

Advisor

THE Newsletter of Effective Communication

Communicating During Layoffs and Expansions

These days, many companies are simultaneously firing and hiring workers, letting go outmoded or redundant employees while adding new ones with very different skills. This trend helps explain a curious anomaly of the current, record-setting economic boom: Layoffs, which usually fade during good times, remain widespread. (The Bureau of Labor Statistics says the number of layoffs reached 1.57 million in 1999.)

Layoffs are significant events that have serious personal consequences for employees and economic consequences for communities. They also have internal and external communications implications. Handled improperly, communications can make a difficult situation worse, especially for employees,

and can damage an organization's reputation and perhaps its bottom line.

Each layoff is unique, and the communications plan associated with it will, and should, vary. What remains constant is the importance of developing and implementing a plan. This article

provides some guidelines to assist in that effort. What's more, it serves as a useful template for communicating during positive events such as workforce expansions.

Be sure your plan identifies all individuals – such as those at the corporate or division level, in communications, government relations

and other functions – who will be implementing the plan. Advise them sufficiently in advance of the event so they can prepare properly, and provide them with all relevant background

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Research shows that most employees prefer to get information from their immediate supervisors, senior executives and small-group meetings – in that order.

We've Got To Stop Meetings Like These

Some bad news: If you're typical of most people in the business world, you'll spend three years of your life attending meetings – most likely listening to business presentations. More bad news: After listening to a 10-minute presentation, the average listener has heard, understood, accurately evaluated and retained about half of what was said. Within 48 hours, that 50% drops another half to a 25% effectiveness level. By the end of the week, that level goes down to about 10% or less.

These statistics suggest that people have poor listening skills. But the problem may just as likely result from poor presentation skills. The fact is most business presentations are not delivered well. Little wonder. Few of us seek out training in how to deliver an effective business presentation. Instead, we acquire our "skills" through observational learning. But we're probably observing colleagues and others who haven't had that training either. Truly, the blind are leading the blind.

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information, talking points, likely questions, etc. It is essential that all spokespersons "sing from the same song sheet" by communicating the same facts, rationale and tone when talking to employees, reporters, elected officials, civic leaders, etc.

Employees

Employees are the most important audience in any layoff. Give careful consideration to how and when they learn of the announcement. Simply put, employees must be the first to be told. Take precautions to ensure that they do not learn of the action through the media or through employees at other company locations.

Whether employees are told in a group meeting or in small sessions by their supervisors, a good rule of thumb is for employees to get the word about 30 minutes before any reporter does. Also consider how and when you will notify employees not on site (those on another shift, on vacation or who are ill).

For a major layoff, such as the closure of a union facility, local and perhaps national union leaders may need to be notified in advance. In such cases, all parties need to agree to the announcement timetable and must maintain confidentiality in order to prevent damaging leaks.

Research shows that most employees prefer to get information from their immediate supervisors, senior executives and small-group-meetings – in that order. When communicating bad news, avoid using impersonal forms of communication such as memos or bulletin board announcements as the primary communications vehicle. That's not to say employees should not be given a copy of a news release, internal announcement or other communication (all of these can ensure that a consistent message is delivered). But use these communications in tandem with, not in place of, personal communication.

Make an effort to ensure that the communications are straightforward and understandable (e.g., no jargon),

appropriate in tone (empathetic) and consistent (no conflicting or mixed messages). Professional communicators should be involved in writing, scripting, editing or reviewing these communications.

Because layoffs can have an impact throughout an organization, determine whether the development needs to be communicated to employees at other locations.

Media

A key decision to make is whether to hold a news conference, issue a news release or simply develop a standby response statement to be used to respond to media inquiries. When the number of layoffs is small, proactive communication with the media is probably not warranted. However, in situations involving larger numbers of employees or where the facility is located in a small community, a proactive approach is best.

Initiating media contact regarding bad news often results in more balanced coverage. Dealing openly with the topic gets it out of the news more quickly than attempts to hide the facts, causing reporters to dig them out, and giving the story a longer life.

