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Balancing Profitability and Sustainability: Shaping the Future of Business

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MARGARET A. GORALSKI
H. PAUL LEBLANC, III
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PREFACE

Each year in April, members of the International Academy of Business Disciplines (IABD) and invited guests come together to share their research and ideas – to explore thoughts with other academics, business leaders, policy makers, and students. This internationally refereed publication is a glimpse into that research. It has been our pleasure as Editors to work with the authors whose work appears in this issue of the *Business Research Yearbook* and the active track chairs who have encouraged them along the way.

We are truly an international body with members traveling from, England, Spain, the Middle East, India, Japan, China, and other countries worldwide to join us in personal, community, and world growth. The objectives and far-reaching visions of the IABD have created interest and excitement. We have evolved into a strong global organization due to the immense support of many dedicated individuals and institutions.

The International Academy of Business Disciplines is a worldwide, non-profit organization established to foster and promote education in all of the functional and support disciplines of business. The objectives of IABD are to stimulate learning and understanding and to exchange information, ideas, and research studies from around the world. The Academy provides a unique global forum for professionals and faculty in business, communications, and other social science fields to discuss common interests that overlap career, political, and national boundaries. IABD creates an environment to advance learning, teaching, research, and the practice of all functional areas of business.

The *Business Research Yearbook* is published to promote cutting edge research. We thank the Board of Directors of the International Academy of Business Disciplines for their dedication to the advancement of knowledge.

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APPLICATION OF A MEDICAL PROTOCOL TO WORKER LAYOFFS

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ABSTRACT

Organizational downsizing has increased exponentially. It is one thing to speak abstractly of the need to reduce costs and quite another to actually tell a worker that he or she has been laid off. This paper offers practical advice to managers on conducting layoff conversations with employees based on a widely used medical model—the SPIKES protocol. This strategy has been extensively employed by health care professionals who frequently communicate negative information to patients and is offered as an approach that can be easily and effectively adapted by managers when they must tell a person he or she has been terminated. Although breaking the bad news of a cutback will never be easy, having a plan of action that entails sound business and medical advice can help firms carefully manage and execute reorganizations.

INTRODUCTION

In the Oscar-nominated best movie for 2009, *Up in the Air*, Ryan Bingham, played by actor George Clooney, is a corporate layoff expert—"Termination Facilitator" in his words—whose job is to fire people from theirs (Up in the Air, 2009). When corporations need to downsize quickly but hate the mess, Bingham flies in and breaks the news to the now former employees. The anguish, hostility, and despair of his "clients" has left him unconcerned about others, falsely compassionate, and living out of a suitcase. Throughout the movie one is left wondering if there is a better, more humane way to conduct a downsizing.

In response to the disheartening realities of terminating individuals illustrated in this movie, in the popular press, and in the professional literature, this paper provides executives with guidelines on how to effectively and compassionately break bad news to workers that their job has been eliminated because of a downsizing. Downsizing is also sometimes referred to as reduction in force (RIF), layoff, restructuring, reorganization, resizing, retrenchment, involuntary redundancy, closing, displacement, or termination. All of these euphemisms refer to the voluntary actions of organizations to reduce expenses by shrinking headcount. Displacing people is a wrenching experience. For instance, Grunberg, Moore, and Greenberg (2006) collected data from 410 managers (none of whom were layoff targets themselves) who either had or had not been in the position of having to inform subordinates about a layoff. The researchers found that the more managers were personally responsible for conducting a layoff, regardless of their age, gender, or marital status, "… the more likely they were to report physical health problems, to seek treatment for these problems, and to complain of disturbed sleep" (p. 176). The following approach is offered to assist manager's conduct a RIF.

THE TERMINATION MEETING

Often, it is just assumed that employees to be terminated will plainly be told that their services are no longer needed and then escorted off the premises. This overly simplistic view may be incorrect because how the termination interview is conducted and the bad news of a job loss is delivered can have a significant effect, positive or negative, not only on persons being laid off but also on those who carry on—the so-called survivors—as well as the entire firm.

