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Leadership and Crisis Management

Soft Skills Training and Intervention in Organizational Crisis Situations for better Managerial

Outcomes in The Delivering of Bad News

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Note: This work project consists of two individual parts. Whereas chapter 3.1. was written by Megan Wallz, chapter 3.2. was compiled by Beatriz Frasco. The residual parts were developed by both authors.

Abstract

This paper examines the impact of communication skills training in organizational crises to enhance managerial outcomes when delivering bad news. With the COVID-19 pandemic highlighting the need for reskilling, this study aims to develop a training model based on Kolb's Experimental Learning Model, using SPIKES, NURSE and Bies' Multiphase model as theoretical basis. To test the designed training, three pilot sessions were conducted, resulting in positive reaction and knowledge retention from the participants. This research ultimately contributes to enhancing manager's skills in crisis communication, offering practical recommendations for future trainings.

Keywords

Crisis Management, Training, Training Methods, Training Design, Training and Development, Soft Skills, Interpersonal Skills, Communication, Management, Empathy, Interpersonal Skills, Organizational Crisis, Human Resources Management

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1. Introduction

Crises can be defining moments in organizations and societies – they can mark the birth of a new generation, and potentially affect the lives of many, and force communities to rethink their ways of living, both in work and in leisure. 2023 officially marks the third consecutive year since the Covid-19 pandemic, which has largely been considered as triggering the most serious economic crisis since World War II, along with the greater implications related to health and human tragedy (OECD 2022). To mitigate the consequences of such a groundbreaking and complex event, business scholars believe that the reskilling and upskilling of both managers and employees can be the main force of change in rebuilding the enterprises from the pandemic's impact (Verma and Gustafsson 2020), with communication and interpersonal skills progressively becoming some of the most prominent and valuable competences in stressing times (Poague 2020). Another example of crisis at an organizational level can be the mass layoffs emerging within the tech world, with companies such as Google, Meta, Amazon, and Microsoft letting go of a significant portion of their workforce (Forbes 2023). Thus, there is an increasingly unmet need to be competent at dealing with these crises and to effectively communicate and deliver bad news within these times.

Thus, leaders and managers are progressively expected to be skilled at dealing with organizational crises threatening organizations, guiding their teams out of the dark and ensuring the longevity and reputation of the company's name. Nevertheless, proper communication has proven to be one of the most daunting roles that a manager must take on (Bies 2010), as most managers are unwilling to be the bearer of bad news to their employees (Tesser and Rosen 1975), even if delivering bad news is crucial in the resolution of an organizational crisis and cannot be overlooked. However, due to the democratization of knowledge stemming from digitalization, managers can constantly

upgrade their skillset (Jaiswal, Arun and Varma 2021), and are encouraged to adapt to the evolving demands of the labor market, especially after the introduction of artificial intelligence and machine learning to the industrial world (Black and Van Esch 2020).

Understanding the discrepancy between a manager's skillset and expectations of their performance when dealing with an organizational crisis and noting the small pool of existing training tools for bad news communication, this work aimed at the implementation of a training model based on the healthcare sector, along with other existing literature, to improve the communication in crisis situations by managers, specifically within the delivery of bad news. In the creation process of the training and intervention model, the **following research question** has been derived, considering the existing literature in the area of *Crisis Training and Communication and Interpersonal Skills*:

- **How can managers be trained to deliver bad news?**

With a focus on the follow sub-research questions:

- How can a face-to-face training program for managers be designed for the purpose of delivering bad news?
- How effective is this training program?

First, based on a thorough literature review, a two-hour training intervention was designed and tested over the course of three pilot studies, implemented at the *Nova School of Business and Economics* campus and with **20 Master Students** as volunteer trainees. The results of the pilot sessions show that most participants already had existing notions regarding organizational crises and communication for its solvency, however there was an improvement on the theoretical notions behind the need for effective communication and the precise steps to follow for the delivering of

bad news. In addition, the trainees gained awareness of the best practices currently available regarding bad news delivery.

