

The Delivery of Bad News in Organizations: A Framework for Analysis

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The delivery of bad news is at the center of many organizational processes. Despite the variety of organizational processes involving the delivery of bad news, there is no integrative framework that guides its study. Based on a literature review of professionals who deliver bad news as part of their occupations, this article presents a framework that conceptualizes the delivery of bad news as a process involving a variety of activities in three different, but interrelated, phases—preparation, delivery, and transition. This three-phase model is the guiding framework for the literature review. The article identifies the strategic functions served by different bad news management activities and highlights many dilemmas facing managers in the delivery of bad news. The article concludes with identifying new directions for research on the delivery of bad news in organizations.

Keywords: *bad news; leadership; justice; impression management; coping*

Life in organizations is punctuated by bad news. Bad news can be an almost daily phenomenon—as in negative performance feedback (Ilgen & Davis, 2000; Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979), customer service failures (Michel, Bowen, & Johnston, 2009), or the refusal of requests (Izraeli & Jick, 1986)—or be less frequent but still consequential—as in downsizing (Cascio, 1993), employee layoffs (Bennett, Martin, Bies, & Brockner, 1995; Brockner, 1988), and employee termination (Lind, Greenberg, Scott, & Welchans, 2000).

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When leaders are asked to name their most difficult tasks, invariably the delivery of bad news is at the top of the list (Bies, 2010).

Even though the bad news must be delivered to some audience at some point in time, managers are often reluctant to do so (Tesser & Rosen, 1975). Indeed, dealing with bad news is a difficult emotional task for managers for a variety of reasons (Harris & Sutton, 1986). For example, it can be emotionally distressing for those who deliver the bad news (Folger & Skarlicki, 2001). Those who deliver bad news may become a target of anger and retaliation by the recipient of the news (Tripp & Bies, 2009). Also, blame is a key managerial concern (Bell & Tetlock, 1989; Bies, 1987b). Being blamed for bad news can prove costly, as it may seriously erode one's organizational legitimacy (Salancik & Meindl, 1984), if not result in the loss of one's job (Gamson & Scotch, 1964), even at the CEO level (Boeker, 1992).

Theoretical Introduction: Defining Bad News

What is the defining core of bad news? This important conceptual issue has received very little attention from management scholars. As a result, I turned to scholars in psychology and sociology, and medical practitioners, for conceptual guidance, as they provide useful starting points for a definition of bad news. For example, Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001) conducted a review of how people respond to bad events and good events. As part of their analysis, they defined good to be "desirable, beneficial, or pleasant outcomes including states or consequences. Bad is the opposite: undesirable, harmful, or unpleasant" (pp. 324-325). Obviously, bad news involves negative information (Fulk & Mani, 1986), but the question remains as to which aspects of that information define the degree of badness.

Up to now, there have been two basic approaches to the study of bad news, both of which avoid a priori definitions of the construct of bad news. One common approach is to focus on some type of negative information that most people would generally agree is bad news. Examples of this approach are found in the research on negative performance feedback (Ilgen & Davis, 2000), job layoffs (Brockner, Konovsky, Cooper-Schneider, Folger, Martin, & Bies, 1994), and employee termination (Lind et al., 2000).

Another common approach involves asking the respondent to define the bad news. This approach is typically found in qualitative studies of the delivery of bad news. Examples include research on the refusal of requests (Izraeli & Jick, 1986), blame management and bad news (Bies, 2012), and routine bad news delivered by supervisors (Wagoner & Waldron, 1999).

But research conducted with either approach has given very little attention to the definition of bad news. Researchers who study the delivery of bad news by professionals (e.g., doctors, coroners, law enforcement officials) provide defining descriptions of the core of bad news. From the world of medicine, bad news is "any information that adversely alters one's expectations for the future" (Back, Arnold, Baile, Tulsky, & Fryer-Edwards, 2005, p.169). Another definition is "news that results in a cognitive, behavioral, or emotional deficit in the person receiving the news that persists for some time after the news is received" (Ptacek & Eberhardt, 1996, p.496). Yet another definition states that bad news is any news that drastically and negatively alters a person's view of the future (Buckman, 1984, 1992). Taken together, this leads to the definition of bad news as *information that results in a perceived loss by the receiver; and it creates cognitive, emotional, or behavioral deficits in*

the receiver after receiving the news. This definition of bad news recognizes that bad news is subjectively determined (Ptacek & Eberhardt, 1996) and may be perceived differently (Barclay, Blackhall, & Tulskey, 2007) and that the badness of the news is socially mediated, shaped by a variety of contextual and temporal factors (Bies, 1987b; Clark, 1960; Goffman, 1952; Izraeli & Jick, 1986; McClenahan & Lofland, 1976).

What is the impact of bad news on people? Baumeister et al. (2001) found converging evidence that bad events are more powerful than good events across a variety of everyday events and major life events, which carries implications for the delivery of bad news in organizations. Of relevance to the present analysis, the empirical evidence suggests that bad events have more enduring and more intense consequences than good events. More specifically, the evidence suggests the following:

- a. Bad events wear off more slowly than good events
- b. The affective consequences of negative information is stronger than those for good information
- c. People overestimate the effects events will have on them, and that effect is stronger for negative events than for positive events
- d. Bad events in close relationships are five times as powerful as good events

Given this consistent pattern of findings, *how* one delivers the bad news may play a key role in shaping how people initially interpret the information and shape their coping process.

The Delivery of Bad News: A Multiphase Process

McClenahan and Lofland (1976) make a distinction between two different types of deliverers of bad news. There are those who deliver bad news in their private lives, which they refer to as the amateurs. Then there are those who deliver bad news as part of their work or occupation. Research on those who deliver bad news as part of their occupation typically has focused on such professionals as doctors, coroners, and law enforcement officials. Yet managers are also occupational deliverers of bad news (Izraeli & Jick, 1986), as there are so many organizational processes in which they must communicate such information. While managers are occupational deliverers of bad news, there is no integrative framework that guides its study.

Based on a review of research on a variety of professionals who deliver bad news as part of their occupations, the evidence suggests that the delivery of bad news involves three different, but interrelated, phases of activities. One classic example of this multiphase approach to delivering bad news was a study of U.S. marshals by McClenahan and Lofland (1976). U.S. marshals delivered bad news in three phases: *preparing* (e.g., presaging the news by dribbling out the facts leading up to the actual bad news), the actual *delivery* of the news (e.g., treating the situation as routine), and *shoring* (e.g., manipulating the news to help people emotionally: scaling down the badness—not as bad as you think, it could have been worse, playing up the positive).

