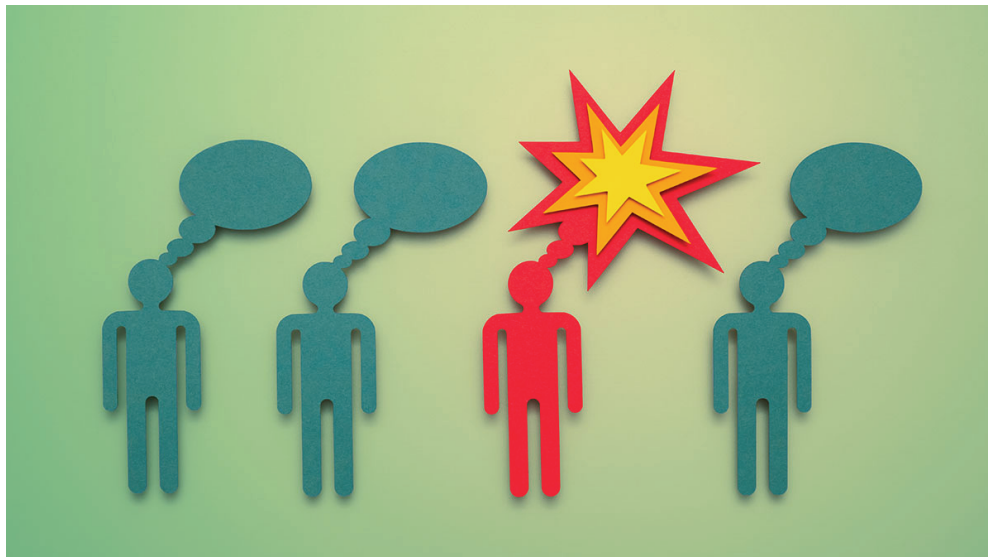




<https://hbr.org/2018/01/how-to-tell-an-employee-they-didnt-get-a-promotion>

Motivating People



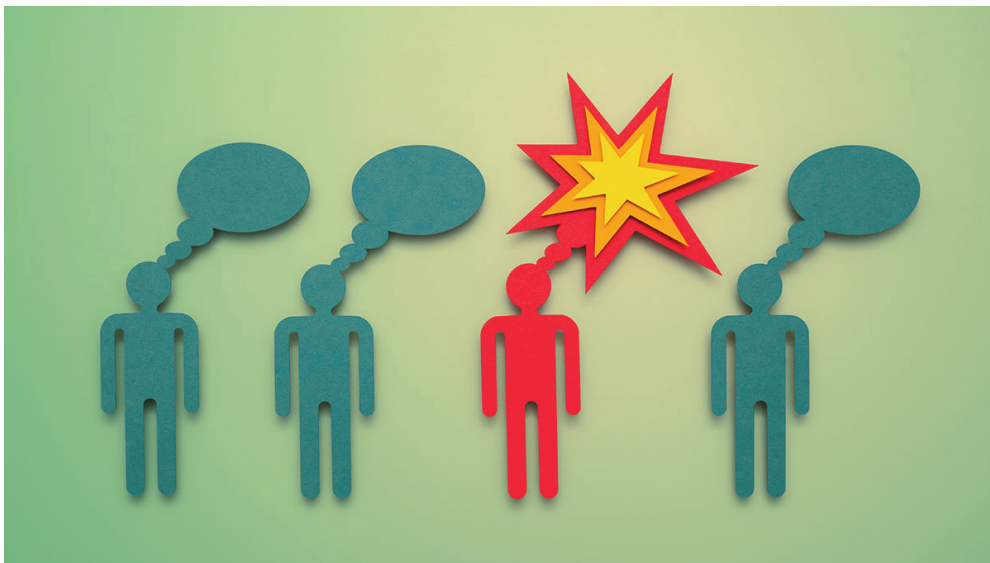
How to Tell an Employee They Didn't Get a Promotion

Be straightforward, and help them stay motivated. **by Rebecca Knight**

How to Tell an Employee They Didn't Get a Promotion

Be straightforward, and help them stay motivated. **by Rebecca Knight**

Published on HBR.org / January 24, 2018 / Reprint [H04413](#)



Jorg Greuel/Getty Images

It's no fun to tell employees that they've been passed over for a promotion — especially if you value them and their work. What's the best way to deliver the bad news? What can you say to make sure they don't lose interest in their jobs or hold grudges against you or the decision makers? Should you offer something else in place of the promotion?