This work will consist of **four main sections**, the first section defines the main concepts guiding this paper and will formulate the training design and development. The concepts of *organizational crises*, *bad news*, *soft skills*, and *communication* will be explored and defined based on the current literature. The *next* section will explore the theoretical frameworks in which were found most suitable for the business environment and the academic profile of the targeted trainees. The *third* section will describe the conceptualization, design, and implementation of the training program, along with observed results from the three pilot training sessions. In the *final* section, the results based on the training sessions will be discussed in further depth, while acknowledging the limitations which existed within this research for future reference.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Crisis

2.1.1. What is an Organizational Crisis?

A crisis can be defined as an *unpredictable situation that will negatively affect and cause disruption to those affected by it* (Coombs 2015, p. 2). When a crisis is applied within the organizational context, it is deemed an **organizational crisis**, which is considered to be “*an event perceived by organization members and stakeholders to be highly salient and unexpected, and a potentially disruptive threat to the focal organization and its stakeholders*” (Bundy et al. 2017; König et al. 2020). It is critical to note that a crisis can be produced both *within the organization and from external events* (Grewal et al. 2007), making it necessary for mitigation efforts to exist for both types of crises. Examples of a crisis to an organization can include major external negative events

such as terrorist attacks, natural disasters, and pandemics (such as the most recent Covid-19 pandemic), which have the capacity to disrupt services, close businesses, and change the production of service within an organization (Morgeson et al. 2015). Internally, crises can manifest in many ways and from a variety of sources, such as, corporate fraud scandals (Davies 2020), quality data falsification (Soble and Boudette 2017), and industry specific events, such as when two of Boeing's 737 MAX airplanes crashed, causing a large organizational fallout (Sucher 2019). Pearson & Clair (1998) note that crises are characterized by extraordinary ambiguity and time pressure. In addition, organizational crises are deemed especially challenging, not only for their acuteness and public nature, but rather in the complexity of their resolution (Schaedler, Graf-Vlachy, and König 2022), where it is common that what once was construed as an event can, if not managed properly, turn into a chronicle state (Jaques 2009), making it imperative that proper mitigation strategies are introduced in a timely manner.

2.1.2 Organizational and Managerial Impact in Times of Crises

How organizations react and communicate during a crisis can have an immense impact on its stakeholders, such as employees' attitudes toward the organization (Bundy et al. 2017; Harvey and Haines 2005). There seems to be a consensus that an organizational crisis requires the involvement of various *strategic leaders* within the organization – noting that the CEO, top management team, and board of directors play an especially significant role (Finkelstein et al. 2009). The development of *organizational trust* is therefore greatly impacted by how management decides to communicate within these challenging times (Koronis and Ponis 2018). Organizational trust is particularly important during periods of disruption, as it allows organizational members to navigate and respond to challenging events and change with success, and underpins organizational agility and resilience

(Balogun, Hope Hailey, and Gustafsson 2015; McLain and Hackman 1999; Mishra and Spreitzer 1998; Oreg et al. 2018) to allow for better outcomes.

Hambrick and Mason (1984) claim that though strategic leaders' characteristics generally influence an organization, they are even more likely to do so during times of crises. This may be due to crisis management overlapping with many of the central tasks already inherent to strategic leadership, such as **1) signal detection**, **2) resource allocation under high levels of uncertainty and time pressure**, and **3) communication with both internal and external stakeholders**.

2.2 Bad News

For the purpose of this paper and the training method developed, the focus will be heavily emphasized on the managerial communication during the times of crisis, where communication will be deemed as the ***“delivering of bad news”*** or communication of the *crisis to stakeholders, specifically employees within the organization*.

2.2.1 What is Bad News? The Definition of Bad News in the Organizational Context

Traditionally, **“bad news”** is defined as *“any news that drastically, negatively, and seriously affects an individual's view of their future”* (Buckman 1984). In a combination of various literature sources, Bies (2013) defines bad news within the organizational context 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”*. French & Holden (2012) claim that bad news emerges within an organization *across the spectrum of communication* and may manifest in many ways, such as the announcement of layoffs, poor financial outcomes, crises of internal or external origin, and natural disasters. In addition, negative performance feedback (Ilgen and Davis 2000), negative hiring and promotion decisions (Lemons & Jones, 2001), and disciplinary warnings (Cole and

Latham 1997) can all be considered sources of bad news within an organizational context. Though the delivery of bad news seems to appear in many areas of the organization, this important topic has received very little attention from management scholars (Bies 2013).

Along with these examples, organizations can also face more severe forms of crisis communication, such as in the case of death and destruction (Tan, Pang, & Kang 2018), ones that require a dialogue between the organization and the public, prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence (Fearn-Banks 2017, p. 2) regarding news that will negatively impact various stakeholders, what actions the organization is taking to return to a state of normalcy, as well as taking care of injured personal and the deceased's next of kin (Tan, Pang, & Kang 2018). A very well-known example is that of the Malaysia Airlines crisis, which involved the mysterious disappearance of one of their airplanes, MH370, in 2014 which merited a more immense crisis communication response (Tan, Pang, & Kang 2018).