A similar three-phase process was found by Clark and LaBeff (1982) in a study of physicians, nurses, law enforcement officers, and clergy who engage in “death telling.” The three phases they identified were *preparing* (e.g., a structured setting to deliver the news like

Figure 1
The Delivery of Bad News: A Multiphase Process

PHASE OF DELIVERY	Preparation	Delivery	Transition
BAD NEWS MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving Advance Warning • Creating a "Paper Trail" • Calibrating Expectations • Using Disclaimers • Providing the Opportunity for Voice • Coalition Building • Rehearsal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timing of the Delivery • Medium of Delivery • Face Management and Self-Presentation • Account Giving • Truth Telling and Information Disclosure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging in Public Relations • Providing an Appeal Procedure • Scapegoating • Caretaking and Parting Ceremonies

an office or quiet room, where privacy is important), *delivery* (e.g., use of direct terminology), and *wrapping up* (e.g., signing the death certificate, making arrangements for the body). This three-phase process is also found in research on other occupational bearers of bad news such as coroners (Charmaz, 1975) and physicians (Ptacek & Eberhardt, 1996).

In a recent study of corporate executives, Bies (2012) also found evidence of a multiphase process in the delivery of bad news. Specifically, he found that corporate executives engaged in different activities before, during, and after the delivery of bad news. These phases were *preparation* (e.g., giving advance warning), *delivery* (e.g., account giving), and *transition* (e.g., public relations activities). This three-phase model, which is consistent with the other findings reviewed earlier, is the guiding framework for the literature review.

Delivering Bad News: Preparation, Delivery, and Transition Phases

In this section, I review empirical research involving the delivery of bad news across the preparation, delivery, and transition phases. Across all three phases, different bad news management activities are identified, and each activity is associated with a more positive view of the news, less anger and blame, a greater sense of fairness, and higher approval of the person delivering the news. Figure 1 presents the multiphase framework and the bad news management activities by phase.

In terms of scope of analysis, this framework focuses on bad news delivered to an audience internal to an organization (e.g., upward, downward), not bad news delivered externally (e.g., corporate annual reports). The types of bad news examined in this literature review range from everyday forms of bad news (e.g., negative performance feedback, saying no to requests) to more extreme forms of bad news (e.g., job layoffs, plant closings, employee termination). However, not all of the bad news management activities identified in this review are associated with all types of bad news, as some activities are more common in the extreme forms of bad news relative to everyday forms of bad news. Yet across all types of bad news, the multiphase process model provides a useful framework for identifying and analyzing bad news management activities.

The Preparation Phase

Psychological preparation for bad news is important for people in terms of how they respond to the news when they actually receive the news. For example, in his landmark study of surgical patients, Janis (1958) found that preparation for possible surgery, including advance warning, helped the patient do the “work of worrying,” which then helped the patient deal with surgery and recuperation afterward, a finding that has been replicated in other studies (e.g., Langer, Janis, & Wolfer, 1975). In other words, psychological preparation is critical for those who receive bad news.

A review of the evidence finds that those who deliver bad news recognize the importance of the preparation phase, which involves all activities that are *prior* to the actual delivery of bad news. A review of the literature identifies seven different bad news management activities in the preparation phase. These activities were *giving advance warning, creating a “paper trail,” calibrating expectations, using disclaimers, providing the opportunity for voice, coalition building, and rehearsal*.

Giving advance warning. Advance warning can be viewed as a forecasting of bad news (Maynard, 1996). Forecasting is a way to lead a person from a state of ignorance to a state of knowledge when the bad news is delivered. Maynard (1996) found nonvocal and vocal forms of forecasting. Nonvocal forms of forecasting (which include the deliverer’s demeanor, often serious in nature) suggest the possibility of forthcoming bad news (Dias, Chabner, Lynch, & Penson, 2003; McClenahan & Lofland, 1976). Vocal forecasting strategies include preannouncements (e.g., “have you heard”) and prefacing (e.g., “I’ve got some bad news”). These forecasting strategies are consistent with the findings from other studies (Clark & LaBeff, 1982; McClenahan & Lofland, 1976).

Psychologically, advance warning increases a sense of predictability, which is important for people in the case of organizational shocks such as layoffs. For example, at Procter & Gamble, plant closings went more smoothly when the closing dates and key closing events were announced well in advance (R. I. Sutton, 2009). This example is consistent with evidence that people can more easily adapt to stressful events that are predictable (Seligman & Binik, 1977) or controllable (Glass & Singer, 1972). Indeed, several literature reviews have found converging evidence that predictable stressors have less impact on people than stressors that are unpredictable (Cohen, 1980; Monat & Lazarus, 1991; S. Sutton, Baum, & Johnston, 2004).

There is evidence that providing advance notice or warning is a key bad news management activity, particularly with more extreme forms of bad news. For example, advance warning is a common bad news management activity in dealing with marginal employees (O’Reilly & Weitz, 1980) or marginal students (Clark, 1960), employee drug testing (Raciot & Williams, 1993), job layoffs (Brockner et al., 1994), and employee termination (Lind et al., 2000). Advance warning can help people cope with negative emotions that may result from the forthcoming bad news (Cropanzano & Randall, 1995).

There is evidence of moderators influencing the use of advance warnings. For example, the positive effect of advance notice may be moderated by outcome negativity, as Brockner et al. (1994) found in a study of victim and survivor reactions to job layoffs. Culture is

another possible moderator. For example, Holland, Geary, Machini, and Tross (1987) found physicians in several countries avoid forecasting or giving advance warning of a possible cancer diagnosis. Finally, hierarchy is another potential moderator. For example, in his study of corporate executives, Bies (2012) found that managers were more likely to give advance warning of possible bad news to their superiors relative to their subordinates.

Creating a "paper trail." As protection against blame placing, managers often document any problems or concerns about an employee or a situation that may lead to bad news (Bies & Tyler, 1993; Sitkin & Bies, 1993a). For example, Bies (2012) found managers speaking of the need to create a "paper trail," which included formal reports and summary memos of any meetings and informal communications with a subordinate or boss. Furthermore, he found that documentation occurred across different types of bad news (e.g., poor employee performance, product quality problems, sales decline) and different targets (e.g., upward, downward).

Documentation also provides a factual foundation to base improvement or corrective strategies. Not surprisingly, documentation is a central activity in performance management (Cascio & Aguinis, 2010). Proper documentation is necessary to support a performance rating, particularly if it involves bad news (Viswesvaran, Ones, & Schmidt, 1996). Proper documentation is a critical factor facilitating employee dismissal (S. A. Cox & Kramer, 1995).

Bies (2012) identified two possible moderators of documentation. He found outcome severity was a key variable. The more "severe" the news that was delivered (e.g., employee termination), the more documentation was done. He found hierarchy to be a potential moderator. For example, managers engaged in more documentation when delivering bad news to a boss than to a subordinate.

