As discussed in part one, difficult decisions can be very hard to make, and communicating them can sometimes be harder still. In this the second of two articles Trainer and Conference Speaker Frank Newberry considers how we can respond positively to the challenge of communicating difficult decisions.

Sadly, as the recession progresses organisations in the turfcare sector continue to make difficult and unpopular decisions. Reading this, you too may have recently experienced, or at least know of pay freezes, reduced hours in which to do the same work, friends or relatives that have been made redundant and so on.

Difficult decisions do not get easier once they have been made. Suspicion and intrigue always seem to surround difficult decisions. Is the employer using the recession to get rid of the people s/he does not like? Are they keeping only the less expensive or least assertive staff?

In the case of redundancies there is also ‘survivor guilt’ to contend with. Those who have kept their jobs (for the time being) feel bad about their workmates losing theirs. Their ex-workmates even turn up at work or social events wearing their ‘victim’ status for all to see. Meanwhile the guilty survivors buy them a drink and wonder who will be next for the chop.

People still ‘bottle out’ of communicating difficult decisions

Having experienced both being made redundant and having to make other people redundant it is with concern that I view the extent to which people still ‘bottle out’ of communicating difficult decisions. It is as if supervisors and managers are not aware that those still in work, are judging them by their performance in these difficult situations.

If bosses want their work teams to do the same work (or even more) with less people then they need to be seen to be handling these situations competently and fairly.

How bad news is being delivered

You may have heard the news stories about redundancy notices being texted to people, or even the recent survey that revealed the primary methods used by organisations to deliver bad news to be:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29%</td>
<td>By e-mail message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19%</td>
<td>Face-to-face meetings with direct supervisors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18%</td>
<td>Face-to-face meetings with senior managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12%</td>
<td>Letter or memo from senior managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8%</td>
<td>Internal employee website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6%</td>
<td>Teleconference/videoconference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>Organisation newsletter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4%</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is rather sobering, to see the number of organisations that let the internet deliver their bad news for them.

Russell Grossman (a senior manager at the BBC) put it best for me when he said: "Difficult news is best received from people you trust … the more leaders cultivate trust when times are good, the more they will reap the benefits when the cream turns sour."

For the purposes of this article I will assume that you will be asked (like I was) to have face-to-face meetings with people to give them the bad news. Some good advice on what to say was given by a man called Bob Kustka, (formerly with the Gillette Corporation).

He said there are a few things to remember when delivering a difficult message.

1. ‘First, whenever people receive negative information, there is a tendency to go into selective listening mode. This means you will need to choose your words carefully so your message will be understood.

2. Be empathetic, but do not say things like "I know how you feel," "I wish I didn’t have to do this," or "This isn’t my decision" because if you’re delivering the bad news, you’re accountable and need to support the decision of management.

3. Lastly, plan your meeting. Don’t wing it. Write down what you intend to say to make sure you cover all the key points.

Always be firm yet professional and you will be able to get the right message across’.

You may find it more practical and cost-effective to have group meetings followed by one-to-one sessions with those involved.

You will need to factor in that well before the facts emerge there will be rumours about what is happening and who is to go. Some of it will be surprisingly accurate. A lot of it will be quite wrong but people will believe it in the absence of an official statement from someone they trust.

**People are already on their guard and have been for some time now**

The problem I had when I was required to make people redundant was that the gossip had taken hold well before we knew precisely who was going to be made redundant.

The situation I faced is likely to recur now that we have a recession as pervasive as the one we have now. People are already on their guard and have been for some time now.

I have spoken to one person in the turf sector who is changing jobs to go somewhere more secure - even though it will be at a lower level and for less pay.

**There are many people who will experience fear as a motivating force**

The gossip, the rumours, the ‘hoping for the best’ and ‘fearing the worst’ is a very natural reaction but we need not let it sabotage what we are trying to do. What are we are trying to do?
We should be seeking to maintain morale and motivation - at a difficult time - so that work performance does not suffer. There are many people who will experience fear as a motivating force. They will work harder in the hope that they will keep their job that way.

Here then is an acronym I like to use to help smooth the transition of changes in the workplace and minimise the gossip and the rumours. It is formed from the word CHANGE.

**COMMUNICATE FREQUENTLY**  
Gossip never sleeps so have weekly updates on the ongoing situation at work.

**HELP UNDERSTANDING**  
Put it in writing, put dates on the changes, and check understanding regularly.

**ANSWER QUESTIONS**  
Put FAQ’s (frequently asked questions) in writing, be patient as people come to terms with the bad news, repetition will help people to understand.

**NEVER BE CYNICAL**  
Put up, or shut up. If you do not agree with the changes then get the answers you need to be able to communicate the bad news. If you are cynical it gives everyone else permission to be the same, and then things could get much worse.

**GET IDEAS**  
Ask for ideas. People may be much closer to the problems than you are. Ask team members what they can do to help the transition to succeed. Set a good example yourself and then ask staff to do their best.

**EXPLAIN THE BENEFITS**  
Get the team engaged in the process of change by explaining the benefits i.e. the organisation survives, the team pulls together, we help each other, efficiencies and economies emerge.

Good luck communicating those difficult decisions. I hope you never need it.

Frank has been coaching and training groundsmen and greenkeepers for over 20 years. If you need further help with communicating difficult decisions you can reach Frank via the contact tab on his personal website [www.franknewberry.com](http://www.franknewberry.com).