2.2.2 Bad News Delivery from the Literature

Authors Holt, Bobocel & Chen (2019) acknowledge that bad news is inherently distressing for the recipient, however, that this distress can be greatly influenced by ***how the news is delivered*** – that the delivery plays a significant role in reducing or greatly aggravating the distress experienced. In the case of the Malaysia Airlines' crisis, the organization was heavily criticized for their inadequate crisis management and the lack of empathy showed in their response (and in their delivery of the bad news) both to the public and the missing passengers' families. This poor handling of the bad news delivery and crisis response resulted in a major decline to the organization's reputation (Watson & Hagen 2015). The importance of compassion, understanding, and consideration of stakeholders emotions are highlighted by authors Tan, Pang, & Kang (2019) as a way for better **organizational-to-stakeholder** bad news delivery.

In analyzing the **manager-to-employee** relationship, the consensus from authors Richter et al. (2016) is that regardless of the topic or source of the bad news, the commonality is that they inherently arouse stress in **both managers and employees alike**. It is suggested that employees experience stress based on the bad news as it impairs their self-esteem and creates uncertainty surrounding their future, while managers commonly feel both uncomfortable with the responsibility to deliver the news, and the harm they may (indirectly) cause to the employee. A fear of employee anger and retaliation, and especially blame are all key reasons for managers' reluctance to engage in the delivery of bad news (Bies 2013). When leaders are asked to identify the tasks in which they deem most difficult, it is almost certain that the delivery of bad news is at the top of their list (Bies 2010). Due to the distress that may be experienced, the manager delivering the bad news may disengage both psychologically and behaviorally as a coping mechanism (Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997; Folger & Skarlicki, 2001). **The goal** is therefore to mitigate this fear response within managers, to create a clear strategy around bad news delivery, and to provide managers with the education surrounding bad news delivery.

Within the literature, there are various explorations into what is important within bad news delivery, Vandekieft (2001) emphasizes the need for frank and empathetic disclosure during the delivery of bad news to avoid emotional disengagement with the audience (in this case, the employee). Jin, Pang, and Cameron (2012) state that it is critical that facts are established quickly to keep the employees informed, and to more importantly, manage any emotional upheavals from stakeholders. Research indicates that when managers deliver bad news with greater **interactional justice**, that is, providing timely and adequate explanations, treating recipients politely, sensitively, and respectfully, the negative reactions to bad news may be mitigated (Holt, Bobocel and Chen

2019). It is even seen that in these cases, recipients are likely to respond more favorably to bad news, with more acceptance and favorable attitudes (Bies 1987; Brockner 2016).

2.2.3 Current Themes & Limitations in Bad News Delivery Literature

Though the literature is becoming greater, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic, which triggered many circumstances in which bad news delivery was necessary, it is critical to acknowledge the limitations that exist within the literature surrounding bad news delivery within the managerial context. The *two greatest limitations identified within the current literature for the purpose of this paper* are:

1) *The External-Focused Approach*

2) *The Healthcare-Centric Approach*

The External-Focused Approach is a common theme within the current literature, where the focus of crisis mitigation and delivering of bad news is on the organization itself, or to the external stakeholders or public, rather than an employee-centric approach. Coombs (2007) writes that while current frameworks surrounding bad news delivery in organizations are extensive, most crisis response strategies studies have been done from the organizational perspective rather than the stakeholders' perspectives, and thus may not be sufficient to equip practitioners with the ability to put into practice an effective method. Seeger (2006) identifies that even the top 10 practices in crisis communication, which are recommended by a panel of crisis communications experts, is in fact organization-centric (what the organization 'can do') rather than stakeholder focused.

In addition, the *Image Repair Theory* has become the "dominant paradigm for examining corporate communication in times of crisis" (Dardis and Haigh 2009), which is based on the premise of when an organization is in a crisis (based on their own wrongdoing), they need to repair their image, by

using one of five *solutions*: *denial*, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification (Benoit and Pang 2008). Although useful in its purpose, this theory suggests that much of the research surrounding crisis communication and the delivery of bad news is focused solely on the organization and its ability to survive crisis, rather than the interactions between manager-employee that may be just as, if not more, impactful in the long term.