Calibrating expectations. The badness of any outcome is, in part, a function of expectations (Bies, 1987b). The importance of expectations is found in how managers say no to budget requests, a common type of bad news for managers to deliver (Izraeli & Jick, 1986). Since saying no left them open as a target for blame, some managers focused their efforts on minimizing the number of subordinate requests (Bies, 2012). These efforts involved calibrating the expectations of subordinates about resource availability prior to any request.

A similar calibration process is central to realistic job previews (Phillips, 1998; Premack & Wanous, 1985). In the realistic job preview, employers provide job applicants with information on the positive and negative aspects of the job. For example, applicant expectations can be calibrated in terms of late hours and stress associated with the job so that, when those conditions arise, the applicants will not view the situation as bad, given that their expectations were calibrated through the realistic job preview.

Finally, calibrating expectations can be a proactive strategy for maintaining organizational legitimacy in the face of potential bad news (Suchman, 1995). For example, Bies (2012) found that executives, often new in their position, would "lower" expectations of achieving great success in the short term. With that expectation calibrated, if bad news occurred, the leader was able to maintain legitimacy.

Using disclaimers. Anticipating the possibility of bad news, managers can provide disclaimers. According to Hewitt and Stokes (1975), the disclaimer is a communication

strategy employed by people who are faced with upcoming events or actions that may discredit their identity or disrupt a social relationship, as is often the case when bad news is delivered. Hewitt and Stokes identify different types of disclaimers, but the one directly relevant to the delivery of bad news is *hedging*. Hedging can involve highlighting the difficulty of the task (e.g., “I’m not sure this is going to work, but . . .”) or identifying mitigating circumstances in the situation (e.g., “I am operating under severe constraints . . .”). The purpose of a disclaimer is to limit responsibility for failure or bad news should it occur.

Disclaimers are often part of blame management strategy. For example, in a two-period negotiation simulation, Shapiro and Bies (1994) examined the effects of the tactic of disclaimers when communicating a threat or a bluff on perceptions of the threatener and on negotiation outcomes. They found that those who used threats were perceived as more powerful, but were perceived as less cooperative and obtained agreements that were less integrative, than those who did not use threats. But when a disclaimer accompanied the threat, the disclaimer lessened the negativity of evaluations of the negotiation partner.

In his study of corporate executives, Bies (2012) found similar evidence of the use of disclaimers to manage blame when there was the possibility of product quality problems or service delivery failures. Specifically, managers would sometimes provide explanations before any bad news might occur. These disclaimers focused on potential mitigating circumstances in the situation (e.g., severe time constraints, inability of supplier to deliver), thus mitigating some blame for the bad news. However, a key concern of managers was the overuse of disclaimers.

Providing the opportunity for voice. To create a sense of fairness before any bad news, managers often provide the opportunity for “voice” to allow recipients to present information about their performance before a decision is made (Greenberg, 1986). Creating the opportunity for voice can influence people’s reactions to bad news. For example, Bies and Shapiro (1988) found that a voice procedure is viewed as fairer than no voice in situations involving job recruitment and budget decision making, even when the outcome involves bad news. This finding is consistent with other situations involving bad news such as performance appraisal (Folger & Greenberg, 1985) and conflict management (Sheppard, 1984). Indeed, researchers have consistently found a strong main effect for voice procedures on people’s reactions to negative outcomes (e.g., fairer, more satisfying and acceptable, trust of decision maker), which has become known as a “fair process effect” (Greenberg & Folger, 1983).

However, there is evidence that the fair process effect is moderated by outcome negativity, as Brockner et al. (1994) found in a study of victim and survivor reactions to job layoffs. This finding appears to be quite robust. In their review of the literature, Brockner and Wiesenfeld (1996) find that procedural and outcome factors interactively combine to influence individuals’ reactions to the outcomes they receive. Specifically, procedural factors are more positively related to individuals’ reactions when outcome valence is relatively low, while outcome factors are more positively related to individuals’ reactions when procedural justice is relatively low.

Coalition building. Given the blame and loss of legitimacy associated with failure, managers seek the support and protection of key people in the organization if bad news is

forthcoming (Bies, 2012), particularly if the bad news is of the extreme form (e.g., product quality problems, loss of major customer). Before managers deliver bad news to their boss, they seek out key and powerful people in the organization to arrive at a consensus concerning what happened and how to approach the situation, as part of coalition building (Pfeffer, 1981). Such coalition building is done not only to build support internally, but also to send a political signal of consensus, which is powerful information to convey to the boss when delivering the news (Bies, 2012), a critical image management objective (Cialdini, 1989).

Coalition building in the face of bad news is similar to an issue-selling process as described by Dutton and Ashford (1993). Indeed, some of the examples identified by Dutton and Ashford involved elements of bad news that could threaten an organization's identity (e.g., rising number of homeless people at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey facilities, corporate responsibility for the natural environment). Dutton and Ashford identify critical aspects of the issue-selling process, including who is the issue seller, issue packaging (content framing, presentation, appeals, bundling), and the selling process (breadth of involvement, choice of channel, formal versus informal tactics). When a crisis of some other form of bad news begins to emerge, coalition building, as part of issue selling, will be a critical activity in issue recognition and diagnosis, which will shape organizational decision making and action.

Rehearsal. The delivery of bad news can create great emotional distress for those who have to deliver that information (Folger & Skarlicki, 2001). To more effectively cope with the emotional demands of the situation, managers will often rehearse the delivery of bad news, particularly if the news is serious as in plant closings, layoffs, and employee termination (Bies, 2012). This can be mental rehearsal or actual rehearsal (T. Cox, 1987), and it can be a useful coping strategy in stressful situations (Taylor & Schneider, 1989)—and it can enhance the deliverer's credibility in delivering the news (Daley, 2009).

Mental rehearsal is a prescription often taken by medical practitioners (Baile et al., 2000), particularly when the news involves life-and-death issues such as cancer (Whippen & Canellos, 1991). Furthermore, repeated rehearsal can increase one's confidence and self-efficacy for the actual delivery (Bandura, 1977, 1997), as part of learning the skill of bearing bad news (Arnold & Koczwara, 2006).

The Delivery Phase

The delivery phase refers to all of the activities occurring *during* the actual communication of bad news. It involves the “who, what, where, and why” of the communication process. Delivery involves both verbal and nonverbal behaviors.

A review of the literature identified five different bad news management activities in the delivery phase. These activities were *timing of the delivery*, *medium of delivery*, *face management and self-presentation*, *account giving*, and *truth telling and information disclosure*.