In general, news conferences afford a more controlled environment where the spokesperson can outline the company's plans and answer follow-up questions all at once rather than having them asked over several days.

Likewise, news releases provide an opportunity to help shape media coverage. It may be advisable to develop several versions of the news release – one for local distribution (emphasizing people-related issues, such as severance pay or outplacement assistance.) and another version for the trade and general business press.

Aside from a news release, several

written pieces may need to be developed. A standby response statement contains the "must airs" or key points you want to make and would like to see reporters include in their stories. The Q&A anticipates reporters' questions and provides succinct responses to them. A facility backgrounder contains historical or other relevant information about the facility. Some or all of these pieces can be used to brief employees (such as investor and government relations, etc.) who need to be familiar with the details.

Because the local facility manager serves as the "face" of the company in the community, and because reporters generally seek out and want to hear directly from that person, he or she should possess the confidence and competence needed to have a successful encounter with the media. Determine whether media training or a media training refresher is needed. Additionally, it may be advisable to hold a practice session (preferably on-camera) in which the spokesperson delivers the key messages and has the opportunity to answer questions.

Prior to making any announcement, give thought to the following:

- What response will you provide to reporters who hear rumors of the layoff or expansion and call for confirmation before any announcement is made?
- How will you respond to reporters' requests for on-site visits for photos and interviews, especially for interviews with hourly employees?
- Are you prepared to respond to serious errors in reporting?
- Do you anticipate any negative employee or community reaction to the announcement, and if so, what contingency plans are in place to deal with that reaction?

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After the announcement, monitor the local news and op ed coverage (e.g., editorials, letters to the editor) as one way to gauge public reaction and to determine accuracy of the news coverage.

In some instances, it may be appropriate or necessary to place an ad (e.g., explaining the layoff, soliciting employment opportunities for those affected, etc.) in the local newspaper. Advertising gives you greater control over the message that is delivered.

Government Officials

Don't forget to communicate with local, state and federal officials during significant downsizings or expansions. It is important to contact these officials as a constituent courtesy and as an affirmation of good corporate citizenship. Initiating contact with government officials is beneficial for many of the same reasons as initiating contact with the media. It allows officials time to prepare a response that may be more balanced and favorable than one given where the official learned of the event from another source.

Typically, a company's government relations function takes the lead in contacting appropriate state and federal officials, while a facility manager takes responsibility for contacting local officials, civic leaders and regulatory agencies. The news releases and other written material prepared for media communications can also be used for government-related communications in order to ensure consistency of message.

Other Notifications

Beyond employees and the media, there are many other audiences who may be affected by a layoff or expansion. For example, proper notification of suppliers (from major utilities to janitorial services) and customers is also critical. If layoffs affect how a customer is served, develop a plan to ensure that service is not disrupted. For instance, if a distribution center is closed, employees in sales, customer service and other distribution centers must understand (and, if appropriate, articulate) the rationale behind the action. Also consider the host of other community leaders and organizations that may have strong ties to the facility.

The bottom line is this: Communicating effectively during layoffs and expansions requires a coordinated plan, developed and executed by various staff working in concert with one another.

Various functions within an

organization should be consulted during the process of developing a communications plan or should be provided information developed as part of that plan. A comprehensive checklist of the various audiences that may need to be notified or consulted can be found on our Web site:

www.ammermanexperience.com.

Initiating media contact regarding bad news often results in more balanced coverage.

Don't forget to communicate with local, state and federal officials during significant downsizings or expansions.

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Consequently, many business presentations fail to achieve their desired result: getting people to listen to, hear, understand and act on what is said.

Some good news: Delivering an effective business presentation is a skill everyone can learn. Here are six of the most common communications-related problems with business presentations, along with some suggestions on how to correct them:

1 Inadequate preparation. Many people who are less-than-effective public speakers say that they just aren't good communicators, or that they are uncomfortable speaking in front of groups. But the real problem usually is that they have done little or no preparation. Unless they have been asked to deliver a major speech, few devote the appropriate time and effort to plan and practice what they have to say. The feeling is, "I'll just wing it."