The Healthcare-Centric Approach is concerned with the large amount of literature focused on the delivery of bad news and crisis communication, with methods to do so from a doctor-to-patient perspective within the healthcare setting. There has been extensive research on how medical professionals can deliver bad news (Buchman and Kason 1992; Girgis and Sanson-Fisher 1995) and therefore an extensive amount of models in which have been developed to address the common critical events that occur within the healthcare setting in which alter common coping mechanisms (Flannery and Everly 2000). Models such as the Mental Health First Aid Guidelines, National Guidelines on Psychosocial Interventions, TENTS Guidelines, etc. (Tan, Pang, and Kang 2018) have been developed to provide a structure in times of crisis for healthcare practitioners to address and/or reduce the post-breakout trauma (Dieljtens et al. 2014). In addition, specific and highly-respected models for the delivery of bad news have been developed for the healthcare sector, such as the *COMFORT Model* (Tan, Pang, and Kang 2019) and the *SPIKES Model* (Baile et al. 2000). The SPIKES model has become the standard guideline for medical professionals in breaking bad news (Seifart et al. 2014; Lüthi and Cantin 2011; Wand, Schildmann, and Burchardi 2008), and will be used as a key model and resource for the remainder of this paper.

Based on the work of two previous Master of Science in Management students from *Nova School of Business and Economics*, Melanie Lehmann & Lisa Maria Dollmann (2022), a frequency analysis was run to determine the professional field in which corresponded with the greatest amount

of crisis training literature. The results found that out of **46** published articles, the Health Care sector had the highest amount of published literature, as **15** of them were published in this professional field. In comparison, only **2** were published by Organizations & Businesses (***Please refer to Appendix A***).

Both the External-Focused Approach and The Healthcare-Centric Approach are key themes that have been discovered within the current literature, though, both critically important for the delivery of bad news, suggest that there is a gap within the research in providing a model for managers within the organizational context to deliver bad news to their employees. Bies (2013) states that there are many organizational processes in which managers must communicate bad news, however there is no integrative framework that guides it. To follow this observation, the following sections will focus on *how developing communication as a soft skill can contribute towards more effective bad news delivery*, which will be followed by a proposed *bad news delivery training program* for managers, integrating key perspectives from the available literature from both the healthcare and organizational perspectives, while adjusting the intervention to be more reflective of managerial needs.

2.3 Soft Skills: The Role of Communication in the Organizational Crisis

2.3.1 Defining Soft Skills from the Literature

According to Stewart, Wall, and Marciniac (2016), **soft skills** are considered as the “non-technical competencies associated with one’s personality, attitude, and ability to interact effectively with others” (p.276). Sometimes referred to as “*transferable skills*” (North and Worth 2000), “*meta-skills*”, or “*generic skills*” (Vermillion and Peart 2011), the key aspect is that these are skills built from personal attributes (Ferreira et al. 2022) and entail the range of general education skills that

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are *not* domain or practice-specific (Boyce, Williams, Kelly, and Yee 2001). Generally, soft skills refer to interpersonal behaviors such as collaboration, initiative, and emotional intelligence, all of which contribute to employees being able to engage positively at work (Deepa and Seth 2013). Organizational activities such as **effective communication**, untangling problems, contributing ideas, and providing constructive feedback are all included in soft skills (Raj 2008). Teamwork, empathy, autonomy in the workplace, creative application of ideas, and leadership qualities (Windels et al. 2013) can manifest through the development of soft skills.

In contrast, **hard skills** are primarily cognitive in nature and determined by an individual's Intelligence Quotient. These skills involve mostly conceptual knowledge and abilities which require an understanding of how to perform in a specific area (Windels et al. 2013) and are often the focus in education as these are skills that must be taught (Dickinson 2020). Technical skills, such as data mining and bookkeeping (Ferreira et al. 2022), along with role specific requirements, are just some of the many that fall under the umbrella of hard skills.

