

D The other thing obviously which he'll be concerned about once he's bitten the bullet, swallowed the bad news as it were, is what is the time, when is this going to come into effect.

F Yes.

D Do you want me to try to deal with this, or is that going to be left to a later follow-up?

J I think that's something you and Frank could decide on a little later. There should be a package that we offer him, and quite a few details to sort out.

F Yes certainly. Erm, I think we ought to move on now, so the next question really is, erm, you know, how are we going to do it, and where? What do you think, Jennifer?

J Yes, this is where Derek can really help more than any of us, knowing him as you do. How you're going to do it would depend, to a certain extent, on what you know of him.

D Well, thinking about it, I mean, we have, you know, not a regular basis, gone off and had a game of squash after work. And I'm not, I mean I haven't really thought this through, but erm, I mean I think it might be better to do it outside the office in a sense.

J I'm afraid I don't agree with you. It needs to be you in your managerial role, not you in your role as a personal friend, in order to make it clear to him that it's not you who's making him redundant. It's the company, and it's his role that's going. I certainly think it should be done, er, somewhere in the office, and preferably in his office rather than in yours. Then he can be left in his office after you've finished talking to him.

F I don't know, Jennifer. I'm not sure I ...

D It's a little bit cold and clinical, that approach. I mean, I think the point you're making, that perhaps it would make the role issue a bit clearer both to myself and to him. But I ... don't know, I mean it's the emotional aspect of this, I don't feel I can deal with it terribly well.

F Well how about a lunch, Derek, in a quiet pub or restaurant So the in-between thing, it's a working lunch. It's work, but it's not the office. It could be a compromise, yes.

J Well, could I just come in here please? I tend to think it might be better if you did it in the office. That you could do it ... it's going to have to be fairly brief, rather than beating about the bush. Because you've got to remember, Derek, how you're going to feel about this. You're going to ...

D Yes.

F I mean, Jennifer, you've had a lot of experience of this. How do people react when they ...

J People tend to be rather shocked, they tend to be angry, but rather briefly, and they do tend to ...

D In other words, they're not able to formulate an immediate and rational response. It is an emotional ...

F Uh huh.

D The effect it has on them.

F In which case, a lunch might not be a good idea. I don't know.

D Well, I see what you're saying. It's just ...

J Sometimes, although you may not believe this, people go away really being sure whether or not they've been made redundant because the person breaking the news finds it so hard to ...

D To put it bluntly. (Laughs)

F You think you're being promoted yes. (Laughs)

J You may think a variety of things. (Laughs)

D In communication, I mean there is a certain degree of directness required here, I think I appreciate that. You know, it's bad news, but it's better to be short and brief and clear about it, rather than beating about the bush.

F Yes, it's worth, er, bearing this in mind.

RM Oh yeah, it does certainly, we're a multinational company, so obviously we have dealings with Europe and around the world. So certainly, quite a lot of the time, I'm dealing with people for whom Italian or French or whatever, is their natural tongue, and I'm afraid being English my linguistic ability is about, er, well, is not too good! But yes, I do find repeating back to people what they have said, in my words, slowly and clearly, is a very helpful way to see that I've understood properly what they're saying, and that they've understood that I've understood it. And communication is what meetings are about, if you don't have that feedback, then you're not getting the full benefit of meeting face to face.

P What advice would he give on participating in meetings?

RM Well, I think again, you've got to, erm, be clear what the object of the meeting is, and how you can contribute to it. Too many people I think go to meetings, without any very clear idea of what they're expected to do. They're there, are they being told something, are they being expected to participate in a decision, and I think holding large meetings is often a mistake for that reason. That there isn't enough focus by the participants on what their individual contribution is. If there are only three or four round a table, it's very noticeable if someone doesn't speak. But if there are twenty, you can keep quiet the whole time. And have you really gained much from being there. So I think the first thing is to think what you want to contribute; secondly when you do speak, try and do so in a pithy clear way, and don't ramble, keep to the point - that's another thing that the chairman, of course, can help with, bringing people gently, politely, back to the point. The last point I'd make about both participating and chatting meetings is that an awful lot of them are greatly improved by an element of humour. And I think the ability to defuse a tense situation, or just to put people at their ease, not by being a raconteur and, and telling funny jokes, but just by making a witty remark, an aside, thus putting people, erm, at their ease and relaxing the atmosphere. Very very helpful in making a good meeting.

P Finally, how important are the minutes of a meeting?

RM Again, it depends very much the sort of, what sort of meeting it is. If it's a formal board meeting, erm, then minutes are statutory and a proper requirement. They should be brief, clear, erm, they needn't be terribly formal, but they should essentially record the decisions that have been reached, and however much of the discussion, erm, that the chairman wants to record. Basically, going on too much about recording discussions seems to me, and I'm a secretary, as well as legal director, to be unnecessary. Normally, you don't need to be reminded of all that, you just want the action points, but I think doing that, doing it crisply, doing it quickly, because having the minutes two or three weeks after the meeting, is no use at all, having them within a day or two is very valuable.

Dialogue

F = Frank D = Derek J = Jennifer

F Let's get started then. Erm, what we've got to do is, er, discuss how Derek's interview with Charlie should go. Jennifer can offer advice on how to go about this sort of thing, she's very experienced in this area.

D I've been thinking about it over the weekend and there's several areas a procedure, erm, for doing this in the future.

F I think we should cover. I need to know when I should tell him, er, where the interview should take place, and how to go about it and handle his reaction, OK? I mean, is there a time scale for this? Have you thought exactly as to when this might best be done?

J Well, I think it's usually useful to break this kind of news midweek, rather than doing it on a Friday afternoon.

F Certainly, I absolutely agree.