What the Experts Say

News of this kind is “hard to hear, and it's hard to deliver,” says

Joseph Weintraub, a professor at Babson College and the coauthor of *The Coaching Manager: Developing Top Talent in Business*. Because the topic is so unpleasant, it's a "conversation that many managers have a tendency to want to avoid." And for good reason, says Heidi Grant, author of *No One Understands You and What to Do About It* and *9 Things Successful People Do Differently*. "You're giving highly emotional feedback, and you worry the other person will feel anxious, dejected, and frustrated. You might also have a very real concern that what you have to say could end up demotivating your employee." But the interaction can yield positive outcomes if you do it the right way. Here are some tips to help you.

Prepare but don't procrastinate

First things first, "don't wing it," Grant says. Before you talk to your employee, "plan out what you want to say and how you want to say it." She suggests writing down your thoughts on paper and rehearsing them out loud. "When you're doling out [negative] feedback, you're in fight-or-flight mode — you want to get it over with," she says. "Your brain isn't working optimally; you become awkward and less attuned to the emotions of others." Practicing what you plan to say "will help you feel more confident." But don't wait too long before delivering the news, Weintraub says. "You don't want an employee to find out they didn't get the promotion via someone else's Facebook announcement," he says. "If word leaks out, it's tough to recover. You blow the trust and respect" in the relationship.

Be transparent

When it comes to "explaining how the decision was made," more information is always better, Grant says. "We assume that other people understand our thoughts and intentions, but that is almost universally untrue," she adds. You need to describe "the organizational context" and the "factors that went into the hiring decision." If nothing more,

“it creates a sense of procedural justice” so that your employee knows that the process was fair. Of course, this explanation is easier to provide if you’ve been “up front” about what people should expect from the start,” Weintraub says, including how interviews and evaluations will work and how long it might take for a decision to be made.

Be empathetic

Getting passed over stings personally and professionally, so as the manager, you need to think about “how to retain your employee — both within the organization and psychologically,” Weintraub says. Be mindful of your report’s self-esteem. He suggests saying something like, “We only considered qualified, competent candidates. We only have one position open, and someone else got it. I want to thank you for applying and going through the process. I also want you to know that you are a valued and important part of this organization.” It’s important to validate the person so that paranoia doesn’t creep in. You don’t want the person wondering, “Is there something they’re trying to tell me?” Grant recommends providing “specific and behavior-based” positive feedback. “Avoid platitudes,” she adds. “People like to know what they’re doing right.”

Talk about development separately

Your employee’s first question is likely to be “Why didn’t I get the job?” “It’s a fair question,” Weintraub says, “and you need to be prepared to respond.” But don’t let the conversation turn into a performance review. “It’s not the time for a development conversation,” he says. “You want to avoid giving the person negative feedback about shortcomings or deficiencies — particularly feedback they’ve never heard before.” If the employee pushes for a response, you might gently indicate that a certain “experience, discipline, or skill set,” was found lacking, then say, “I’d love to continue this conversation further, so let’s set up a time to

talk about how best to get you the experience you need,” and be sure to follow through, so it's clear you're not blowing the person off.

Don't overpromise

One of the greatest dangers of delivering this kind of news is softening it with promises you might not be able to keep, Weintraub says. “In your desire to minimize your own discomfort, you might say something like, ‘Next time you'll get the job.’” But you don't know what the future holds, and if you promise the next promotion, and it doesn't pan out, “that will really leave [the employee] disgruntled.” Grant concurs: “It's human to want to make it up to the person, but you must resist that impulse.” She suggests saying something along the lines of, “I have a lot of confidence that you can get the next promotion if you do...”

