only surface in the planning process for a major downsizing project.

CAN THEY BE COACHED? Emphatically, yes they can! You can stop bright people following tangential preambles which delay and dilute the core message. You can help the hard-hitters soften the blow without losing clarity. You can help the aloof to be closer and the consensus-builder to step up and lead. However, you cannot coach real caring and real emotion. You can help it to emerge in a controlled way if that is desirable. You can rein it in if it is too abundant, but you cannot create it out of thin air.

So how is the training best conducted? Each person will have their own style of communication, and trying to alter that extensively can make a spokesperson appear very false and ...well....coached. It is best to let the executive remain in character, but (most importantly) arm him or her with the detail necessary to answer questions and the focus necessary to get the main points across. The subtleties can be coached, but do not push the boundaries. Have you ever watched someone at a funeral who has been told to go and put their arm around someone? If they do not do something like that naturally, they will be more credible staying put.

As with good media training, the best preparation is knowledge. Clarity of message, detail, direction and discipline are all key. That latter point refers to the spokesperson's ability to draw a line in his or her head. The information above this line is for public consumption, everything below it is not. It is amazing how often nervous senior executives offer up unasked for detail from the "only if you're pressed" section of the Q&A. Good training can bring a little inner calm and so keep that delineation of information safer.

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Rob Shimmin has spent 20 years advising and coaching senior managers. His methodology begins with strategy and messaging and progresses to the coaching of spokespeople with the emphasis on what to say rather than merely how to say it.

not help the company by leading the communication, you have a duty to tell them and to come up with a better plan. Fortunately, people do not get to those lofty boxes without the basic skills so very few people reading this will face this problem. There may however be other reasons for keeping the top person out of the limelight.

“Managing communications around a major downsizing is draining of emotion and energy.”

Impending litigation or a yet to be announced change of leadership in a newly merged organisation are two possible scenarios. Whatever the reason, the good news is that there is always a role for the top person. If your spokesperson has been sidelined because they do not perform well with this type of communication, control the environment as much as possible. Place them firmly at the helm of the decision-making team and bring a small team of players one rung down to do the communicating. Keep the boss on hand for a few very well controlled set-piece communications where gaps in the communication skill set are less likely to be exposed. That means no live questions and a buffer between the spokesperson and the raw emotion of the moment. Managing communications around a major downsizing is incredibly draining of emotion and energy. However, try to keep some in reserve to debrief properly at the end of the process. The very best executives crave honest and candid feedback on all aspects of their performance. Do not be tempted to sugar-coat your observations: if the UN's Davos prediction is right, you may be calling on these spokespeople again. ■