In one interesting study, Lind, Greenberg, Scott, and Welchans (2000) interviewed a large number of laid off workers. Many of these individuals considered legal action following their termination, and almost a quarter of them went so far as to speak to an attorney. The single best predictor of willingness to take legal action was the treatment former employees received at the time of their discharge. Among those who felt unjustly treated, Lind et al. (2000) found that a full 66 percent contemplated litigation. Among those who felt justly treated, this dropped to just 16 percent when an apology was added. Although legal and human resource personnel advise against apologizing—an apology can be seen as an admission of guilt—these results suggest that an apology may help promote feelings of interactional justice in which individuals are treated with dignity, courtesy, and respect (Cropanzano, Bowen, & Gilliland, 2007) and that such concerns actually reduce the risk of litigation.

Unfortunately, most executives have difficulty identifying elements of an effective downsizing interview beyond protecting the organization from litigation. Indeed, Wood & Karau (2009) argue that most organizations approach termination interviews from a defensive, legalistic framework. This legalistic orientation might result in procedures that communicate a lack of respect for the downsized worker, which, they argue, could make it more likely that the terminee will engage in the very types of behaviors that the employer seeks to minimize. This seems to be the case in an investigation by Karl and Hancock (1999) who found that manager termination training was positively related to *increased* victim hostility. The reason, the authors suggest is most termination training focuses on litigation prevention strategies that may be inconsistent with favorable employee reactions, raising the possibility that practices designed to reduce legal action may actually increase anger, hostility, and other negative outcomes because such defensive-legalistic approaches likely communicate a lack of respect for the victim.

But what procedures should managers follow? We believe that the medical literature can be helpful since breaking bad news is one of the most difficult and frequent tasks physicians have to do. Bad news is defined as "any information which adversely and seriously affects an individual's view of his or her future" (Buckman, 1992, p. 15). This phenomenon has been widely researched yielding valuable guidelines (Buckman, 1986, 1992).

A review of procedures from the medical communities' delivery of bad news provides insights to managers and executives on ways to more effectively convey to workers the bad news inherent in a discharge. Framing termination interviews within the medical context of breaking bad news provides managers vivid examples of conversations which many may have experienced either as patients or as part of a relationship with a loved one and thus provides realistic insights into the very real and unpleasant situation of individuals losing their jobs.

PRINCIPLES GLEANED FROM THE MEDICAL LITERATURE

Six key elements have been used as a strategy that medical professionals have found useful in delivering bad news to patients (Buckman, 1986). These six elements are summarized in the acronym "SPIKES" which stands for **S**etting, **P**erception, **I**nvitation, **K**nowledge, **E**mpathy, and **S**ummarize. Each element of the SPIKES protocol is defined in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1. SPIKES: A SIX-STEP MEDICAL PROTOCOL FOR BREAKING BAD NEWS

S—Setting. This step involves establishing the right surrounding, including the physical setting of the discussion. Here it is important to allocate adequate time for the meeting and manage interruptions so that privacy is maintained. Patients prefer receiving bad news from a physician whom they know. The clinician should establish rapport with the patient by maintaining comfortable eye contact, sitting at eye level with the patient, or touching the patient on the arm or holding a hand (if the patient is comfortable with this).

P—Perception. This guideline involves finding out what the patient already knows or suspects. The medical practitioner should be able to construct a fairly accurate picture of the patient's perception of the situation—in particular, how they view the seriousness of their condition. This knowledge is vital because it helps physicians assess the, often unexpectedly wide, gap between the patient's expectations and the actual medical situation. The most effective method of conducting this conversation is by using open-ended questions.

