



(LEADER GUIDE)

DELIVERING DIFFICULT NEWS WITH STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

DR. JOE HILL
higherperformancegroup.com

LEADER {CORE} Guide: Delivering Difficult News with Strategic Leadership

How Educational Leaders Can Transform Crisis Communication into Trust-Building Opportunities

Duration: 45 Minutes

Purpose: To facilitate meaningful dialogue about transforming crisis communication into strategic leadership communication, helping team members explore how to deliver difficult news with clarity, confidence, and authenticity while building rather than eroding trust.

Pre-Session Preparation

- Send the article to participants 48-72 hours before the session
- Request that they identify one difficult conversation they need to have or recent challenging communication they delivered
- Set up meeting space that feels psychologically safe for honest discussion
- Prepare materials for the Strategic Communication Framework exercise
- Consider your own authentic example of successful difficult conversation to model the process

Session Flow with CORE Process Opening (5 minutes)

- Welcome participants
- Briefly explain the CORE process (Call It, Own It, Response, Execute)
- Share a personal example of when strategic communication during a difficult situation actually strengthened trust with your team
- Establish relevance: "Today we're exploring how we might shift from avoiding difficult conversations to using them as trust-building opportunities"

C: Call It - Questions of Clarity (10 minutes)

Group Discussion:

- "Based on the article, what's the fundamental difference between crisis-reactive and strategic communication leadership?"
- "What are the four communication types educational leaders need to master?"
- "How does the Strategic Communication Framework transform difficult news into leadership opportunity?"

Facilitation Notes:

- Capture key insights on shared space
- Clarify any misconceptions about strategic communication vs. avoiding difficult truths

- Reference key concepts from the article: "Organizations using enhancement language saw 43% greater community support"

O: Own It - Questions of Meaning (10 minutes)

Individual Reflection:

- "Which of the four communication types do you find most challenging in your leadership role and why?"
- "Where do you see yourself caught in the 'comfort trap'—avoiding discomfort rather than providing clarity?"
- "What difficult conversation have you been postponing that your team or organization actually needs?"

Paired Discussion:

- Have participants share their reflections with a partner
- Partners ask: "What's the cost of not having this conversation, both for you and for those you lead?"

R: Response - Options for Practice (15 minutes)

Application Exercise:

- Working in small groups, participants select one difficult conversation or challenging communication scenario
- Using the Strategic Communication Framework, develop a brief strategic approach:
 - o Context: Frame the reality with honesty and strategic perspective
 - o Clarity: Name the challenge without apologizing for necessary decisions
 - o Connection: Link to shared mission and values
 - o Confidence: Demonstrate leadership conviction
 - o Commitment: Invite partnership rather than passive compliance
- Groups provide feedback using the prompt: "How does this approach maintain authenticity while building rather than eroding trust?"

Group Sharing:

- Invite 2-3 groups to share their strategic communication approaches
- Facilitate peer feedback on effectiveness and authenticity

E: Execute - Commitment to Practice (8 minutes)

Individual Commitment:

- Each participant completes the statement: "In the next two weeks, I will practice strategic communication by..."
- Participants identify one specific difficult conversation they will approach with the Strategic Communication Framework
- Each person names an accountability partner who will check in on their progress

Closing (2 minutes)

- Round-robin: Each person shares one word describing how they feel about approaching difficult conversations now
- Remind participants of the article's challenge question: "What's stopping you from having this conversation with clarity and conviction?"
- Leader closes with commitment to model strategic communication in upcoming challenging situations

Key Concepts for Reference

- "How you deliver difficult news determines whether your community trusts you or questions your leadership"
- The four communication types: Crisis, Change, Compliance, Resource
- "Meaningful change depends more on communication clarity than message comfort"
- The Comfort Trap: "avoiding discomfort creates confusion rather than harmony"
- Strategic Communication Framework: Context, Clarity, Connection, Confidence, Commitment

Remember: Your role is to facilitate courage and clarity, not to provide scripts. Model the very principle you're discussing by having honest conversations about the challenges of leadership communication.