The connection between **soft skills** and **hard skills** is essential to acknowledge, as the interpersonal, behavioral, and people skills that are inherent to soft skills are used to apply hard skills within the workplace (Windels et al. 2013). In addition, Rao (2019) deems soft skills “human skills” and suggests that these uniquely “human skills” are actually the way in which one presents their hard skills. However, as the literature has progressed, scholars have suggested that hard skills may now *just* be meeting the basic requirements for a job fit, while soft skills are often the differentiator that identifies top candidates (Deepa and Seth 2013). Authors Lyu & Liu (2021) claim that even in industries known for their requirements of technical skills (such as the energy sector), the demand for soft skills are on the rise in these job postings by 18 percentage points in the last decade, whereas the requirement for hard skills has remained flat. Devedzic et al. (2018) state that soft skills have

steadily become more measurable, and with this, training practices for soft skills are transitioning to become more focused on emotional intelligence and leadership competencies, which are now being considered the key skills (Trudeau-Poskas 2020) within an organization.

Ultimately, the growing demand for soft skills is critical, and those who may not demonstrate the desired soft skills, may ultimately be left behind (Binsaeed et al. 2017) in their careers and success within organizations. Therefore, the focus for this paper will be primarily on the ways in which managers can develop their soft skills, particularly their communication skills, and translate this into effectively managing crises through the delivery of bad news for the future.

2.3.2. Soft Skill of Focus: Communication for Managers

In work by authors Martins et al. (in print) communication was the second most frequently referenced soft skill for crisis training within scientific literature, in addition, it is recognized that the communication in which an organization can establish with their employees is mostly conducted by managers (Paksoy et al. 2017). Tanrıverdi et al. (2010) states that a good manager is one who is a good communicator, and that ‘good management’ is based on the good communication skills of the manager. Brunetto & Farr-Wharton (2004) state that due to being in an era of constant change and “erosion of corporate loyalty” within organizations, interpersonal communication skills in managers are vital to promoting employee attachment to the organization. These findings suggest that communication as a soft skill can be essential for managers and for the organization. Bhatnagar and Bhatnagar (2012) point out that ‘Communication’ is defined as being derived from the Latin word *communis*, meaning ‘**common**’, connoting a common ground of understanding (p.14) and can be defined as ‘*an exchange of facts, ideas, opinions, or emotions by two or more persons*’ as well as ‘*an intercourse by words, letters, symbols, or messages and as a way that one organization member shares meaning and understanding with another*’. The broad

topic of communication can be further divided into four broad Dimensions (Bhatnagar and Bhatnagar 2012), which are: *Intrapersonal Communication*, *Interpersonal Communication*, *Group Communication*, and *Mass Communication*. For the purpose of this paper, Interpersonal Communication will be the dimension in focus.

Interpersonal Communication is defined by Bhatnagar and Bhatnagar 2012 as a “transaction between people and their environment, which includes other individuals such as friends, family, *co-workers*, and even strangers”. In addition, the transaction implies that both parties are active, however, not necessarily in equal amounts, and that the transaction is in some way functional for both parties. It is key to acknowledge that interpersonal communication “is a procedure by which people swap information, feelings and impart through verbal and non-verbal messages’ . The ‘*what*’ of the message (verbal aspects) and the ‘*how*’ of the message (non-verbal aspects) are both crucial to the exchange (Bhatnagar and Bhatnagar 2012).

In addition, an element that often goes overlooked when it comes to interpersonal communication is the ability to be a ‘*good receiver*’ - involving the need for listening skills, which can be displayed by showing an interest in the person(s) speaking, concentrating on the message, and asking questions to ensure understanding. Listening becomes even more critical, as employees who regularly experience high quality listening (from management and the organization), enjoy benefits such as higher levels of satisfaction within their jobs, increased psychological safety, trust, and organizational citizenship behavior (Itzhakov and Grau, 2022). Overall, interpersonal communication skills from managers are involved with the competency in which one is able to send a message, their listening skills, and their ability to provide feedback (Robbins and Hunsaker, 2003). Downs and Adrian (2004) state that message clarity, developing and maintaining credibility

and obtaining feedback become essential within interpersonal communication and that these skills have profound ramifications for managers in the coordinating and controlling of the organization.

2.3.3 Communication Process in the Delivering of Bad News

It can be seen that within the manager-employee relationship, interpersonal communication can manifest in many ways, including in the delivery of bad news - involving the transaction between the manager and the employee(s). Bies (2013) reiterates that it is in **how** one delivers bad news that will play a key role in shaping how people initially interpret information and will significantly influence their coping process. Based on an extensive combination of various sources, Bies (2013) considers **three key stages** in a multiphase process for the delivery of bad news: *The Preparation Phase*, *The Delivery Phase*, and *The Transition Phase* (**Please refer to Figure 1**). While all phases are critical to the flow of communication and effectiveness of delivering bad news, the focus will be on the **Delivery Phase** in specific, which encompasses all of the activities which occur during the **communication** of the bad news - involving the “*who, what, where, and why*” principles of the communication process, involving both verbal and non-verbal behaviors (Bies 2013).