Timing of the delivery. There is research suggesting that the timing of the delivery is an important variable in managing bad news. For example, when bad news involves

life-and-death issues, people do not want delays in receiving bad news (Dias et al., 2003). Not surprisingly, doctors deliver bad news in a timely manner, as soon as possible (Ptacek & Eberhardt, 1996). On a more everyday occurrence in the workplace, communicating bad news in a timely fashion is critical in giving performance feedback (Ilgen et al., 1979).

In his study of corporate executives, Bies (2012) found timely transmission of bad news to be a key goal for managers across a variety of bad news (e.g., negative performance feedback, budget cuts, customer service failure). But Bies also found that the timeliness of delivery was of a greater concern and importance when managers delivered bad news to their superiors rather than their subordinates. This finding suggests that hierarchy or the target of the news may be a moderator variable.

Medium of delivery. When bad news must be delivered, the question is through which medium it will be delivered. Will it be delivered face-to-face? Or will it be delivered through other media such as e-mail, texting, and phone calls?

Media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), in particular, offers insights into how misunderstandings and escalations might occur in the delivery of bad news depending on the medium chosen for delivery. Daft and Lengel (1986) define media richness as “the ability of information to change understanding within a time interval” (p. 560). Media richness is a function of a variety of factors including (a) the medium’s capacity for immediate feedback and (b) the number of cues available. In the context of delivering bad news, a medium, such as face-to-face communication, is much richer than media such as e-mail, texting, or phone calls and, as a result, less likely to create misunderstanding because of the immediate feedback and availability of social cues (Dennis & Kinney, 1998).

Shapiro, Buttner, and Barry (1994) found evidence to support this line of reasoning. Shapiro et al. studied job applicant reactions to the bad news of rejection. They found the perception of sincerity was higher when the bad news was delivered verbally (in person or over the phone) than in writing (memo or letter).

Research on the delivery of bad news by doctors emphasizes the importance of face-to-face delivery, which is not surprising given the sometimes serious subject matter of those conversations. In a review of guidelines for medical practitioners, Girgis and Sanson-Fisher (1998) found that a face-to-face delivery in a private place was critical for communicating bad news. Other studies of doctors found the same importance of face-to-face communication in delivering bad news (Buckman, 2005; Ptacek & Eberhardt, 1996).

Computer-mediated communication, as in e-mail, is often used by those who deliver bad news in organizations (Bies, 2012). Whether it is news of a rejection of a college applicant or a rejection letter from a journal editor to an author, the use of electronic communication has now become more commonplace. Sussman and Sproull (1999) conducted a study of three different types of media to deliver bad news: computer-mediated communication, telephone, and face-to-face conversation. They asked the participants to deliver bad news to a “student” (one of the confederates in the study) with negative comments on the student’s resume. They found that participants were more accurate and honest in delivering the bad news when they used computer-mediated communication than telephone or face-to-face communication. The participants also reported more satisfaction with the computer-mediated communication.

However, there is research documenting the problems inherent to computer-mediated communications (e.g., Baltes, Dickson, Sherman, Bauer, & LaGanke, 2002). For example, in an experiment using different media for negotiation, Kahai and Cooper (2003) found that deleterious features of computer-mediated communication led to worse negotiations. Specifically, the deleterious features are (a) relative lack of immediate feedback, feedback that is helpful for “rapid bidirectional communication and, hence, rapid reinterpretation and clarification of messages” (p. 266); (b) fewer cues, such as vocal inflections and body gestures; and (c) reduced socioemotional communication (e.g., showing hostility or rejection).

Face management and self-presentation. In bearing bad news, the deliverer is a “signal sender” (Bies, 2010). Managers communicate signals through face management and self-presentation activities such as communicating in a calm and empathetic manner (Michel et al., 2009; Ptacek & Eberhardt, 1996), which is similar to the process of “emotional work” (Hochschild, 1983). This is similar to the strategies used by coroners: (a) impersonal distancing and (b) the choice of language—“it’s just routine” and “it’s not a body, but an investigation” (Charmaz, 1975).

Interpersonal sensitivity is another aspect of face management and self-presentation, and it is a sign of respect to those hearing the bad news (Bies, 2001; Miller, 2001). For example, layoff victims feel more fairly treated and remain more loyal to the company after termination when managers deliver that bad news with respect and dignity (Bies, Martin, & Brockner, 1993). Similarly, job applicants who receive rejection letters feel more fairly treated when that news is delivered with respect rather than rudely (Bies & Moag, 1986; Shapiro et al., 1994). In addition, when bad news about pay cuts is delivered with interpersonal sensitivity, it reduces employee theft (Greenberg, 1993).

Account giving. Account giving (Scott & Lyman, 1968)—that is, giving an explanation or justification for an action or outcome—is a hallmark managerial action in the delivery of bad news (Bies, 1987b). Account giving in the delivery of bad news serves several functions (Bies, 2012). First, people expect an account to be given when bad news is delivered (Bies & Moag, 1986). Second, the account can mitigate the blame assigned to the deliverer by providing information to influence the receiver’s perception of the deliverer’s responsibility or motives for the action (Bies & Sitkin, 1992; Sitkin & Bies, 1993b). Shaw, Wild, and Colquitt (2003) illustrate how fairness theory, as proposed by Folger and Cropanzano (1998, 2001), provides a useful framework to explain how blame assignment is shaped by different accounts.

Indeed, there is considerable empirical evidence that account giving can lessen the blame attributed to the deliverer and increase the perceived fairness and legitimacy of the bad news. This finding occurs across a variety of organizational processes, including the refusal of requests (Bies & Shapiro, 1987; Bies, Shapiro, & Cummings, 1988; Izraeli & Jick, 1986), giving criticism (Baron, 1990), performance appraisals (Greenberg, 1991), corporate responses to consumer complaints (Conlon & Murray, 1996), corporate recruitment (Bies & Moag, 1986), employee selection (Gilliland, 1994; Gilliland et al., 2001), job layoffs (Brockner, DeWitt, Grover, & Reed, 1990; Konovsky & Folger, 1991), evaluation procedures

(Cobb, Vest, & Hills, 1997), negotiation (Shapiro & Bies, 1994), conflict management (Bobocel, Agar, Meyer, & Irving, 1998), pay cuts (Greenberg, 1990), layoff decisions (Wanberg, Gavin, & Bunce, 1999), company relocations (Daly & Geyer, 1994), and organizational change (Cobb, Wooten, & Folger, 1995; Daly, 1995).