I—Invitation. It is useful to identify what level of detail the patient desires. For instance, a physician might say, "Some patients want every medical detail, but others want only the big picture—what's your preference?" This establishes that there is no right answer, and that different patients have different styles. Physicians should check frequently to make sure that they and their patient are both thinking in similar ways. While the majority of patients express a desire for full information about their illness, some do not

K—Knowledge. Most authors suggest using simple language rather than more technical words; e.g., "spread" instead of "metastasized." Nevertheless, some researchers have argued that it is important to inform patients of the specific terminology associated with their illness so that they can gain information on their own. The use of euphemisms is somewhat problematic. While some researchers found that the use of the word "cancer" as opposed to "illness" increased anxiety, suggesting that using euphemisms is beneficial to patient mental health, others caution that using less offensive synonyms, for example, "slow" or "developmentally delayed" instead of "mental retardation," often deter understanding and often prevent people from grasping the full significance of the condition.

E—Empathy. This principle requires responding to the patient's reactions and acknowledging all reactions and feelings and reacting with compassion and understanding. Communication requires empathy and caring in addition to skill. As emotions and reactions arise during the discussion, acknowledge them and respond empathetically. Such empathy may involve touching the patient's arm or hand.

S—Summarize. Here the meeting is concluded. Before it ends, the information is summarized and the patient is given an opportunity to voice any concerns or questions. If the physician does not have time to answer these concerns, then the patient can be told that these issues can be discussed in detail at a following meeting. The clinician and their patient should leave the conversation with a clear plan of the next steps that need to be taken.

SPIKES APPLIED TO DOWNSIZING IN ORGANIZATIONS

Delivering bad news is never effortless or painless, but to ease the level of uncomfortable feeling, the delivery must be made with care which is exactly what the SPIKES protocol does. This section illustrates the application of the SPIKES protocol to business with two slight modifications indicating that there are important activities both before and after the actual discussion that must be addressed.

Pre-SPIKES Interview Considerations

The Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act (1989) requires employers of 100 or more employees to give 60 days' advance notice before closing a facility or starting a layoff of 50 people or more to employees who will (or who might reasonably be expected to) experience a layoff. Thus, some consideration must be given to this regulation.

Apart from such legalities, Marks and De Meuse (2005) recommend preparing employees in advance for the impending change in head count. While some executives fear raising employee stress and distraction from work, in actuality there are usually already rumors of impending layoffs or closings and these tend to be much more frightening than reality. For example, at one organization Marks and De Meuse (2005) noted that rumors indicated that 3,000 jobs were to be reduced at headquarters when in fact only 1,000 people worked there!

Downsizing without preparation can make managers look incompetent (Mishra, Spreitzer, & Mishra, 1998), and thus some time spent in planning this discussion is essential. It is impossible to make giving unpleasant news enjoyable but practice can help. This can help an individual learn how to transmit negative messages constructively, without being hurtful.

Before conducting an actual termination interview, it is important to ensure that all legal and human resource concerns have been addressed. It would be prudent to have a letter for the terminated employee outlining specific things the organization will do for the employee. Managers conducting the interview should recall the words of widely respected authority on leadership, John Kotter, who famously said that executives undercommunicate on important issues by a factor of ten (1996). In other words, managers should give considerable attention to how information is to be communicated to downsized workers.

Setting

Patients want their physician to be honest, compassionate and caring, hopeful, and informative. They want to be told in person, in a private setting, at their own pace with time for discussion by a familiar person. The implication for managers is that the organization should not allow management to treat downsized individuals as mere objects or production units but should be considerate and respectful to them. Just as it is encouraged that a patient's personal physician deliver bad news to a patient rather than an outside specialist, most experts agree that the worker's immediate supervisor should be the one who delivers the bad news of a layoff.

Most knowledgeable persons agree that the best place to conduct a termination interview is in a neutral location, such as a conference room or an empty office. This allows the manager to exit gracefully after the termination interview and gives the downsized employee a few moments to collect himself or herself in privacy (Rothman, 1989). Unless there is established privacy and a distraction-free environment, information may be missed or not be transmitted effectively. Poor locations include public areas, employee's desk, or any area where a third party is present.