The *Delivery Phase* created by Bies (2013) considers **five key activities** for managers to follow in communication with an employee, developed through various sources and literature. The five key activities are: *Timing of the Delivery*, *Medium of Delivery*, *Face Management and Self-Presentation*, *Account Giving*, and *Truth Telling and Information Disclosure*.

The **Timing of the Delivery** is deemed an important variable for managers when delivering bad news. In everyday organizational occurrences, such as in providing feedback on performance, communicating bad news in a timely fashion is deemed critical. In life-or-death situations, delays should be especially avoided.

The Delivery of Bad News: A Multiphase Process			
PHASE OF DELIVERY	Preparation	Delivery	Transition
BAD NEWS MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES	• Giving Advance Warning • Creating a “Paper Trail” • Calibrating Expectations • Using Disclaimers • Providing the Opportunity for Voice • Coalition Building • Rehearsal	• Timing of the Delivery • Medium of Delivery • Face Management and Self-Presentation • Account Giving • Truth Telling and Information Disclosure	• Engaging in Public Relations • Providing an Appeal Procedure • Scapegoating • Caretaking and Parting Ceremonies

Figure 1 - The Delivery of Bad News: A Multiphase Process (adapted from Bies 2013)

The **Medium of Delivery** considers the selection of an appropriate way to deliver the bad news, which can be: Face-to-face or through other media such as emails, texting, and phone calls. Bies (2013) considers the *Media Richness Theory* by Daft and Lengel (1986) which looks at two key factors: 1) the medium’s capacity for immediate feedback and 2) the number of cues in which are available. The theory deems face-to-face communication as richer than other forms of mediums, as it is less susceptible to misunderstandings due to the immediate feedback and the abundance of social cues. Face-to-face communication, along with a private location were emphasized by research within the medical field.

The **Face Management and Self-Presentation** activity deems the manager (the deliverer) a “signal sender”, where they communicate signs through their face management (or lack thereof) and self-presentation activities, which can appear through a calm and empathetic demeanor. Interpersonal sensitivity was emphasized, which relays a ‘sign of respect’ to those receiving the bad news.

The **Account Giving** activity is the explanation or justification for an action or outcome – which is deemed as the ‘hallmark managerial action’ in the delivery of bad news. Account Giving is intended to meet the expectation that the receiver has (being provided with context) and to mitigate blame assigned to the deliverer (deliverer provides motives for the action). Adequacy is seen as the key factor in the literature when it comes to account giving and adequacy is seen to increase based

on the receiver's perceived sincerity of the deliverer. The length, clarity and reasonableness of the account, along with the ability for the deliverer to provide a solution, all contribute to adequacy.

The ***Truth Telling and Information Disclosure*** activity concerns the expectation of the receiver that the deliverer (manager in this context) will be truthful in their delivery of the news, and that they will disclose all relevant facts. Truth telling is seen as key in building trust with the receiver, as when the receiver feels lied to or deceived, this will anger and create a negative reaction.

This model created by Bies (2013), with the five management activities within the Delivery Phase of delivering bad news, will be used as a basis for the continuation of the training development and design to assist in honing managers skills regarding communication for bad news delivery.

2.4. Models from the Literature: Learning, Bad News Delivery, and Assessment

This section is intended to explore the *current soft skills intervention training* from the literature, then will break into the theoretical background behind a *learning theory* in which to base the training sessions, followed by *two specific bad news delivery models*, and *an assessment model* in order to be able to design a program in which is reflective of the current literature at all stages.

2.4.1. Context for Model Decision

Besides the theoretical basis on learning styles, thorough research was performed on the already existing intervention training programs on communication-focused soft skills in the managerial context. From this exploration, it is concluded that there is still much uncharted territory in the organizational crisis communication training field, especially tailored to the business environment. Faced with this noticeable scarcity for managing-focused training for bad news communication, the research was broadened to include other professional sectors that could have a more recurrent

need for communicating harsh information. Under this new light, the healthcare sector stood out, as there is much more information on bad news communications in a medical environment, theoretical frameworks and models to aid physicians in the process, such as the ***SPIKES competence model*** and the ***NURSE framework***, which will be further developed in this research paper, and already put in place training modules in medical schools and hospitals. Regarding the latter, examples such as Rezayof et al. 's (2022) virtual training on bad news communication catered towards obstetrics and gynecology students and simulation (2021) are worth noting, as these initiatives display the practical learning environment in which healthcare workers and students are becoming increasingly more competent.