While account giving is important in delivering bad news, what characteristics of accounts make them effective? One answer to that question is different types of accounts are more effective than others (Bies et al., 1988). In their meta-analytic review of explanations (excuses versus justifications), Shaw et al. (2003) found strong effects for explanations, particularly for excuses relative to justifications, on justice judgments and other responses (e.g., cooperation, retaliation, withdrawal), when they were given after unfavorable outcomes or bad news.

But it is not just the account or the type of account that matters. Although explanations have a beneficial effect, adequacy had a greater impact relative to provision (Shaw et al., 2003). This finding occurs across a variety of types of bad news including job rejection (Shapiro et al., 1994), employee layoffs (Bies et al., 1993), and employee termination (Dunford & Devine, 1998). Shaw et al. (2003) also found that inadequate accounts were associated with decreased levels of cooperation (e.g., task and citizenship behaviors; Konovsky & Cropanzano, 1991), increased acts of retaliation such as litigation (Wanberg et al., 1999) and theft (Greenberg, 1990, 1993), and increased levels of withdrawal (e.g., turnover intentions after disciplinary events; Ball, Treviño, & Sims, 1993).

What contributes to the perception of adequacy is also the perceived sincerity of the deliverer (Bies, 1987a). In addition, the length, clarity, and reasonableness of the account add to its perceived adequacy (Shapiro et al., 1994). Finally, when managers can provide a "solution" as part of the account, it adds to its perceived adequacy (Bies, 2012).

Shaw et al. (2003) also identified three specific moderators of effects of accounts. These moderators include the following: the *type of account* (e.g., excuses versus justifications), the *context* (e.g., selection decisions, layoffs, resource requests, stealing credit for a subordinate's ideas, pay cuts, a merger, a change in job structure, or a relocation), and *outcome favorability* (e.g., explanations are more beneficial when outcome favorability is low, which supports the Favorability \times Process Fairness interaction; Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996).

Sitkin and Bies (1993b) identify other potential moderators including *audience characteristics*, as in the case of multiple or heterogeneous audiences, when there may be the need for multiple accounts or different accounts given the informational needs or expectations of the audiences. They identify two other situational factors that can influence the processing of accounts: *informational uncertainty* and *outcome importance*. In general, social accounts are found to be important and influential when there is high uncertainty and the consequences are of great importance. *Outcome severity* can also have an impact (Shapiro, 1991).

Truth telling and information disclosure. A key expectation of those receiving the bad news is that managers will tell the truth and disclose all relevant facts (Bies et al., 1993; Bies & Tyler, 1993). Truth is what patients expect from their doctors (Dias et al., 2003)—and why, then, doctors focus on being truthful (Ptacek & Eberhardt, 1996). Truth telling is critical for building trust (Bies, 2012).

In delivering bad news, when people feel lied to or intentionally deceived, that elicits the most anger and rage in people's responses (Bies, 2001; Bies & Tripp, 1996; Shapiro, 1991).

Whether it be corporate recruitment practices (Bies & Moag, 1986) or negotiator tactics (Shapiro & Bies, 1994), *lying* to others creates intense feelings of distrust and outrage, particularly when people feel “used” by the person who was doing the lying (Bies, 2001).

But within the context of truth violations, Anton (1993) discovered some intriguing findings about people’s reactions to being deceived. Specifically, he found that there may be different levels of deception or lying, some of which may even be acceptable in different settings. Furthermore, lying by “commission” was viewed more negatively than was lying done by “omission.”

The Transition Phase

After the bad news is delivered, the transition phase is critical, for the evaluation of the bad news is still ongoing by a variety of audiences. The announcement of bad news raises both performance and political concerns for the deliverer. Is the performance problem solved—and do people think things are getting better?

The transition phase refers to all of the activities undertaken *after* the delivery of bad news. A review of the literature identified four different bad news management activities in the transition phase. These activities were *engaging in public relations*, *providing an appeal procedure*, *scapegoating*, and *caretaking and parting ceremonies*.

Engaging in public relations. Bad news is not just a “performance problem” to be solved; it is also a “political problem” in that the legitimacy of a manager or senior leadership may be in question, as in the cases of product quality problems and customer service failures (Bies, 2012). Thus, it is not surprising that managers engage in public relations activities as part of image management. These activities may include spending time “visiting” others in the organization (Brockner, 1988), or communicating with key stakeholders (Fitzpatrick & Rubin, 1995), to shore up any “damage” created by the fallout from the bad news. Public relations activities are focused on those who were the target of earlier coalition building efforts, with the purpose of maintaining their support, and others not in the original coalition but whose support is now necessary (Bies, 2012).

Another public relations activity to shore up support is the use of an apology (Bies, 2012). In an apology, a person accepts responsibility for the bad news and promises not to repeat the actions that gave rise to the bad news (Bies, 1987b; Goffman, 1971). For example, United Airlines CEO Jeff Smisek apologized for the poor customer service that many fliers are experiencing as part of the United and Continental Airlines merger (Casey, 2012). In his apology, Mr. Smisek took responsibility for the problems while promising things would get better soon, which is consistent with the goal of an apology as part of public relations. A growing body of research suggests that an apology can play a role in resolving interpersonal conflict (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010), rebuilding and sustaining long-term relationships (Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, & Dirks, 2004), and enhancing leader effectiveness (Tucker, Turner, Barling, Reid, & Elving, 2006), which are key concerns of those who deliver bad news. However, culture is a moderator on the use and meaning of apologies (Maddux, Kim, Okumura, & Brett, 2011).

But public relations activities can focus on the performance problems that need to be solved. For example, to signal to upper management successful efforts to overcome failures in product quality or customer service, managers gather data to “track” improvements to demonstrate that the situation has turned around (Bies, 2012). A similar process occurs in performance feedback processes (Ilgen et al., 1979).

Providing an appeal procedure. When managers make decisions, they may create an appeal procedure about the decision, as a key criterion of procedural fairness (Leventhal, 1980). Indeed, there is evidence that providing an appeal procedure enhances people’s sense of procedural fairness regarding an evaluation (Greenberg, 1986), an allocation decision (Barrett-Howard & Tyler, 1986), or corporate retrenchment (Simerson et al., 2000).

In his study of corporate executives, Bies (2012) found that after bad news was delivered managers would sometimes create an appeal procedure for the recipient. This appeal procedure was found only in cases involving subordinates, and typically involved a subordinate’s rejected resource request or low performance rating. By creating an appeal process, managers felt it enhanced the subordinate’s sense of fairness about the decision and increased commitment to the final decision, thus lessening the amount of blame ultimately attributed to the managers. Indeed, in some cases, a subordinate’s appeal would move successfully, which would significantly reduce, if not eliminate, the blame attributed to the receiver.

