

## Real life marketing tips for unpopular decisions / outcomes

Garret Olson, Deputy Fire Chief

Scottsdale Fire Department

- If you find your decisions are commonly surprising people, you are most likely not involving the right people early enough in the fact and perspective gather processes. There should be few surprises in human resource management.
  - When you surprise someone, you should immediately ask yourself what you could (should!) have done to prevent the surprise.
- Be direct and timely – a rumor is a “freelance marketing” event and a missed opportunity to disseminate accurate information married to its decision process.
- Maintain eye contact and positive body language (open, attentive, relaxed, and engaged).
  - Don’t let your body communicate aggression or submission. This is a professional discussion so you should maintain a professional posture.
- Take your cues from body language and tone. If you think you lost attention or said something created a divide, honestly express your observation (“I feel like we lost our connection. Did I say something that needs more discussion or clarification?”)
- Respond, don’t react.
  - When you observe disappointment, empathize with your words and to a lesser extent your face, but not your body. Square up, but never off.
  - Proactive empathy and sympathy can be hazardous as you communicate that there is something to be upset about. Sometimes you may inadvertently let someone know they should be upset about something that would not have otherwise upset them.
  - Don’t talk too much and avoid circular reasoning. Present your information, and then ask if there is anything they don’t understand or would like to discuss further.
  - Share the decision and the factors that influenced the decision. “Rationale” is the appropriate word, but I don’t use it because so many associate that word with “rationalizing” which has a distinctly negative connotation.
  - Listen. Rephrase if necessary and add clarity to those items that can be clarified.
- Don’t respond to what you *think* someone is thinking. There are enough real facts to address that you don’t need to invent possible ones.
- Know your audience and their position.
  - Don’t tell someone their position unless they already made it clear to you (even then, you’re better to address the position than restate it).
  - If the person or group you are talking with has a history of supporting a particular perspective, make sure you’ve considered this perspective in your decision making process. Communicate this in a manner that demonstrates you are sensitive to other perspective. Don’t play it as a trump card.
  - Maintain an open approach that allows you to consider new perspectives – don’t pigeon hole your audience’s perspectives.

- Be complete, be honest, and don't guess.
  - Don't leave the impression that a door is open if it is not. This doesn't soften the blow – it simply prolongs the agony and sets you up to appear hypocritical.
  - If you don't have a fact, don't massage pseudo-facts into your discussion.
  - One misstated "fact" has the potential to derail your entire discussion.
  - Personal opinions rarely help, especially in a professional setting.
- When you expect (or suspect) your audience is going to convey this decision after your meeting, help them formulate their approach. Ask, "How do you plan to communicate this decision?" "How will you respond if someone asks you...?" Set them up for success.
  - Don't delegate important stuff regardless of how much you trust your delegate. If it's your decision and it's a big one, it should be delivered via your face and voice.
- End the topic by sincerely thanking them for their understanding and professionalism (only if these traits were exhibited). This ends your conversation on a positive note and gently communicates your expectations. Move on to another topic (this requires forethought) or pleasantly end your meeting.
- Follow up to make sure your decision has the intended outcome. Touch base with those affected.
- Remember, popular outcomes need to be marketed, too. Marketing both popular and unpopular decisions identifies your communication strategy. Focusing solely on marketing unpopular outcomes looks too much like "spin doctoring" and makes people feel like they should be upset every time you call them into your office or send out a memo. Marketing popular decisions also helps to minimize the impact of unpopular decisions. If you find all your efforts are going into marketing unpopular decisions, you may want to do a quick self-appraisal. To be well received and effective in this organization and personally satisfied on the inside, we all need a healthy balance of positive workplace interactions.