What constitutes adequate preparation? All successful communication efforts begin by answering two questions: "Who is your audience?" and "What is your message?" If you fail to answer either of these questions, or if you fail to tailor your message to the informational needs of your audience, your presentation will lack purpose and relevance, and your listeners will tune you out. Carefully select the subject and content of your presentation. Because "one size" rarely "fits all," resist the temptation merely to "recycle" a previous presentation.

Once you've developed your presentation, practice it . . . three times . . . aloud . . . on your feet . . . if possible, using a tape recorder. This is the best-kept secret to effective delivery; it generates both



Case Study: Helping School PR Pros Graduate to Greater Influence

The Texas School Public Relations Association (TSPRA) is a professional organization dedicated to promoting public schools through effective communication.

The largest chapter of the National School Public Relations Association, TSPRA has almost 500 members, primarily public information officers and communications directors serving the school districts and educational associations and agencies in Texas. Its membership also includes superintendents, principals and other school administrators.

The organization provides a variety of products and services to promote public education and assist its members and the school districts of the state in the practice of effective communications with parents, taxpayers, staff and students.

Last spring, TSPRA asked The Ammerman Experience to develop a training seminar that introduces school administrators to the basics of facing the media and managing crisis situations. To date, some 250 superintendents, assistant superintendents, principals, public information officers and other education professionals have attended sessions held throughout the state. More sessions are scheduled.

Like their counterparts in corporations and other organizations, school PR professionals face some tough, new communications challenges. TSPRA's executive director, Annell Todd, spoke with *Advisor* about the changing nature of school PR.

Q. What are some of the changes occurring in school PR today?

A. It used to be that only very large districts had professional communications people on staff. Now we have PR people in districts as small as 5,000 to 6,000

students. Also, what PR people do has changed. We laugh today about how, not long ago, PR people would talk about printers and the nightmares you'd have with these vendors. The focus was on tactics – newsletters, the occasional bond issue, open houses and the year-end awards and retirement dinners. PR was a pretty simple operation. Those issues are just a blip on the screen now.

Q. What issues now dominate that radar screen?

A. In Texas, and most likely across the nation, school funding is definitely one of the most important. Texas is in a fast-growth mode. People from all over are moving to the state. The high tech industry is bringing a lot of people, as is immigration from Mexico. We have districts that are growing so fast, they have to pass a bond issue every three years. That means you've got to be communicating with constituents. And it has to be a constant process. Gone are the days when you could wait to talk with people until you had to go to them for money. Public information officers play a key role in that continuing communication.

Q. Besides school funding, what other issues are people interested in?

A. Accountability and testing are real challenges for school communicators. There's a lot of competition among districts. If test scores fall, parents may think their district is not as good as a neighboring district. Also, some people think there's too much emphasis placed on tests, so we have to communicate that learning really is going on in the classroom – that we're not just teaching to the test. Of course, there's also the issue of increased violence.

Q. How are communicators dealing with the threat or reality of increased violence?

A. Last spring was particularly challenging because of the spate of threats and copycat bomb scares. One of the most creative strategies I've seen came out of the Spring Independent School District, near Houston. What they did was communicate that any class time missed due to bomb threats or the like would be made up at the end of the year. That idea – communicated effectively – created the peer pressure needed to shut down the threats that would have resulted in building evacuations.

Q. Research shows that education is getting increased news coverage. What does this mean for communicators?

A. Education is front-page news every day. And because the prevailing news in the mass media is sensational and negative, it's a constant challenge for our people to communicate good news – and there's so much of it. The amount of time and expertise needed to deal with the media, even when there's not a crisis, has greatly accelerated. We were acutely aware that principals and central-office administrators needed hands-on media training. This is why the training The Ammerman Experience is conducting is so important.

Q. What does the training involve?

A. It's a one-day session. The morning focuses on media communications: how to have a successful media interview, the most common and damaging traps encountered during interviews, and how to establish trust and credibility – the primary goal of all communication. Several of the participants experience an ambush interview, which is taped and critiqued.

