How to break bad news isn’t always part of management training. And it's something you would hope to never have to do.

But if you are a manager in a humanitarian organisation, it’s likely that in the event of a crisis or tragedy, you will have to break bad news to your team. And the way in which you do so is shown to have a lasting impact on how an individual and team responds to the situation. In fact, doing it well can be a meaningful experience for you and the people you’re speaking with.

There are a variety of situations that would require you to break bad news. It may be a matter of a staff member dying unexpectedly from an illness. Or you may have been working to secure the release of an abducted staff person with confidentiality considerations for weeks.

You may be the first person that your team hears the news from, or some may have already heard the news. Conveying news as soon as possible prevents misinformation and helps to build trust. In any scenario, there will be mixed responses. Recognise that the circumstance around a staff member’s death may trigger past painful memories for some.

The following '5 Ps' of breaking bad news provides a basic and reliable framework for this difficult meeting:

1. Prepare

Write down what you would like to cover and bring these points with you to the meeting. Enlist the support of a colleague or two to review what you will say and to accompany you to meet the staff. Liaise with the Crisis Management Team (if activated) and get as much information as possible, including what will happen next, and any ongoing supports available.
2. Be present

As simple as it sounds, it can be hard to do - your own anxieties about not knowing what to say, mixed with hyperactive feelings of needing to be productive, can stand in the way of authentic and caring presence.

3. Present the information

You should present information to the whole team, and create an atmosphere that respects a variety of responses. When giving bad news, be direct and compassionate. Tell them what happened and what will happen next. If information needed to be kept from team members (ie kidnapping), explain why that was important.

Let team members know what is going to happen next and, if appropriate, invite them to participate. This may include funeral arrangements, commemorations, and memorials. Point them towards committee leaders if they have been formed. Provide preliminary information on time-off and return to work.

“Hearing bad news may disorient some people and so information will need to be communicated several times.”

4. Provide an opportunity for staff to speak and ask questions

Some staff may have reflections, while others will have questions. Listen attentively and give clear and concise responses; letting them know that you will “look into it”, if you don’t know the answer to a question. Make a note and ensure you communicate back.

Understand that emotional responses will vary: disbelief, sadness, crying, denial, shock, anger, among others. Recognise that someone’s anger is not personal, but an expression of frustration, guilt, or worry. Also understand cultural differences and perceptions of death will influence individual responses. Son’t presume to know how someone may respond.

Other reactions may include:

- Difficulty thinking clearly
- Dwelling on meaningless activities
- Expressing hostility or numbness
- Impulsiveness
- Dependence
- Feeling incompetent

Refer to special psychological support if symptoms are persistent and aggravated, drastically interfere with work, family or social life, present risk of harm to self or others, exhibit addictive behaviours, or present with severe abnormal symptoms. Yet, assume that most if not all of your team will recover naturally, without specialist intervention.
5. Personal wellbeing

Lastly, make sure you are leaning on your supports and finding rest. Giving bad news is very stressful. Often times, we have sufficient energy and fortitude in the immediate aftermath of a crisis, but be aware of the “adrenaline crash” and have compassion on your feelings of exhaustion. As explained above, get into a healthy routine and avoid isolating or escaping with drugs or alcohol.

You could also invite external psychosocial support to offer an optional Psychological First Aid (PFA) session within 3 days following the incident. During PFA, it may become apparent that some team members would like additional support. Provide clear information on how to access further psychological support. Invest in building team cohesion and resiliency during good times. This goes a long way when faced with needing to provide bad news.

FURTHER SUPPORT

We can offer you or a member of your team a range of psychosocial services including:

**Family Liaison In a Crisis**
Gain practical skills for engaging with family members or emergency contacts of staff during and after a crisis. [https://thrive-worldwide.org/service/family-liaison-in-a-crisis/](https://thrive-worldwide.org/service/family-liaison-in-a-crisis/)

**Counselling**
A safe space with a trained therapist for anyone struggling through personal issues [https://thrive-worldwide.org/service/counselling/](https://thrive-worldwide.org/service/counselling/)

**Resilience Check-In**
Space for an individual or group to pause, reflect and plot a path through a difficult time, guided by a facilitator: [https://thrive-worldwide.org/service/resilience-check-in/](https://thrive-worldwide.org/service/resilience-check-in/)

**Psychological First Aid Training**
Equip members of your team to give crucial support to others when a crisis hits. [https://thrive-worldwide.org/service/psychological-first-aid-training/](https://thrive-worldwide.org/service/psychological-first-aid-training/)

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We’re ready to support you

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