

# Be transparent in times of uncertainty

When major changes are about to happen in a business, uncertainty follows, and without information staff often speculate and morale can suffer.

**Leah Mether** shares her advice on how managers can build trust

**WE'VE ALL** heard the saying “no news is good news”, but often, particularly at times of uncertainty when you know change is brewing, this is not the case.

In fact, not only is no news not good news, but frequently it is even worse than bad news, because it adds to uncertainty and anxiety. In a vacuum of information, people fill the space with their own stories and

even if it's not what people want to hear, because this builds trust. As David Rock and Christy Pruitt-Haynes wrote in *Harvard Business Review*: “Research shows that getting an answer you don't like is better than not receiving one at all. Any way you can provide useful information, even if it seems small, can increase people's sense of clarity, if not certainty.”

because it's the right thing to do. You're not waiting to be asked, you are being open in your communication and proactively sharing. In that awkward period when you know change or a big decision is coming but you don't know exactly what it looks like yet, transparency is a powerful trust and respect-building tool.

## Four steps to better communication

So, how do you communicate with transparency to your team when things are uncertain? Here is a simple four-step framework to help you:

Tell them:

### 1 What you know

The facts. Share as much truth as you can.

### 2 What you're doing about it

The action you're taking.

### 3 What you don't know

Don't leave things unsaid. Address the elephant in the room and verbalise the unknowns.

### 4 When you expect to know and how you will keep them informed

Give people a sense of certainty amid the

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conclusions based on fear, rumour and innuendo. Often those stories are far worse than what is actually coming.

According to Hilary Scarlett, author of *Neuroscience for Organisational Change*, the brain finds uncertainty so uncomfortable that we are better at dealing with bad news than not knowing what the future holds. In fact, bad news is often better than no news.

At times of uncertainty, it's important that leaders share as much truth as they can,

## Uncertainty calls for transparency

The words 'honesty' and 'transparency' are often used interchangeably. But there's a difference between them, and in times of uncertainty, transparency is what people need.

Honesty is telling the truth as you perceive it and refusing to lie or be deceptive – crucially – when you're asked.

Transparency means easy to see through. If you are being transparent, you are sharing the truth that you believe needs to be known



uncertainty by making it clear that you will communicate any new information as soon you have it.

**Share as much truth as you can; be honest about what you can't share**

When communicating during change and uncertainty, most leaders stop after the second point in the framework.

They share what they know and what they're doing about it but leave the unknowns unspoken, rationalising that if they don't know the answer, they shouldn't say anything. This is a mistake. Why? Because you can bet that the things left unspoken by the leaders are what everyone else is worried about and talking about. Avoiding the topic breeds suspicion and distrust.

But what if sharing is not allowed? What if you've been sworn to secrecy and your people ask questions you can't answer? Again, the

answer is simple: speak the truth. Don't say, "I don't know", if you do. This is a surefire way to erode trust if your people know or suspect that this is a lie and you're simply not telling them. Instead:

- Be transparent: "I can't share that information with you."
- Empathise but stay firm to your message: "I appreciate you want more information, and this uncertainty is unnerving, but at this stage I am unable to share any more detail."
- Include the 'why' if you can. It may be: "Because the structure has not yet been finalised", "Because it's commercial in-confidence", "Because we're still working through what the change will look like", or "Because there are non-disclosure agreements".

- Outline your commitment to keeping them as informed as you can: "My promise to you is that I will be as open and honest as I can be with you and communicate any updates as soon as I have them."

Communicating when things are uncertain and unknown can be challenging, but it's not complicated. Use the four-part framework in this article as a guide and you will reassure your people, build trust and help steer your people through the storm of change to calmer waters. **MPA**

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