In the afternoon, the focus shifts to crisis management: the five predictable stages of every crisis, and the critical role communication plays in controlling and resolving a crisis. Participants are given a crisis scenario and form crisis-management teams. Each team analyzes the crisis, develops a strategy to manage

“Like their counterparts in corporations and other organizations, school PR professionals face some tough, new communications challenges.”

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it, prepares a media statement and selects a member to conduct a press briefing, which is taped and critiqued. The scenario is updated, and the process is repeated.

Q. What are the benefits of the training?

A. First of all, many administrators do not always get a lot of training in PR or communications. So they leave this session with solid media skills – skills they can use when talking about positive or negative developments. They also come away with a greater appreciation of what PR people who speak with reporters have to deal with, and that it's not easy.

"The amount of time and expertise needed to deal with the media, even when there's not a crisis, has greatly accelerated."

Q. There's an expression, "The "Net" changes everything." Is the Internet changing the way schools communicate?

A. It's had a tremendous impact. And Web sites will only grow in importance as a tool for communicating with the public. Internally, we're going to have to educate people that although the tool is technology based, oversight for it belongs in the PR function – with trained communicators.

Q. Clearly, school PR professionals are operating in a more challenging environment – media relations, crisis management, the Internet. What rewards are they reaping?

A. In many districts, particularly the larger ones, we're seeing the communications position being elevated to the cabinet level. Several of our members are now at the associate or

assistant superintendent level. They're functioning not merely as tacticians, but as counselors – strategic thinkers. To be truly effective, the top communicator needs to report to the superintendent. Unless you're at the cabinet level, it's difficult to be on top of the information you need to do your job.

For more information about the Texas School Public Relations Association, contact Annell Todd at 512-474-9107, Annell@tspra.org or visit TSPRA's Web site at www.tspra.org.



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confidence and competence.

You may lack the time needed for such practice or feel that not every presentation warrants this time commitment. If so, recognize that your performance is unlikely to meet your own expectations and those of your audience.

For most of us, one way to distinguish ourselves on the job is through our performance in routine, ordinary meetings. Rehearsing your presentation may be one of the best investments you can make in your career.

2 Inappropriate length.

(Translation: Too long!) Successful

speakers know that the attention span of most audiences is about 20 minutes. If you're an extraordinary speaker, you probably can hold their attention for a half hour, yet many business presentations last well beyond what the average person can (or is willing to) handle.

Even if you're given an hour of speaking time, try to limit yourself to 20 minutes or so. You'll score points with your audience

for doing so. Or at least find a way to divide that hour into segments – with a break or several unusual or entertaining pauses. To ensure brevity, follow the example of some of the most effective communicators around – advertising copywriters: Focus on one or two key messages.

3 Boring. Your "business face" – that unemotional, inexpressive persona that may serve you well during an intense negotiation – actually limits your effectiveness in most speaking situations by preventing you from "connecting" with your audience. Just as people naturally gravitate to individuals with outgoing, enthusiastic personalities, they are inclined to listen to ideas presented with energy and conviction. Remember, communicating is selling . . . and successful selling is the transfer of enthusiasm from speaker to listener.

To help sell your message, increase your normal energy level 50% when delivering a presentation. Also, keep your presentation from becoming a mere litany of dull, uninspired facts. For example, if you're discussing a 200-megawatt cogeneration plant, put its size into perspective by saying that it generates enough electricity to power a city the size of Ithaca, New York. Remember those similes, metaphors and other figures of

speech you studied in English class? Use them to create powerful and lasting visual images with words.

4 Poor eye contact. Eye contact is a critical skill. It has the greatest impact on one-on-one or group communication.

Avoiding eye contact makes us seem uninterested and distant.

Talk to one person at a time. Literally,

Eye contact is a critical skill. It has the greatest impact on one-on-one or group communication. Avoiding eye contact makes us seem uninterested and distant.

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In Brief

Words Matter

A picture may be worth a thousand words, but online, people would rather read the words, at least when it comes to news. That's the conclusion from a joint study by Stanford University and the Poynter Institute on the way people read news online.

Researchers, who tracked readers' eye movements, expected people to read Web news the same way they do newspapers: look at pictures and graphics before looking at text.

