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Delivering Unpopular News -- When You Haven't Bought In

By **TODDI GUTNER**

Question: *What advice do you have for delivering an unpopular message to your employees, particularly when you may not have bought in to the message yourself?*

--Student at UVA's Darden School of Business in Charlottesville, Va.

Answer: It's hard enough to deliver unpopular news to your employees, but it's even harder when you struggle with the message yourself. If you're in a position with your superiors to push back on the decision, you might want to try that first, recommends Gary Schuman, president of CDL Consulting, a leadership and change management consulting firm in Baltimore. "If you lose that battle, then as a leader you have to figure out a way to get onboard with the message," he says.

To that end, take the time you need to get your own feelings about the decision in check. If you haven't fully bought into it, "your employees will be able to tell in the tone of your voice or your body language that you do not believe in what you are doing," says Ray Skiba, director of human resources at Streck, a manufacturer of clinical laboratory products in Omaha, Neb.

The worst thing you can do is send a mixed signal: "I don't believe in this but they're making me do it." That may seem like the safest way out of challenging situation, but you'll lose credibility with your staffers. "You're making it clear you're powerless in this situation and you're selling out your responsibility as a leader to stand behind company policy," says Mr. Schuman.

Once you've done your internal work, prepare yourself to deliver the message. If there was team involvement in the decision, ask one of the team members to listen to how you plan to address your employees. "The more prepared you are, the better the outcome," says Mr. Skiba.

Next, consider your communication strategy. "Explain why the decision is important to the business, how the decision was made, and why it is important that the plan be executed," says Kimberly Bishop, founder of a career management and leadership services consulting firm in New York.

Give your employees ample time to digest the message. Since it took you some time to accept the information, realize that your employees will need time as well. "When the message has been delivered, be available to answer questions, be visible and approachable to help individuals get to the point of acceptance," says Mr. Skiba.

Realize that once your employees see that the decision has not totally destroyed their work environment, they may be more willing to let go of their anger. "You might want to get your group together a week or two after a decision has been made and ask people what's been working and what hasn't been working since the announcement," says Mr. Schuman. Then see if there's any action that you can take to improve the situation. Your availability to your employees and understanding of their experience will go a long way in making them see

you as an effective leader.

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