The manager conducting the layoff interview should be the employee's direct supervisor because he or she typically knows the employee best. De Valck, Bensing, and Bruynooghe (2001) found that employees prefer a direct supervisor-employee relationship style of talk.

Managers must tell the truth and overcommunicate (Mishra et al., 1998). They should carefully and thoroughly explain the criteria for layoffs and clarify the role of performance evaluations or other key criteria in the layoff decision-making process (Leana & Feldman, 1992). The supervisor should also develop a script that highlights the positive characteristics and contributions that the employee has demonstrated during their time with the organization. While some may believe that such positive scripts have the danger of being perceived as insincere, Wood and Karau (2009) found that the focus on positives can have a favorable impact.

Another consideration impacting respect and dignity with regard to the setting involves the presence of a third party, for example, a human resources representative or a security guard. Wood and Karau (2009) found that having a third party present during the termination interview resulted in lower perceptions of being treated respectfully, and feeling of anger were highest when a security guard was present during the termination interview. Karl and Hancock (1999) likewise reported employee hostility increases when two or more people are present. These findings suggest that third party presence may add insult to injury and should be avoided.

There does appear to be some support for terminating employees at the end of the work day. Rothman (1989) suggests, "If at all possible, you should allow the employee the courtesy of being able to clean out a locker or desk when other employees are not present. The best time for this would probably be at the end of the workday" (p. 34). Nelson and Burke (1998) recommend that laid-off workers and survivors should be allowed to grieve and say goodbye to each other suggesting perhaps late in the day but still early enough for good-byes to be made. There does appear to be some evidence that the magnitude of an employee's hostility is greater when he or she is terminated early in the week rather than later in the week (Karl & Hancock, 1999).

Perception

In most cases workers have begun to hear rumblings through the rumor mill and thus it is appropriate to ask the employee what he or she already knows or suspects. In using the data gathered from the individual's perception, the supervisor can correct misinformation and determine the methodology in which the bad news should be delivered. The most effective method of conducting this conversation is by using open-ended questions. This will help create a reasonably accurate picture of how the employee perceives the organization and situations that have caused the meeting. Examples of open-ended perception questions might include: "What have you been told about the organization's situation to this point?" "What is your understanding of the reasons why the company is implementing a reduction in force program?"

Invitation

This step involves offering employees who are affected by a layoff decision to present information they consider relevant to the decision. This is known as voice (Lind & Tyler, 1988) and it has been shown to lead to perceptions of justice (Folger & Greenberg, 1985) as well as to positive reactions such as perceptions of fairness (Kanfer, Sawyer, Early, & Lind, 1987). Interestingly, the opportunity to voice one's opinions regarding a decision increases the perceived fairness of the process, even if one does not influence the decision (Folger, 1977) because the opportunity to voice one's opinions is a desired end in itself (Korsgaard & Roberson, 1995) and because it validates employee self-worth (Tyler & Lind, 1992). Simply being able to speak one's mind and voice his or her opinions causes employees to be more favorable toward management actions. Getting workers involved can be achieved by asking open-ended questions (e.g., "How would you prefer that I give you the information about the organization's decision on implementing the RIF?" or "Are you the kind of person who prefers to know all the details about what is going on."

Knowledge

Wise executives tell everyone the same unvarnished story. Nevertheless, beneficial as candor may be, great unintentional harm can be done when people speak honestly about difficult subjects, hence caution is advised. Clearly explain the termination decision. Too often, when people are terminated they claim that they had no idea why it happened (Coulson, 1981). Supervisors should explain the issues factually and truthfully explain what is happening and what the employees' rights are in clear terms. Then after explaining the decision and emphasizing that it is final, they should move on to practical matters like severance pay.

Business research shows that perceptions of organizational justice, that is, being treated fairly amid layoffs, can ease workplace tension, reduce the risk of lawsuits, and improve job performance among workers who were not terminated (Cropanzano et al., 2007). Unfortunately, certain aspects of downsizing are inherently unfair. The key for managers is to recognize that organizational justice comes in several parts during the termination interview and business leaders reap rewards even if they get only one of these components right.