But online, readers look at the text before they look at photos or graphics. Often, they don't look at the art at all. For instance, people read 92% of the text on Web pages, but they looked at only 22% of the graphics on the same pages.

"We were not anticipating this lessened interest in pictures and graphics," says Marion Lewenstein, Stanford professor emerita of communication and the project's main investigator.

Why does this happen? It's not clear, she says, but "my own personal opinion about graphics is they don't give you a lot of information, and people are after information."

Her advice to Web sites that convey news? "Be sure the text is interesting, and use graphics and photos judiciously."

For more information:

• www.poynter.org/eyetrack2000/index.htm

• www.onlinejournalismawards.org

Crisis Management Help for Schools: What You Can Do

The tragedies in Littleton, Colorado; Paducah, Kentucky; and Lake Worth, Florida, demonstrate that a crisis can happen to any organization – large or small, public or private – even schools.

During a crisis, an organization must take immediate, corrective action to remedy the problem. In addition, it must communicate those actions immediately and sometimes repeatedly to all appropriate audiences. Failure to communicate or to communicate effectively creates the perception that the crisis is continuing out of control, or that the organization is hiding something or is indifferent to public concern.

For nearly 30 years, The Ammerman Experience has prepared corporations and other organizations to navigate successfully through crisis situations and to communicate effectively during them. Increasingly, participants in our Effective Media Communications Seminar are primary- and secondary-school educators: superintendents, assistant superintendents, principals, public-information officers and other administrators. Some are sponsored by companies in their community.

If your firm is involved in "Adopt-a-School" or similar school-support programs, why not consider sponsoring one or more educators at an upcoming Ammerman Experience Effective Media

Communications Seminar. Helping prepare your school district to properly manage a crisis and interact with the media may be one of the most valuable community relations "contributions" you can make.

For details, contact The Ammerman Experience at 800-866-2026.


"The conversion to the Internet is going faster than anyone thought, particularly among young people,"

Internet Preferred Over Other Media

The Internet has begun to replace newspapers and TV for 18- to 24-year-olds, according to a survey about Net access

in America. The poll, by the Round Table Group, a Chicago-based consortium of business school technology professors, says 67% in the 18-to-24 age group use the Net to gather key information. Of those, 59% say they get better information from the Net than from newspapers, and 53% say the Net does better than TV.

"The conversion to the Internet is going faster than anyone thought, particularly among young people," says Round Table spokesperson Jeff Barge.

The study also looks at the gap between the technology haves and have-nots. Like other recent studies, it concludes that age, income and education have more to do with who is online than with race. 

Advisor is a quarterly newsletter of The Ammerman Experience. The mission of our firm is to help clients succeed in the communications arena. The mission of this publication is to provide you with thoughtful, useful, state-of-the-art information to help you do that. Your comments and content suggestions are welcome. Contact Ken Haseley at 1-800-866-2026 or by email at kenhaseley@compuserve.com.

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look directly into the eyes of one listener at a time, just as you normally do in one-on-one conversation. Contact eyes, not faces or tops of heads. Most business and social situations call for "involvement." You achieve it through 5-10 seconds of eye contact. When we're excited, enthusiastic and confident, we usually look at someone for 5-10 seconds before looking away. Remember the 85/15 rule: During your presentation, look at the audience 85% of the time; glance down at your notes or elsewhere 15% of the time.

5 Misuse of humor. Standard fare in many business presentations is the opening joke. Although the use of humor is one of several ways to help you connect with the audience, telling jokes is risky: They can offend people. They are difficult to deliver. And the audience may have already heard them.

At the start of your presentation, you need positive reinforcement from the audience, not the negative feedback that comes with failed humor. Leave joke telling to the professional comedians. Instead, use humorous stories or anecdotes that tie into your message or are relevant to the situation. Memorize all humor.

6 Mistakes involving visual aids. The fewer the better. Use a few well-conceived visuals that are memorable, rather than many ordinary, boring visuals. Pie charts, bar graphs and the like are usually appropriate visuals; those merely containing words usually are not. Remember, visuals should enhance your presentation, not be your presentation.