Follow up

Even if your employee responds calmly to the news, “bear in mind that that's not necessarily their real reaction,” Weintraub says. “Oftentimes when you get bad news — particularly if it's unexpected — you're not able to process it in the moment,” he says. “You are in a state of shock or surprise. It may only be later that this person tells a friend or significant other that they didn't get the job and feel upset.” So it's important to continue checking in with an employee who's been passed over, emphasizing the person's value and “giving developmental feedback, help, and guidance,” Grant says. “Talk about ways for this person to grow and keep the “focus on the future.”

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Show compassion. Be mindful and respectful of your employee's self-esteem.
- Praise and validate your employee.
- Discuss your employee's growth and development plan in a separate meeting.

Don't:

- Procrastinate. Deliver the news in a timely fashion.
- Wing it. Plan what you will say and how you will say it.
- Promise your employee the next promotion. Chances are you can't offer that assurance.

Case Study #1: Be honest and direct — and don't make any promises

Over the course of her career, Tania Salgado-Nealous, vice president of human resources and operations at Vectorworks, the design software company, has had to tell many people that they've been passed over for promotions. It's never easy, but she tries to be philosophical about it.

"I [have] a clear conscience when I know that the decision makers considered what opportunity would make the employee most successful," she says. "When people know that you have their best interests in mind, and that you want them to succeed and not take on too much before they are ready, it helps tremendously."

A few months ago, Tania had to tell a junior team member, "Cindy," that she wasn't quite right for a job she wanted.

"It was a specialist role, which required at least three years of practical experience," Tania explains, "and Cindy didn't have the particular skill set [needed]."

Once the decision was made, Tania met with Cindy one-on-one and broke the news to her “in an empathetic yet direct” manner, explaining why she’d been passed over and how much the company appreciated her work in her current role.

“I made sure to let Cindy know that she is a valuable asset and noted how talented she is — that she’s great at what she does,” she says.

Tania also thanked Cindy for applying for the job. “I said it was commendable that she wanted to throw her hat in the ring,” she says.

However, she stopped short of making her any promises about future jobs.

Cindy was disappointed but seemed to react well to the news. “It helped that she knew that the position was a reach,” Tania says.

Shortly after this talk, Tania met with Cindy again to discuss career development. “It was most important to make sure that she stays engaged. I communicated that while right now she doesn’t have the skill set or experience to be successful in role, we will work with her to get there.”

Tania laid out a plan that included more training and said she would find opportunities for Cindy to partner with the new team member — “not so much in a job-shadow format, but in a collaborative way.”

Case Study #2: Schedule a separate meeting to discuss development and career progression

When Anne Leyden, executive vice president of human resources at TransUnion, the consumer credit reporting agency, has to deliver unhappy promotion news to a team member, she follows a simple rule.

“What this employee needs from you more than anything is honesty and respect,” she explains. So that’s what she delivers.

Many years ago, following an acquisition, Anne had to tell “Charlie” that he’d been passed over for a promotion he’d felt sure he would get.

From the start, she was up front about how the decision would be made. She told Charlie and the other individual vying for the job “what the steps were, who was going to be involved, the criteria we were using to evaluate candidates,” and how long it would take.

When the other person got the job, Anne was straightforward with Charlie. “I said, ‘I have disappointing news,’” she recalls.

She then validated him. “I said, ‘No one took this decision lightly. And everyone here thinks very highly of you.’ I said, ‘You are seen as someone who is valuable here.’”

Next, she briefly walked him through the reasons for the decision. It was simply a matter of skills: Charlie lacked certain functional capabilities necessary for success in the role; the other candidate was more qualified. Charlie was visibly let down, and “I let him talk about his disappointment,” Anne notes. “I mostly listened, but I also said that we would talk about experiences and exposure to make sure he was on the radar for future opportunities.”

The very next day, Anne scheduled a meeting with Charlie to discuss his career plans. “I wanted to talk to him right away,” she says. “I didn’t want [bad feelings] to linger because it might undermine his power and confidence and ability to move past it.”

They talked about projects he could execute, and she suggested meetings he should attend. "I wanted to make sure the words I said about his value to the organization came to life," she says. "I think it helped him move on."

This article was originally published online on January 24, 2018.



Rebecca Knight is currently a senior correspondent at Insider covering careers and the workplace. Previously she was a freelance journalist and a lecturer at Wesleyan University. Her work has been published in The New York Times, USA Today, and The Financial Times.