As healthcare professionals, physicians often must deliver personal information about negative health problems to both the patients and respective families. Because delivering bad news is a crucial and recurrent portion of a doctor's day-to-day activities, it is crucial for healthcare workers to develop empathetic communication skills, as they are usually the principal actors in the communication of crises such as the death of a family member, discovery of a grave condition, etc. The absence of direct training on bad news communication can gravely affect the confidence and professionalism that physicians present to their patients, thus recognizing the importance that formal education on communication skills can have on the improvement of the patient's satisfaction with their care (Rezayof et al. 2022).

Despite the lack of current soft skill training materials for crisis situations in the managerial context, there is still the need for managers to develop emotional intelligence and empathetic communication, as team leaders are often the ones to communicate both professional and personal news to their employees. Understanding this unmet need and more advanced research work catered to the medical sector, the training session developed in accordance to this research paper sought to take advantage of the existing theoretical frameworks developed for use in the hospital, applied to

the business environment, as it can be argued that the best practices in one sector can be easily transferred to the other. Afterall, work-related crises are taken personally by the employee as often as personal issues and there is still a grieving process that needs to be respected and handled with empathy and understanding.

2.4.2. Model for Learning: Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory

To ensure effectiveness from the training sessions developed, ***Kolb's Experiential Learning Model*** was adopted as the theoretical basis for the learning involved in the structure of the training exposure and exercises. This model focuses on the main premise that “*learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience*” (Kolb 1978) and the belief that effective learning occurs through ***experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting*** (Growth Engineering n.d.).

This framework therefore explores a **four-step process** (See Figure 2) that is correlated through the four effective learning requirements: **1) Concrete Experience (CE)**, **2) Reflective Observation (RO)**, **3) Abstract Conceptualization (AC)**, and **4) Active Experimentation (AE)**. These four steps are cyclic and meant to work as an integrated process, where each step acts as a foundation for the next. For a further explanation of each of the steps.

The model further breaks down the steps into two dimensions: *Grasping knowledge* (through Concrete Experience and Abstract Conceptualization) and *transforming experience into knowledge* (through Reflective Observation and Active Experimentation). Within transforming experience into knowledge, the Reflective Observation and the Active Experimental dimensions differ, as the first focuses on learning through mindful contemplation, contrasting with the **hands-on learning strategy** proposed by the latter.

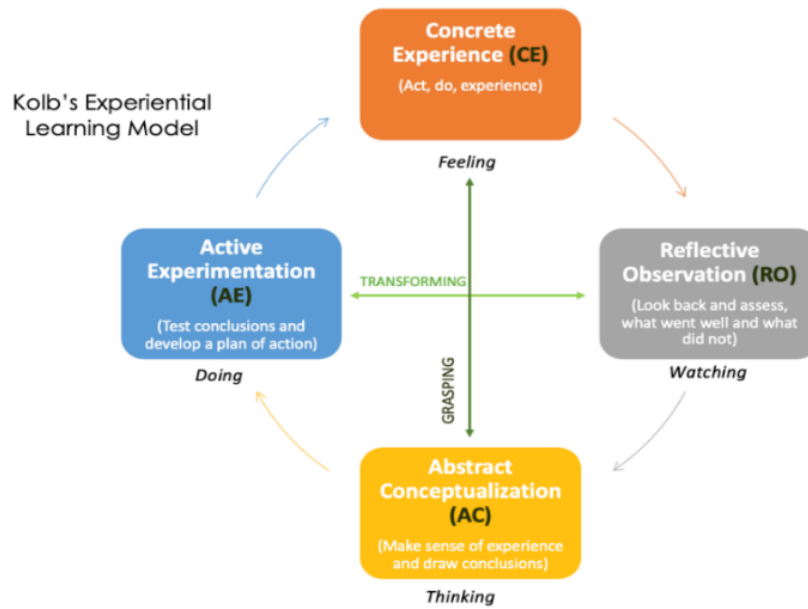


Figure 2 - Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (adapted from Kolb 1978)

Kolb further explains in the four-step process mentioned how people use observation and reflection to process what they are currently learning, followed by a decision-making process on the next steps in their learning as they take in the information observed. While acknowledging that different learners often have **different learning styles**, with some being more effective at retaining valuable information by actively participating in a practical assignment and others valuing a more abstract perspective of learning, the learning model proposed by Kolb allows for a well-integrated approach that is appropriate for an in-person training session. This model will be the basis for the workshop learning experience, with specific bad news delivery methods integrated.

