

A better way to deliver bad news by jean-françois manzoni article review

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Communication: Article Review

“ A Better Way to Deliver Bad News” by Jean-François Manzoni

Good communication does not always mean sharing good news. One of the most challenging jobs of a manager is to tell someone that they need to perform better at work. Dispensing criticism to improve the work of employees is one of the most important parts of a manager’s responsibilities. A manager’s performance depends on the work quality of his or her team members. Manzoni (2002) has written a very helpful paper on how managers can do a better job of communicating with employees as well as make the job of criticism less difficult. The advice is especially good because the manager needs to change his or her attitude instead of needing to try to change others. The best way for a manager to meet deadlines with good results is to adopt a reframing strategy when communicating to their team members.

A common mistake managers make is to pass judgment on a problem’s origin before the discussion with the team member even starts. Manzoni (2002) calls that method as framing “ a difficult situation and decisions in such a way that it is Narrow” (6). He means that a manager is not approaching the situation with an open mind. Manzoni goes on to explain that a “ Binary” approach is too narrow; when it is assumed that there are only two dimensions to the solution - a right way and a wrong way. He explained how even if a conversation over the situation escalates and becomes more dramatic the framing of the problem remains “ Frozen” or

stuck without being able to bring the problem to a resolution (Manzoni, 2002, 6) Narrow, binary and frozen are shorthand for negative strategies during the process of talking to an employee during a work critique. The key words are helpful in reminding a manager what not to do but it would be better if the author had framed his method in a positive way. The article goes on to give examples of (a) the wrong way to approach a meeting to give a worker critique to the worker, (b) how the manager can take a broader view of the problem (reframing) and (c) what the manager can say to the worker once he or she has personally reframed the situation.

Schwarz (1994) also explained that a major problem is how managers fail to use a good strategy in work critiques but Schwarz uses a different context. He says that “ the sandwich” method is still used by many managers to give their employees feedback. His opinion is that it is an old-fashioned strategy that should not be used to train managers. Schwarz (1994) describes sandwiching as a work critiquing meeting that unfolds in three stages. The first stage is to give positive feedback, the second stage is to give negative feedback and then the third is to again give some positive feedback. In that way the negative is sandwiched between two positives. (Schwartz, 1994, 337) Sandwiching can end up being far more confusing than necessary and make the meeting a failure in terms of improving a worker’s quality of work. Schwartz (1994) suggests being “ transparent” or honest from the beginning to the end of the meeting (338-339). The manager wants a conversation with the worker on a give and take basis; not an “ I win” or “ you win” situation.

Schwarz has a more positive way of explaining the problem and the solutions which seems more effective than Manzoni presents in his article.

Manzoni does take into account the stress managers are under and the time constraints for planning a worker's critique. Those are the reasons he suggests that cause a manager to immediately decide there is a problem with the worker rather than consider that the problem may be with the circumstances the worker is in. Manzoni highly recommends considering the circumstances not the personality of the worker in order to solve a work problem. His main point is to stop using "restrictive framing" but instead to use "a broad and flexible approach" (8). This article can change a way a manager approaches a problem. The only criticism is that the suggestions are presented from a negative 'what not to do' point of view throughout most of the article.

References

Manzoni, Jean-François. (2002). "A Better Way to Deliver Bad News," Harvard Business Review, September: R0209J.

Schwarz, Roger. (1994). *The skilled facilitator: A comprehensive resource for consultants, facilitators, managers, trainers, and coaches*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. Print.