

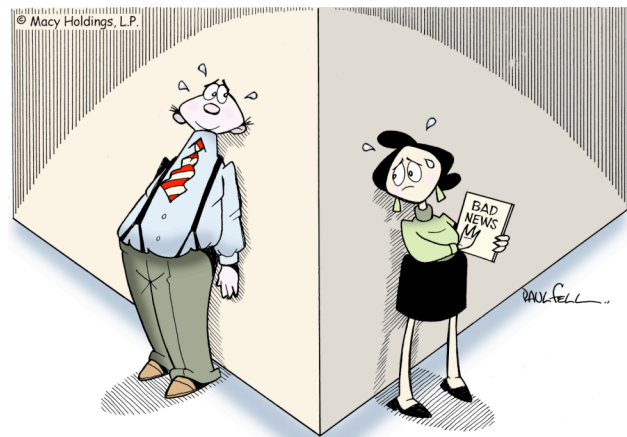
Giving Bad News

One of the most dreaded experiences of many leaders is giving bad news: projects that have been dropped, promotions not granted, performance not acceptable, downsizings, and many other forms of news that will deeply disappoint the recipient. How might a leader approach this difficult task?

In conversations with leaders, I hear three major worries as they describe steeling themselves to give bad news. First, they are uncomfortable with the range and depth of emotion likely to be displayed, both by the recipient and by themselves. Second, they feel guilty for bearing news that will be perceived as hurtful or detrimental to another. And finally, almost always, some major unfinished business regarding bad news in the leaders' own lives lies lurking under the surface of these first two. This unfinished business is the laboratory for those who wish to find a better starting place for serving in bad news situations.

Lets look at the situation that the leaders so dread and find the leverage points.

If the bad news the leader has to offer is really disappointing, it might, in fact, create chaos for the person. Particularly in cases such as layoffs, the person will have major issues to face. So that worry is real. But that's where we often get stuck.



In truth, the *perceived chaos has two sides*.

It's like a double helix. While it can destroy, it also can be the ground for re-growth. Just like a forest fire, chaos burns the vital timber of our life situation. It also produces the rich soil in which a new forest emerges. This isn't to make light of the situation of the person who has just been plunged into the confusion of major change. It can go either way – destructive or constructive.

What allows for resolution of the disappointment and its chaos is a willingness of the person to stay present and allow the emotions, the disparate and confused thoughts, the disorderliness of the process to progress. If she or he can allow themselves to experience the confusion, the unknowingness and the emotionality that initially appear, a few scant thoughts of a different nature will begin to emerge. Dreams from earlier days long ago put in the closet drift back to mind. Relief at not having to deal with the crazy

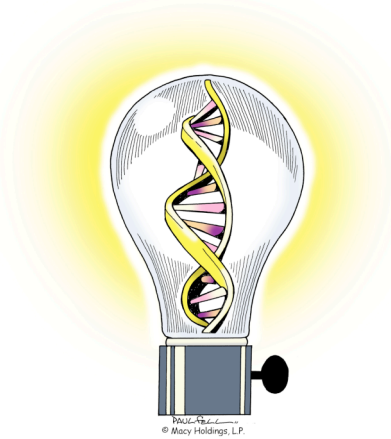
expectations of an unrealistic boss, longings to study a topic for which there never seemed time, enjoyment of simple pleasures of family time together...many little fragments of experience offer themselves up for attention, hints perhaps at what could be possibilities for the new situation.

Each of us has an inner guidance system. Many of us have disabled it by being overly rational and controlling and may not even be aware it exists. The person who sticks it through the seeming irrationality of the chaos comes to find that inner GPS which afterwards is regarded as one of the most vital parts of one's self.

The person who sticks with the experience of chaos will most likely arrive at a place in life that they consider to be of much higher quality than what they left. Their experience of disappointment or loss, once resolved, has carved a deep capacity for self-honoring and compassion for others. Many consider these dramas of their lives as their most revered teachers.

For the leader who must give bad news, think back about your own experiences of having received bad news. Chances are, your sense of dread comes from disappointments you packed away in the back of your mind before you had completed working them through. They are the baggage that determines your frame of reference and your dread. Those unresolved disappointments are what make you so uncomfortable in giving others bad news.

Track your own evolution through these chaos points until you see the resolve that occurred in the end. Track through as many experiences as necessary until you get it that *disappointment and chaos offer vital lessons to put us more directly on our own individual pathways*. If you are at peace with your own past disappointments, you will have far less baggage that affects you in your leadership role as you deliver bad news.



Then, consider the vantage point from which you will approach the situation. You can offer the person across the desk from you the best service by holding the picture of the double helix. One spiral of energy could appear destructive and will seem to threaten the person's stability. The other spiral offers pictures of new possibility, new lessons, renewed vitality in pursuing the person's own unique life path.

Holding the two spirals of the helix at the same time – both the appearance of destruction and the appearance of

construction – allows the person to turn the light onto his or her future. When we *hold both simultaneously*, the light switch comes under our control.

Of course, there are lots of other things to consider. Your HR folks will guide you on procedure, but right now we're talking about where you *come from* as you carry out those procedures. We're talking about how you orient yourself and how you set the field of energy around the delivery of bad news to best serve the other person and yourself. Your point of orientation will have a very strong influence on whether the recipient gets stuck on one side or the other of the chaos helix, or whether s/he is able to integrate them into a higher pathway and to turn on the light switch.

No matter how insightful a leader is about healing from disappointment and the opportunity it offers for finding a more coherent life direction, delivering bad news is still difficult. There's no formula or nor five easy steps that will take the difficulty away.

But then, leaders aren't ordinary people. Leaders are called to experience life in its multi-dimensionality by the nature of our day-to-day activities. We see our employees, our peers, and our bosses at their best and at their worst. Leaders see the dark side and the light side of organizational life and recognize that all are part of the mix. In essence, organizations are also double helices. We hold the bigger picture of how it all fits together. We are the mirror of the whole.

By being called to see and hold the vast dimensionality of organizational life, self-aware leaders are asked to wake up to their own depths. We see more, and if we integrate what we see, the depth and breadth of our own selves evolve. The more we experience and integrate, the more capable we become. These experiences of being with people in times of turmoil grow us as well as grow them, grooming us for higher challenges yet to come and greater opportunities to serve.

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