Scapegoating. After bad news is delivered, organizations often seek to eliminate the “cause” of the failure through scapegoating (Bies, 2012). Scapegoating involves “sacrificing” someone on behalf of the mistakes of many. Interestingly, the word *scapegoat* came out of religious ceremonies in which an actual goat was a sacrificial offering for the sins of people (Keil, Im, & Maehring, 2004).

Reassigning or terminating an employee is a common scapegoating strategy (Gamson & Scotch, 1964). Fundamentally, scapegoating is a strategy for blame avoidance (Bonazzi, 1983). Scapegoating for blame avoidance is a strategy used by politicians (Weaver, 1986) as well as by corporations, particularly with the firing of chief executives for poor performance (Boeker, 1992). The purpose of scapegoating is to convey to different audiences that the “real” problem had been eliminated, as part of a broader image management strategy (Cialdini, 1989).

But the use of scapegoating may create dysfunctional consequences for organizations. This is particularly true when scapegoating occurs at the lower levels of organizations after project failures. For example, in an experiment conducted in the United States and South Korea, Keil et al. (2004) examined the effects of the presence of a scapegoat for project failure on a respondent’s willingness to report subsequent bad news. They found that the presence of a scapegoat lessened the U.S. participants’ likelihood of delivering bad news after failure but had no impact on Korean participants. This also highlights some cross-cultural differences in reactions to scapegoating, suggesting another potential moderator.

Caretaking and parting ceremonies. Bad news is often associated with organizational change, particularly when it involves employee layoffs or plant closings (Bies, 2010). While change is often the focus of bad news, from the perspective of those affected the focus is on

transition as well (Bridges & Bridges, 2009). The key to effective transition for people is helping them “let go” and “move on.” Often managers provide emotional support to employees as part of the transition (Bies, 2012).

In bad news involving employee termination, managers engage in caretaking activities such as severance pay and outplacement (Brockner, 1988). Parting ceremonies are often created in dying organizations to help employees cope with the ending (Harris & Sutton, 1986). Both caretaking and parting ceremonies may take some of the “sting” or pain out of loss and transition.

Analyzing the Delivery of Bad News: A Multitheoretical Perspective

In reviewing the literature, I argue that the bad news management activities across the three phases serve five different, but related, strategic functions. Each of the bad news management activities may serve a primary as well as a secondary function. I further argue that to understand these strategic functions and their dynamics, the analysis of the delivery of bad news is best served with the use of multiple theoretical perspectives. These analyses follow.

The Strategic Functions of Bad News Management Activities

The strategic functions served by the bad news management activities of those delivering the news include *performance correction*, *blame management*, *lessening the perceived severity of the outcome*, *building commitment and support*, and *self-management*.

Performance correction. Across all three phases, there were bad news management activities that focused primarily on performance correction. Clearly this was the primary function of “tracking” as part of public relations activities. Other bad news management activities had as a secondary function, performance correction. These activities include creating a paper trail (e.g., provide a factual foundation for behavior change), account giving (e.g., providing reasons for behavior change), and scapegoating (e.g., signaling that performance had been corrected by “removing” the person responsible for the failure).

Blame management. Many of the deliverer’s actions were in service of blame management across all three phases. In particular, managers focus their efforts on influencing the receiver’s causal judgments as a key function of blame management activities. This primary function was served by such activities as creating a paper trail, using disclaimers, and account giving, which is consistent with the attributional perspective on blame management (Heider, 1958).

The evidence reviewed also found blame management activities that focused on role responsibility. This function was served by the activities of giving advance warnings, timing of the delivery (i.e., timely transmission), and truth telling and information disclosure. These activities are consistent with Hamilton’s (1978) role-based conception of responsibility judgments in which fulfilling social expectations is a key determinant of liability for blame.

Actions taken by managers to enhance their legitimacy are also central to blame

management. Activities such as public relations, creating an appeal procedure, and scapegoating have a primary function of blame management. Coalition-building efforts have a secondary function of enhancing legitimacy as part of blame management.

Lessening the perceived severity of the outcome. Across all three phases of bad news management activities, there was consistent evidence that managers attempt to lessen the perceived severity of the outcome. This strategic function was served by the activities of calibrating expectations, account giving, public relations, and caretaking and parting ceremonies. A secondary function of giving advance warning is intended to help the receiver view the news as less bad because he or she has time to prepare for it.

This strategic function is also related to the blame management function. For example, by making the bad news appear less negative, it should lessen the blame assigned (Bies, 2012). Interestingly, this managerial logic is consistent with the transformation perspective on legal disputes (Felstiner, Abel, & Sarat, 1980-1981). In this model, a specific event must go through three stages before it is transformed into a legal dispute. Specifically, the event must be “named” as harmful before any “blame” is assigned and, finally, any damages are “claimed.”

Building commitment and support. Many of the deliverer’s actions are in service of building commitment and support across all three phases. This function is served primarily by such activities as creating the opportunity for voice, coalition building, the timing of delivery, account giving, and public relations activities. As a secondary function, giving advance warning, calibrating expectations, and providing an appeal procedure are intended to build commitment and support.

The focus of activities on building commitment and support is consistent with the “intuitive politician” model proposed by Bell and Tetlock (1989). As suggested by models of organizational power and politics (e.g., Pfeffer, 1981), managers build commitment and support through the traditional means like participative decision making (e.g., voice), coalition building, and public relations. In addition, creating the opportunity for voice has the effect of creating the sense of a fair process that can also build commitment and support for unfavorable outcomes (Lind & Tyler, 1988).

Self-management. Bad news can be emotionally distressing for managers to deliver (Bies, 2012; Folger & Skarlicki, 2001; Harris & Sutton, 1986). A review of the empirical evidence finds many of the deliverer’s actions in service of the self-management function. These activities include rehearsal, medium of delivery, and face management and self-presentation.

Self-management activities suggest that managers are concerned about their emotions as nonverbal verbal cues presented to others. For example, according to the managers, any evidence of emotion could suggest they were “hiding” something, as they would deviate away from the expected “cool, dispassionate, and rational” pose (Bies, 2012). In other words, it appears self-management involves a “managed heart” (cf. Hochschild, 1983).

Toward a Multitheoretical Perspective on the Delivery of Bad News

There are a variety of theoretical perspectives that could be used to connect and provide conceptual insight into the bad news management activities that serve the five different strategic functions. In examining these strategic functions of bad news management activities, there are three theoretical perspectives that seem most relevant for analyzing the delivery of bad news. These theoretical perspectives are organizational justice theory, impression management theory, and coping theory, which I outline in the following and use to identify new directions for research in the following section.

