

## **Cut out the doom and gloom talk**

*John Baldoni from Harvard Business Online*

*Striking the right tone by choosing words that address the crisis realistically but do not induce fear.*

A commercial real estate developer referred to his company's inability to obtain financing as a "financial Armageddon." An investment pundit referred to traders as being "despondent" over the state of the market. Market watchers speak of not "knowing where the bottom is." No doubt all of these comments are apt assessments of the current state of the economy, but these are words that no leader should say out loud in front of his team.

Such terms, as psychologists tell us, are "emotionally charged." Instead of providing a sense of realism, they heighten fear and panic. As dire as things are, it does not help when the senior executive stands up and says the sky is falling. At the same time, executives cannot hide the truth either. Leaders need to claim the middle ground, to convey severity without instilling hopelessness. Striking the right tone is a matter of understanding context and your people, and choosing words that address the crisis realistically but do not induce fear. Here are some suggestions to crafting your message.

Think ahead. If your company is experiencing serious difficulty, consider how you will explain it. Do not use words like "stupid" and "idiotic" when referring to senior managers. You may feel like saying that, but avoid them. Use words such as "challenged" or "unaware." Blaming individuals is good for blowing off steam but it is not good for instilling faith in the company.

Pause before you speak. When you are asked a question about the business, pause before you answer. The pause radiates calmness. It demonstrates that you are in control. You may not be, but you want your team to believe that you are holding things together. The pause also gives you time to gather your thoughts as well as to cool down if you are feeling overwrought.

Avoid hyperbole. Just as you would not pour gasoline over an open flame, you do not use words like "disastrous," "catastrophe," and "meltdown." Such words escalate tensions; a leader's job is to de-escalate tension. Instead, you can say, "serious," "tough," and "wrongheaded"—these words make your point without raising an employee's blood pressure.

Convey urgency. Tough times demand tough talk, but make sure you talk in ways that focus on what people need to do rather than what they cannot do. That is, talk specifically about how employees can do more with fewer resources by trimming less valuable tasks. Avoid blame; instead, accept ownership for the things you can control, like your work ethic and attitude.

Be like Warren. Find humor in the situation. Warren Buffett's annual letter to shareholders of Berkshire Hathaway was filled with tough talk, but he did find levity. For example, regarding Geico, Buffett wrote that he and the company's CEO "feel like two hungry mosquitoes in a nudist camp." Buffett lampooned derivative risk by saying, "It's not just whom you sleep with, but also whom they are sleeping with." And speaking personally, Buffett said, "if enjoying life promotes longevity, Methuselah's record is in jeopardy."

Of course, there are times when things are really bad and will only get worse. You play it straight; you deliver the news but you do not overly editorialize. You can express your opinion about why things are bad but spend more time on the cold, hard facts. Show concern, but not hysteria.

Finally, however, a leader has to find a way to communicate more through action and less through words. Be more present with your team. Be available to listen to what people have to

say. And be seen doing your own work, rather than avoiding it. Never over-promise, but do not over-frighten either.

In tough times, words matter. Leaders must choose them carefully.

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