Delivering Bad News

Advance planning will serve you well when you have the difficult job of delivering bad news. Below are some of the things to consider.

- Carefully determine the safest place to deliver the news. The office might be safer than an individual’s home.

- Be sure your supervisor knows the situation. He or she can help you prepare for the meeting. It may be good to role play likely scenarios beforehand.

- In some situations, it may be preferable to ask another team member to join you when delivering bad news. Use information from your work with an individual to guide you regarding this decision such as the tone of previous interactions, the history of violence, the implications of the bad news, etc.

Greet the person/s.

- Be pleasant and cordial and quickly focus on the purpose of your meeting rather than engaging in friendly, and possibly misleading, connecting behaviors.

- Your demeanor should express the nature of your business – suspend the usual smile and cheerful greeting when delivering bad news.

- Keep your tone professional.

State the purpose of the contact.

“I called this meeting to share some information.”

“We need to discuss something that has come up.”

Communicate the bad news – directly and to the point and with empathy.

“I know this will be disappointing. John’s Attendant Care services are going to be terminated.”

“I am leaving the CMHC next month. I know there are a lot of adjustments when a provider leaves.”

Pause and give people time to absorb and react to the information.

- Expect people to be upset. No one likes to hear unwelcome news.

- Do not take it personally if the person receiving the news is angry or upset with you. It is common for the messenger to be the target of upset.
• Allow time for the news to soak in and for the person to express how they feel. This is a time for you simply to listen. Your only reaction at this point should be empathy.

Use communication skills universally known to help defuse upset.

• Listen. People feel better if they can express their upset.

• Communicate that you understand the feelings (but never say you know exactly how someone feels).

  “I understand you had hoped for a different outcome.”

  “I can see that you do not agree with the decision.”

  “I didn’t expect you to be pleased with this outcome.”

Invite movement.

  “Would it be helpful if I clarified the reasons for the decision?”

  “I’d be happy to talk to you about options, if you think you’re ready to hear them.”

  “I can tell you how the decision was reached, if that would be helpful.”

Explain the options.

• Do not give the best options until the upset has subsided enough for the other person to hear and evaluate what you have to say.

• If all or some services are being terminated, be prepared to suggest alternative community supports that may help carry the family through.

Inform about the rest of the process and what will be happening.

• Respectfully check with the person to see if they are receptive to hearing about next steps.

  “Do you need a little time to soak up this information, or is this a time it would be helpful to hear what will happen next?”

• If the person wants more information, help him or her know what to expect.

• Describe the process in terms of what will happen and when.

  “I will be leaving the agency in a few weeks. Mary Jones will be taking my place. I will be telling Mary about your situation so that she has a lot of information and so that you won’t have to tell your story completely over again. Hopefully we can all meet together so that the transition feels as smooth as possible. Do you have any specific questions I might be able to answer?”
Remember that people’s stories get changed when told through another person. Bias can inadvertently creep in. It is always best to let the person served tell their story to the new staff person. Moreover, being able to tell one’s own story is part of the recovery process.

Close the contact.

- Avoid statements to the effect of “cheer up, it’s not so bad.”
- Don’t continue to explain. Don’t defend the decision. Don’t apologize.
- If appropriate, you can give the person a phone number for more information or the name and number of who to call if they have additional questions.
- Acknowledge the situation again in closing.
- Reconfirm the next steps that you will be making. Leaving the individual or the family with a plan as the last thing they hear may prevent feelings of hopelessness or continued anger.

  “Let’s look into potential services that we might be able to put in place to prepare for terminating Attendant Care services.”

  “I’ll be contacting you this week to find a time when I can bring your new case manager by to meet you.”

- Thank the person for coming or for talking with you.