

Leadership Essentials

The Bad News Disease

A common ailment in corporate life – and
how to avoid it

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The HR Manager was on edge. He was about to present his report to the CEO and the senior management team. His research brief had been to conduct an analysis of the company's culture and to make recommendations for improvement. He had sweated on this for months. After running hours of focus groups and face-to-face interviews he was confident in his findings. But he had mixed feelings about presenting the report. On the one hand, he was confident that if the company acted on the results, it would get stronger. On the other hand, the CEO was an intimidating, no-nonsense man. He was known to shoot people down in flames if he was not satisfied with the answers to his questions. As he stood in front of the room, beads of sweat started to pour from the HR Manager's forehead.

The CEO was sitting at the head of the table, surrounded by his senior directors. He was a get-straight-to-the-point-I-don't-have-time type of person. The room was silent. The HR manager cleared his throat and quickly introduced his first key finding. "My research shows that people do not feel empowered to make decisions." He went on for two or three more sentences and then the CEO abruptly cut in. He turned to the directors in the room and said, "People feel empowered in this company, don't they?" The senior team quickly agreed with the CEO.

The credibility of the HR Manager's report had been shot to pieces. He was questioned on how he came to his conclusion, but the CEO did not accept that his answers represented the true situation. The HR Manager continued with his presentation, but he knew that he had lost his audience from his first few sentences. The report was not mentioned again after that presentation.

The Bad News Disease

This CEO has what Daniel Goleman and his co-authors of the book, *Primal Leadership*, refer to as the "CEO Disease." (Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis & Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership*, Harvard Business School Press, 2002). The CEO Disease is the information vacuum around leaders that buffers them from important information on what is happening in the company. In short, the CEO Disease sets in when leaders get feedback that filters out the bad news or news that is likely to be unpalatable to them.

The Bad News Disease is a strain of the CEO Disease

I believe that you don't have to be a CEO to be afflicted by the CEO Disease. I have seen supervisors, middle managers, senior managers as well as CEOs who demonstrate symptoms of this disease. In fact, I have done a laboratory examination and have identified the more "common" strain of the CEO Disease to be the "Bad News" Disease. The symptoms of the Bad News Disease are the same as the CEO Disease – an aversion to bad news and negative feedback.

Causes of the Bad News Disease

One common reason for the Bad News Disease is “power-distance” between the manager and his or her team. There is a manager, let’s call her Janice (the story is true, but the name has been changed) who drives her people by fear. She says that she wants results, not excuses. She is impatient, can get very angry, and does not tolerate news that might show that the high targets that she has set for her team cannot be achieved. So, what happens? Her people are too afraid to tell her the truth. They don’t give her valuable feedback that would help the team to address the issues. No one has the courage to do this, so planning and decisions are made based on partial information. This manager’s team will continue to struggle to achieve their results – and her people will become more disengaged over time.

People are afraid to tell the truth...and the team becomes more disengaged over time

Another cause of the disease is CEOs, managers or supervisors who adopt the position that they know the answers. They are not inclined to ask questions, but rather, do the telling. They don’t have time to get feedback. It’s all go-go-go for these managers.

A third cause of The Bad News Disease is created by the “yes man” syndrome. This gets worse the higher in the organisation that we go. It is at its worst at the CEO level. Those who suffer from this strain of Bad News Disease surround themselves with “yes men” who will agree with them and protect them from bad news. The CEO mentioned at the beginning of this article surrounded himself with “yes men.” Lower down in the organisation, the manager will have allies, or even worse, “favourites” who filter news before it gets to their boss. They do this to “protect” the boss – and to maintain their comfortable relationships.

The “yes man” syndrome gets worse as we go higher up the organisation

A fourth cause of Bad News Disease is CEOs, managers and supervisors who are not open to feedback on their own performance. We are all human, and we all have areas to improve in, whether they be listening skills, implementation skills, team building skills or a range of other key management and leadership skills and attributes. Honest feedback will help us to improve. Without feedback, we will spin our wheels and not move forward.

Under-performance and poor team morale

The first antidote is to accept that unfavourable news is important news

The impacts of the Bad News Disease

The ultimate impacts of the Bad News Disease are under-performance and poor team morale. We are living in a fast moving world. Customer and employee expectations are changing. Competitors are trying to grab our market share. We live in a world where, more than ever before, we need feedback to help us stay ahead as leaders, managers and as companies. This is definitely not a good time to catch the Bad News Disease. Nonetheless, this disease is widespread and does not seem to be abating.

How to overcome the Bad News Disease

The first way to overcome Bad News Disease is to accept that news and feedback which is not favourable is *important* news. Nobody wants to hear “bad news”, but to **not** hear it, analyse it and do something about it is to bury our heads in the sand. We can only do this without repercussions for so long! Second, look for people who have the courage to be “no-men” – the ones who are prepared to challenge and ask the hard questions. These are the people who will tell it as it is. These are the provocative and “challenging” people on your team who might otherwise be considered to be “troublemakers.” The news that they deliver, and the questions that they ask may not be what you *want* to hear, but it definitely is what you *need* to hear. Encourage and reward these “no-men” on your team. Instead of saying, “How dare you ...” say, “Thank you for daring to tell me ...” Third, at a personal level, find people who have the courage to give you one-to-one personal feedback on your own style and performance. This can be boosted by calling for honest 360 degree feedback, and by being open with your team about the results – focusing on your areas for improvement. This will send a strong signal to your team that you want to foster an open communication climate.

Your mission for the month is to do a self assessment. What is your reaction when people bring you “bad news”? Do you get any? Do you encourage it? Do you act on it? The second part of your mission is to make sure you have team members whom you can trust to give you feedback on your own personal performance. Understand the symptoms of the Bad News Disease and you will be on your way to becoming an even better supervisor, manager or CEO. Until next month!

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