Explain exactly what each visual means so the audience doesn't have to guess. Even if it is fairly obvious what's on a chart, it's a good habit to repeat it verbally, thus adding reinforcement to key


points. When possible, use your hand to point to visuals. Most speakers misuse pointers, laser or otherwise. (Have you ever seen a speaker with a pointer who didn't play with it at least once?)

Don't show a visual aid until the moment it's necessary for your discussion. Otherwise, the audience will be distracted. When you do reveal it, pause for a few seconds to give the audience a chance to begin to absorb the information. After you're through with the visual, cover it up. Don't give the audience something that will distract them from what you're saying. Talk to your audience, not to your visual.

The damage done by an ineffective business presentation goes far beyond the boredom and opportunity cost associated with it.

You don't have to turn the house lights all the way down to show transparencies or PowerPoint visuals. Keep the room as light as possible so you can see your audience, and they can see you. Darkened rooms, especially after lunch, invite drowsiness.

Whenever possible, save handouts until after your presentation. If you give people materials at the beginning of your talk, they'll read instead of paying attention to you.

The damage done by an ineffective business presentation goes far beyond the boredom and opportunity cost associated with it. Its real damage is that it limits or prevents the speaker from achieving his or her communications objective – getting people to listen to, understand and act on what they hear. The ability to deliver an effective business presentation is an essential skill. 

Beware The PowerPoint!

Earlier this year, Gen. Hugh Shelton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, issued an unusual order to U.S. military bases around the globe.

His message: enough with the bells and whistles – just get to the point.

It seems that e-mailed military briefings larded with electronic "slides" of booming tanks and spinning pie charts were gobbling up so much of the Defense Department's classified bandwidth that they were slowing more critical communications between headquarters and units in the field.

"The chairman basically told everyone that we don't need Venetian-blind effects or fancy backdrops. All we need is the information," says one senior Defense Department official.

Gen. Shelton's order is only the Pentagon's most recent assault on a growing electronic menace: the PowerPoint briefing. Sure, business executives complain about the seemingly endless PowerPoint presentations put on by overeager middle managers in darkened boardrooms across America. But in the military, the Microsoft program, which helps users create computer-based graphics and sound effects, has become one of the most dreaded facts of life.

Army Secretary Louis Caldera suggests that PowerPoint presentations are alienating lawmakers. "People are not listening to us, because they are spending so much time trying to understand these incredibly complex slides," he says.

*from The Wall Street Journal,
April 26, 2000*

The Ammerman Experience Promotes Two

The Ammerman Experience has promoted two staff members. The new appointments were announced by Dan Ammerman, chairman and CEO of the 27-year-old, Houston-based communication skills development firm.

Teresa Saylor was named president and chief operating officer. A 19-year veteran with the company, Saylor will have responsibility for strategic planning, finance, sales and marketing, and personnel. Previously she was executive vice president.

Jeff Braun was appointed vice president and general manager,

responsible for new business and seminar development, as well as client relations. He will continue in his role as one of the firm's instructors. Braun, who spent 25 years in broadcast journalism, joined The Ammerman Experience in 1996. Prior to his new assignment, he was general manager.

"These promotions are well deserved – by individuals who have a passion and commitment to provide our clients with the most valuable and innovative communications seminars available," said Dan Ammerman. "The leadership of our firm is in good hands." 

CALENDAR

Effective Media Communications. A two-day seminar that helps you acquire the confidence and competence needed for a successful encounter with the news media. September 25-26, October 23-24, November 13-14, December 4-5.

Effective Media Communications (Refresher). A one-day seminar that will help you keep your media relations skills sharp. September 28.

Effective Media Communications for Marketing Professionals. A one-day seminar designed to prepare you to respond to, or seek out, media opportunities that will aid in your marketing or sales efforts. October 25.

Effective Presentations. A one-day seminar that will help you identify your strengths and weaknesses as a presenter – helping you build on your strengths while diminishing or eliminating your weaknesses. September 27.

**For detailed information, or to enroll, contact The Ammerman Experience at:
1-800-866-2026**

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