

Quartz Leadership 1

The best leaders don't pretend everything is fine

It's impossible to know for sure, but we imagine many of the 30,000 Oracle employees laid off on March 31 woke up believing it was just another routine day.

In fact, things seemed great. Three weeks earlier, Oracle reported its best growth quarter in 15 years: \$17.2 billion in revenue, up 22%. Oracle is not a company in distress.

Oracle sent an email at 6 a.m. ET to employees around the globe. The opening lines: "We are sharing some difficult news regarding your position. After careful consideration of Oracle's current business needs, we have made the decision to eliminate your role... today is your last working day."

Ouch.

We don't claim to have a monopoly on corporate communication wisdom. Organizational leaders are allowed to run their businesses as they see fit. Yet, this particular layoff announcement seemed like it could have been handled better.

We do believe that people can handle bad news better than they can handle feeling blindsided, or misled.

Business leaders do not owe employees total transparency about every discussion happening in the boardroom, but perhaps they do owe their people timely honesty.

Communication isn't a soft skill. It's a business strategy.

What employees want

The "right amount" of honesty is what people tend to want.

"Leaders should speak as soon as the issue is real enough to affect jobs, pay, workload, or strategy, even if every detail isn't locked," said Josiah Roche, a fractional chief marketing officer.

Employees need three things, Roche said:

What leaders know

What leaders do not know

When they will hear more

“In hard moments, the standard isn’t perfect certainty,” he said. “It’s timely truth, plain language, and enough context that people don’t feel managed like a risk item.”

Derek Neighbors, chief technology officer at Vixxo Facility Solutions, a facilities solutions company, echoed Roche.

“I lead AI and engineering [organizations] through messy change, and the pattern is consistent. **People can handle hard news. What they cannot handle is feeling managed, surprised, or misled,**” Neighbors said. “For leaders, honesty does not mean sharing every legal detail in real time. **It means saying what is true right now, naming what you do not know yet, and committing to when you will update people next.**”

With difficult news, the following order helps, Neighbors said:

What happened

Why the decision was made

What it means for employees now

What is still unknown

Exactly when the next update is coming (even if that update ends up being ‘no changes at this time’)

“Hard news does less damage than dishonest framing,” Neighbors said.

Silence isn’t a strategy

Silence creates a vacuum — and teams fill it fast. When leaders go quiet, teams don’t become calmer, they fill the vacuum with rumors, speculation, and worst-case scenarios, said David Arrington, founder at executive coaching firm Arrington Coaching.

“Let’s be honest: 30,000 people waking up to a ‘today is your last day’ email isn’t just a communication failure; it’s a leadership failure,” Arrington said. “And it’s more common than most executives would care to admit.”

The tension leaders don’t like to talk about, Arrington said, is that radical transparency and quarterly earnings are often in direct conflict.

“The fastest route to short-term profitability is headcount reduction, and disclosing layoffs in advance creates real legal and operational exposure, confidentiality risks, potential corporate sabotage, and talent flight before you’re ready,” Arrington said. “I get it. The pressure is real.

“The question leaders should be asking isn’t ‘How much do I have to tell them?’ It’s ‘What do my people need from me right now to feel like humans and not a headcount?’ There’s always a communication plan in these situations. The problem is those plans are usually designed to protect the organization, not preserve the dignity of the people being affected. Those two goals aren’t mutually exclusive, but they require intentional and ethical leadership.”

Sharon Justice, a strategic HR and leadership development consultant, recognizes how tricky these major transitions are for businesses.

“I was tasked with this action many more times in my career than I would have liked,” Justice said. “Here’s more of the reality. The WARN Act would be in place in this situation, so the reality is that employees did get a 60-day notice of their last paycheck that was probably triggered the day of the email.

“Some may be asked to continue working, others would be paid but not required to show up to work. This is meant to address the challenge of making a business decision that results in a **[Reduction in Force], while maintaining a sense of calm during chaos, and managing emotions that span anger, grief, disbelief, etc.** And still keeping the business doors open even during drastic disruption.”

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How to deliver difficult news

“A 6 a.m. mass email is a logistics tool. It’s not a leadership tool,” said John Lentini, founder of BOLD Training Corp., a former global banking executive, and author of the upcoming book “Engineering Character: Six Dials to Build Better Leaders.”

“Honest communication requires three dials working in concert: integrity, empathy, and influence,” Lentini said.

“Integrity is the foundation,” he said. “It is the character dial that governs everything else. Without it, the other two dials are just techniques. **Empathy is the receiving dial. It means genuinely internalizing the human impact of the message before a single word is written. Influence is the transmitting dial. It governs not just what you say but how, when and through which channel you say it. Without integrity anchoring both, empathy becomes performance and influence becomes manipulation.”**

The Oracle email failed on all three counts, he said.

“Integrity would have demanded that the human cost of this decision be honored, not processed through a legal and PR filter,” Lentini said. “Empathy would have asked: what does it feel like to wake up to this? Influence would have asked: is a 6 a.m. mass email the right channel, timing, and tone for news this significant? All three questions needed answers before the send button was ever touched.”

The Oracle situation isn't an outlier, Arrington said.

“It's the latest cautionary tale with a very clear lesson: your employees aren't disposable assets,” he said. **“They're invested partners, in the mission, in the culture, in the outcomes. Lead like you believe that, especially when it's hard.”**

Building trust with your teams

Communication during layoffs doesn't create trust. It simply reveals whether trust already existed within the organization, said Sabine Hutchison, founder of The Ripple Network, a leadership development and training platform.

“Far too many leaders look at crisis communication as a sort of damage control,” Hutchison said. **“Actually, it's whether you've been having honest conversations all along. The leaders who navigate layoffs with integrity are the ones who built that foundation daily.”**

“The Oracle email happened because leadership treated communication as a transaction,” she said. “Legacy isn't built in the boardroom announcement. It's built in how you show up when the news is hard to deliver.”