Two kinds of organizational justice seem particularly important during these discussions: procedural justice and interactional justice. Procedural justice involves peoples' perceptions of the fairness of the procedures used to determine the outcomes they receive (Cropanzano et al., 2007). A just procedure is one that is applied consistently, free of bias, accurate, representative of relevant stakeholders, and consistent with ethical norms. During layoffs, this means an organization should consider factors such as seniority, job performance, and salary, and then establish a process that managers can apply consistently to all. In a layoff conversation managers should spend some time explaining the processes used in applying the downsizing rubric. A person is interactionally just if he or she appropriately shares information and avoids rude or cruel remarks. In other words, there are two aspects of interactional justice with one referring to whether one is truthful and provides adequate justifications when things go badly. The second part refers to the courtesy, respect, and civility with which one treats another.

For example, in one study, Skarlicki and Latham (1996) trained union leaders to behave more interactionally just. Among other things, these leaders were taught to provide explanations and apologies (informational justice) and to treat their employees with courtesy and respect (interpersonal justice). When work groups were examined three months later, individuals who reported to trained leaders exhibited more helpful organizational citizenship behaviors in which people go beyond what is formally expected of them to contribute to the well-being of their organization and those in it (e.g., being tolerant to temporary inconveniences without complaining) than individuals who reported to untrained leaders.

Empathy

Be sympathetic to the laid off worker's feelings. When one loses a job, the resulting feelings of uncertainty—both personal and financial—are quite unsettling. This is bad enough, so managers should not make the situation worse by being insensitive and uncaring. Compassion and empathy are precisely what is needed most at this time.

The ability to use empathy effectively during a termination interview is likely to be an important factor in how the employee views the experience. Moreover, showing empathy to the downsized employees helps maintain the trust and empowerment of survivors (Mishra et al., 1998). Indifferent, insensitive, or self-serving motives are likely to trigger negative reactions in the terminated employee.

Von Bergen and Shealy (1982) provide a simple approach to expressing empathy. Briefly, they indicate that an empathetic response conveys to the worker an understanding of *both* the content and the feeling of a message. Empathy requires one to show an understanding of a worker's experience by responding to his or her feelings. The following types of formats will be helpful in expressing empathy to the worker:

- You feel (feeling) because (content).
- When (content) it made you feel (feeling).
- It's really (feeling) when (content).

These responses let the worker know that the supervisor is trying to understand both what the employee is saying and the emotions felt.

Summarize

In this stage the supervisor closes the discussion and communicates to the employee what he or she can next expect. In most cases a detailed letter outlining the benefits the organization will provide for the worker (e.g., severance packages and ways the firm will help employees with job transition). More mundane matters might involve telling the worker that his or her computer access will be terminated at a certain time and day, information regarding use of the company telephone, and available printing resources. Managers should provide laid-off workers with fair recommendations to future employers. Providing outplacement assistance for employees is a critical part of managing the transition process. It is important that employees understand the resources that the company will make available to them and what benefits they will receive and for how long.

After summarizing the conversation and telling the employee the next steps, consideration should be given to the mode of exit from the termination interview since such dynamics are likely to affect perceptions of respect and trust. Individuals may be allowed to leave individually or may be escorted, and the exit from the building may be either private or public. For example, in the case of security escorts, a guard may be able to take the terminated employee down a back hallway or use a service elevator that allows the employee to leave in a discrete manner. Alternatively, a guard may escort the laid off employee through the work area and directly out the front door with everyone watching.

Post-SPIKES Interview Considerations

A key activity associated with the interviews with terminated employees is reassuring surviving employees—those who were not fired. When someone gets downsized the word tends to spread quickly. Survivors cannot help but wonder what the future holds for them. To the extent that uncertainty may breed distrust and spin off rumors, it is wise for supervisors to provide appropriate reassurances about the future. Such explanations can not only help layoff survivors feel better about their futures, but can also help the company (Caplan & Teese, 1997).

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