Organizational justice theory. Bad news involves all aspects of organizational justice: outcome, procedural, informational, and interpersonal (Colquitt, 2001). What organizational justice is concerned about is the perceived legitimacy of outcome and process (Bies, 1987b). And as the review of the literature uncovered, all aspects of organizational justice are served by several bad news management activities. These activities include giving advance warning, creating a paper trail, providing the opportunity for voice, account giving, and truth telling and information disclosure, providing an appeal procedure, and caretaking.

Impression management theory. Being associated with bad news can pose a threat to one's social identity and legitimacy (Bies, 1987b); thus, impression management theory provides another conceptual window through which to analyze the delivery of bad news (Cialdini, 1989; Schlenker, 1980). And as the literature review uncovered, impression management concerns are served by several bad news management activities. These activities include calibrating expectations, using disclaimers, coalition building, face management and self-presentation, account giving, engaging in public relations, and scapegoating.

Coping theory. The delivery of bad news is emotionally distressing for those who deliver the news (Folger & Skarlicki, 2001; Harris & Sutton, 1986). Coping with the emotions is a key deliverer concern (Bies, 2012; Ptacek & Eberhardt, 1996); thus, coping theory provides a useful framework to analyze the challenges facing those who deliver bad news (Lazarus, 1993, 2006; Lazarus, Averill, & Opton, 1974). These activities include rehearsal, medium of delivery, face management and self-presentation, and parting ceremonies.

The Delivery of Bad News: New Directions for Research

In this section, I use the framework of analysis developed in this article to identify new directions for research on the delivery of bad news. These new directions for research are organized around the multiphase model of bad news management activities, the moderators, the strategic functions of bad news management activities, and the multitheoretical perspective (organizational justice, impression management, coping theory).

The Multiphase Model

The multiphase model of bad news management activities grew out of several grounded theories of the delivery of bad news by occupational deliverers of bad news such as U.S. marshals (McClenahan & Lofland, 1975), coroners (Charmaz, 1975), physicians (Ptacek & Eberhardt, 1996), and clergy (Clark & LaBeff, 1982). In a study of corporate executives across different industry sectors, Bies (2012) found a similar multiphase process.

But more qualitative studies of how managers and executives deliver and manage bad news are needed. There may be industry or sector (private versus public) differences in bad news management activities. Furthermore, these qualitative studies should be conducted internationally, as all of the studies cited above are from the United States. Whether the grounded studies involve interviews supplemented by archival evidence or involve actual observation of the delivery of bad news (cf. Mintzberg, 1973), more research is needed to confirm the validity of the present framework as well as to identify new bad news management activities.

Beyond confirming the validity of the present framework, research is needed to expand it and enrich our understanding of the delivery of bad news. One focus of expansion should be on analyzing the processes associated with upward versus downward delivery of bad news. For example, the review identified activities across all three phases that were enacted more frequently in the upward delivery of bad news relative to the downward delivery (e.g., advance warning, coalition building, timing of delivery, public relations activities). Similarly, the review identified activities across all three phases that were enacted more frequently in the downward delivery of bad news relative to the upward delivery (e.g., calibrating expectations, face management and self-presentation, providing an appeal procedure).

The different strategic functions of bad news management activities suggest possible explanations for the different processes associated with upward and downward delivery, which should inform the research to expand the multiphase model. For example, in the upward delivery of bad news, the political implications for the deliverer are more salient (Bies, 2012). As a result, this should increase activities focused on political concerns such as blame management, lessening the perceived severity of the outcome, and building commitment and support. On the other hand, in the downward delivery of bad news, the focus is typically on the subordinate's performance (Bies, 2012). As a result, performance correction is a more salient concern to the deliverer while the political implications become background. This shift in salient concerns will shape deliverer actions.

The three phases of bad news management activities suggest a variety of new directions for research. First, the multiphase model should inform theory building and research design to include variables across all three phases, thus providing a longitudinal and more textured analysis of a bad news episode. As an example, take the case of performance appraisal, which is viewed as an onerous task by most managers. Rather than asking questions on only one aspect of performance appraisal such as account giving—what type of account was provided and whether it was perceived as adequate—additional questions across all three phases should be asked. For example, how much time and effort were given to rehearsal (preparation phase), face management during the feedback session (delivery phase), and

providing emotional support after the session (transition phase)—and how did all these processes interact in the bad news episode? In other words, the multiphase model suggests interesting and interrelated questions that should be incorporated into any research design on the delivery of bad news.

Second, in reviewing the research across all three phases, some bad news management activities have received more scholarly attention than others. For example, in the preparation phase, there is more research on such activities as giving advance warning, creating a paper trail, and providing an opportunity for voice than there is on calibrating expectations, the use of disclaimers, and coalition building. More research is needed on these latter three bad news management activities.

Similarly, in the delivery phase, there is more research on such activities as the choice of medium of delivery and account giving than there is on the timing of delivery, face management and self-presentation, and truth telling and information and disclosure. More research is needed on these latter three bad news management activities. Finally, in the transition phase, which has received less attention than have the preparation and delivery phases, there is more research on such activities as providing an appeal procedure, scapegoating, and caretaking than on public relations and parting ceremonies. More research is needed on these latter two bad news management activities.

Moderators

The literature review identified a variety of moderators that influence different bad news management activities (Shaw et al., 2003), and thus should be incorporated into future research on the delivery of bad news. In addition to the target of the news, which was discussed above, one of the most important moderators identified was outcome severity (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996; Shapiro, 1991; Shapiro et al., 1994; Shaw et al., 2003). Much like analysis earlier on upward versus downward delivery, another area to expand the multiphase model is to analyze the different processes associated with everyday versus extreme forms of bad news.

Other moderator variables identified included the degree of informational uncertainty (Sitkin & Bies, 1993b), the medium of delivery (Shapiro et al., 1994; Sussman & Sproull, 1999), context (Shaw et al., 2003), culture (Holland et al., 1987; Maddux et al., 2011), and the audience characteristics (homogeneous versus heterogeneous; Sitkin & Bies, 1993b). And if the focus is on account giving, the type of account is a key moderator (Shaw et al., 2003).

Strategic Functions of Bad News Management Activities

Identifying different strategic functions of bad news management activities highlights the multiple motivations that influence managerial action. Future research needs to explore the interplay of these different functions and how they shape the choice of strategies and actions across all three phases of the delivery of bad news. Such research may also expand the multiphase model, thus providing a richer, more textured analysis of managing bad news across time.

This discussion of strategic functions suggests a rational, calculative motivation for action and ignores the role of social cognitive dynamics shaping managerial behavior (Bazerman & Moore, 2008). Future research on the choice of bad news management activities should focus on the influence of social cognitive variables such as the *vividness* of the bad news (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). There could be an *anchoring effect* in which the first information about bad news is more influential in making subsequent decisions (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Third, there is the *framing effect* in which managers may be more risk taking if the information about the bad news is framed as a potential loss and more risk averse when the information is framed as a potential gain (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981).

