

Press Release

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The Five Immutable Laws of Layoffs

LONDON (05 January 2009) -- The leading management consultancy Able and How today published its recommended guidelines for the new year. "If this is going to be a January of layoffs, then why wouldn't you do it as well as you can?" asked Managing Director David Ferrabee.

"Almost every business says 'people are our greatest asset' but in times like these they disprove that in seconds," MD Paul Arnold agrees. "It's not as hard as people think to do bad news well. It just takes a bit of effort and common sense."

"Unfortunately with your adrenaline pumping and shareholders breathing down your neck, time and patience seem to be in short supply," says Ferrabee.

Here are Able and How's 'laws':

1. Do it in one go

If you have bad news to tell me then get it all out there in one go. Don't dribble it out. Get everything you know out at once and then concentrate from that moment forward on making it better.

No one will believe you for long if you keep discovering more bad news. Least of all your closest stakeholders – employees, suppliers, joint ventures, customers – who have put their faith in you in the past.

2. Publish a timeline

I know that one day I might lose my job. Hell, I've spent my holidays thinking it could be today. Then I can make plans. You know what? I'll survive. It's just this not knowing what to plan for that's killing me.

Be as clear as you can, as quickly as you can. You can even publish a timeline that only tells people when you will know more. All those connected with the organisation can then make plans and steel themselves for the future. Even those who aren't affected will want to know when things return to normal.

3. Talk about the future

There's got to be a good reason why we are doing this. Surely? So tell us a bit about it. Even if I am going, I want to know that my mates have something to look forward to.

You don't have to say that it's going to be FABULOUS. That would be a bit unkind. But do give people something to keep working for. Something to focus on.

4. Don't show favouritism

We know that the boardroom has alliances and IOUs, just like the school yard. But don't make it hideously obvious by doing odd things, like promoting the person responsible for the business unit that tanked.

You can't say you have no choice. You always have a choice. Make some smart ones.

5. Tell it like it is

Don't use clichés or jargon, like "this is hurting me more than it's hurting you"; "it's not you, it's me." It is not "market forces" that caused this. It isn't "an inability to leverage synergies." Be a (wo)man. Tell it like it is. And then shut up.

Talk to employees and the people gathered around the water-cooler as much as you talk to shareholders and analysts. This is a time in the economic history of the western world when we could do with some straight talking.

"Recessions are never easy," Arnold concluded. "However businesses are not obliged to lose all their dignity in the process. If companies use common sense and treat people with respect they can come out of the whole process with their heads held high."

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Able and How is a management consultancy specialising in organisational communications. We help companies improve their bottom line through communications. We bring together the best minds in internal communication, organisational development, change management and human resources communications.