Identifying these different strategic functions also highlights the dilemmas facing managers in the delivery of bad news, which represents another direction for new research. For illustrative purposes, I outline two such dilemmas next.

Dilemma 1: Blame avoidance versus accepting responsibility. Blame avoidance is an obvious motivation of managers, given they want to avoid any negative consequences associated with the delivery of bad news (e.g., the loss of legitimacy, loss of job). However, by trying to reduce or avoid blame, a variety of dysfunctional consequences can occur for the organization. For example, by framing the bad news more positively through account giving, it may lessen the likelihood of the receiver or the organization pursuing corrective responses. Similarly, if the account focuses attention on the environment for the cause of bad news, rather than on individuals, there is less incentive for change. In other words, blame management may lead managers to avoid taking responsibility for the bad news, thus undermining the motivation to change, which may lead to even more bad news in the future (Bies, 2010).

On the other hand, by taking responsibility for managerial and organizational actions, including failure, it demonstrates integrity, which inspires trust and follower performance, which are associated with effective leadership (Palanski & Yammarino, 2009), which is good. But repeatedly taking responsibility for bad news, while noble, may undermine one's credibility and legitimacy so much so that it results in a loss of job (Bies, 2012). What this dilemma highlights are the trade-offs associated with different managerial actions in managing bad news across time.

Dilemma 2: Honesty and truth telling versus full disclosure. One of the key challenges in dealing with bad news is keeping employees engaged and motivated (Bies, 2010), objectives that can be served by account giving, public relations, and face management and self-presentation activities. Yet those same activities may lead managers to overemphasize the positives such that they fail to tell the full truth about the challenges and hurdles that lay ahead, which undermines the sense of urgency for change (Kotter, 1996).

Embedded in this dilemma is another dilemma: honesty versus disclosure. One can be honest and tell the truth, but not disclose all of the facts. Yet for those receiving bad news, the failure to disclose all of the facts may be viewed as deception (Bies, 2010). So another empirical question arises as to what it means to be honest: tell the truth but don't disclose all of the facts versus disclose all of the facts (cf. Anton, 1993). This legalistic approach, while

protecting the deliverer in the short run, may undermine trust in the organization and its leadership in the long term (Sitkin & Bies, 1993a).

Beyond highlighting the dilemmas associated with delivering bad news, the focus on different strategic functions highlights paradoxical implications of bad news management activities (Sitkin & Bies, 1994). Two such paradoxes are *the formalization paradox* and *the justice paradox* (Sitkin & Bies, 1993a). The formalization paradox grows out of the motivation to create a paper trail, documenting all aspects associated with the bad news, as a means of protecting managers and the organization in terms of liability. Yet such legalistic actions may actually contribute to an adversarial and less trusting environment, which makes cooperative action and change more difficult for managers. The justice paradox grows out of the motivation to rely on legalistic procedures such as creating a paper trail and limiting disclosure and information sharing at the expense of social considerations such as justice and fairness. Future research on the delivery of bad news should be looking for and examining these dilemmas and paradoxes and their impact on managers and their organizations.

The Multitheoretical Perspective

The three theoretical perspectives, organizational justice theory, impression management theory, and coping theory, not only provide useful frameworks for analyzing bad news management activities, but also suggest new directions for research. For example, organizational justice theory would suggest the need to measure all facets of justice that may be associated with any bad news: distributive, procedural, informational, and interpersonal (Colquitt, 2001). In addition, when the bad news involves a team, how teams make sense of the event highlights the importance of the group level of analysis in analyzing reactions to bad news (Roberson, 2006). Similarly, social networks and social influence may influence a team's reactions to bad news (Roberson & Colquitt, 2005).

Impression management theory identifies different variables that could influence the delivery of bad news. For example, impression management variables such as characteristics of the deliverer (e.g., attractiveness, sincerity) as well as tactics to build positive relationships (e.g., ingratiation) may influence a receiver's reactions if and when bad news must be delivered (Schlenker, 1980). Similarly, image management tactics, such as blasting and basking, may also influence a receiver's reactions to bad news (Cialdini, 1989).

Coping theory also suggests different variables and methods for the study of bad news. For example, one of the reasons that deliverers have a difficult time delivering bad news is because they are not trained or skilled to perform this difficult task except through "on-the-job" training. In the world of health care, there are several initiatives to help doctors deliver bad news more effectively through education and training (Arnold & Koczwara, 2006; Baile et al., 2000; Buckman, 2005), which would represent a new direction in research and training in the field of management. Similarly, a focus on the neuroscience aspects of how deliverers cope with the delivery of bad news would be another new direction for research (Becker, Cropanzano, & Sanfey, 2011).

Coping theory can further broaden the focus of research to include processes that explain how a receiver may eventually reinterpret the bad news by virtue of future events that are

unrelated to the delivery of bad news. For example, consider the example of a faculty member who is denied tenure at a university, which is obviously bad news. But, then, at a second institution, the faculty member receives tenure and creates new academic programs that would not have been possible at the first institution. As a result, the faculty member reconceptualizes the initial bad news of tenure denial as “good news.” This suggests another direction for future research for the meaning of bad news in the workplace (cf. Frankl, 1946/2006)—identifying and analyzing the effects of psychological and temporal processes that influence and shape the transformation of bad news into possibly good news.

Conclusion

This article presents a framework for analyzing the complex process of delivering bad news in organizations. As the review of the literature suggests, the delivery of bad news involves three different, but interrelated, phases of activities: preparation, delivery, and transition. This is important practically for managers, as they must now attend to all three phases of bad news. Moreover, the framework suggests important practical applications for a variety of managerial and organizational processes in which bad news is delivered (e.g., selection, performance management, budget decision making, change management).

But these bad news management activities serve different strategic functions, which may be in conflict with each other (Sitkin & Bies, 1994). For example, these different strategic functions may create organizational dilemmas that need to be managed. Furthermore, these different strategic functions may create unintended consequences and paradoxes for managers and their organizations.

Third, the perspective taken in this analysis is that the badness of any news is “in the eye of the beholder.” That is, the nature and meaning of some bad news may be construed differently by different people. Furthermore, the badness of the news is socially mediated, shaped by a variety of contextual and temporal factors. In other words, the delivery of bad news can be viewed as part of a social construction process (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978).

Finally, leaders must lead in good times *and* in bad. In fact, a leader’s ability is most tested in times of bad news. The framework presented in this article can guide researchers in formulating research questions and conducting empirical studies that can produce useful knowledge for leaders in meeting the daunting challenges posed by bad news and how it is delivered.

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