2.4.3. Bad News Delivery Model: SPIKES Model

Following the Kolb learning model that will guide the general flow of the training workshop, the SPIKES Model will be used to address the specific objective of guiding the trainees through the delivering of bad news within an organizational crisis. The *SPIKES Competence Model* has been accepted by medical professionals as the standard guideline for breaking bad news (Tan, Pang and

Kang 2019) to patients and their families (Baile et al. 2000; Kaplan 2010). The acronym SPIKES stands for: *Setting, Perception, Invitation, Knowledge, Emotions, Strategy* and *Summary* (Baile et al. 2000), in which each consecutive stage builds upon the last in order to prepare, perform and conclude a difficult conversation in times of crisis.

Firstly, one must set up **(S)** and prepare for the conversation: since the subject of the dialogue tends to be serious, it is crucial that the medic chooses to share the bad news in a private setting. The receiver of the information should feel safe to express their emotions, process the news, and clarify whichever doubts they may have, thus needing a private location and empathetic communication. Because of the significance of the topics, a generous timeframe may be needed in order to elucidate the patient and allow for the natural grieving reaction to said information. Once the conversation is set to happen, it is crucial to delineate what is the perception **(P)** of the receiver. Depending on the patient's background, they may be decontextualized, and the physician should provide a discourse that covers the necessary context for the patient to feel confident to then process the bad news that is to be disclosed. The information offered must be personally tailored to the receiver, as the interpretation will differ depending on if this patient values a more analytical approach or emotional approach. After reflecting on the existing information, the physician should propose an invitation to discuss the issue at hand **(I)**. Depending on the subject's personality, some patients may value understanding the issue in its entirety; on the other hand, more reserved patients may prefer only knowing the bare minimum about their condition. The medic should take both options into consideration and first ask for consent on the sharing of deeper information.

Acknowledging the negative nature of the conversation **(K)** is advantageous for the receiver, as they become mentally prepared for the harsh information. From their point of view, it is a telling of the physician's empathetic behavior **(E)**, which is a crucial step in SPIKES competence model.

While one understands the challenges that come along with beholding the distressed patient, it is a fundamental part of processing the bad news communicated, as opposed to suppressing said emotion. Noticing the importance that empathy weighs as a soft skill for bad news communication (Garcia et al. 2023) and recognizing that, like other soft skills alike, empathy does not come natural to all healthcare professionals, needing training for it to become an instinctive reaction to grieving patients. Once the patient has relieved their emotions, the physician can carry on the conversation by summarizing what has been conversed and proposing a strategy for the next steps **(S)**. As the issue discussed may be complex, it is helpful to wrap up the conversation with a summary of what has been said, manage the patient's expectations, and plan for next steps.

While the SPIKES model was designed for usage in the healthcare sector, it provides a useful basis for the managerial context as well, as bad news in the workplace often is taken as personally by employees as much as personal issues (Slater and Taylor 2018). As problems in the workplace often affect the employees on a much deeper level, taking a toll on the worker's ego and self-esteem, it is crucial to consider an effective model when communicating harsh information (such as a layoff, demotion, negative performance review, etc.). This model is intuitive and simple for managers to learn, memorize and apply in their day-to-day communications. All considered, the SPIKES model was chosen as the base theoretical framework for the training sessions.

2.4.4. Bad News Delivery Model: NURSE Framework

As previously mentioned, the **empathetic positioning** of the manager is key when referring to the successful delivery of bad news. In addition, empathy as a soft skill can be trained and perfected with formal and informal education (Williams 2019), for example, with the NURSE framework. The NURSE framework, designed by Back, Arnold, and Tulskey (2009), was created for healthcare workers to assist in the empathetic communication of grave news to the patients. Like the SPIKES

model, the simplicity of this framework to the business environment justifies the transference of this mnemonic to the managerial context, thus including it as a theoretical basis in the design of the training. Moreover, adequately showing empathy to the employee has been shown to enforce the mutual trust in the relationship between both parties and positively influence the company's culture and brand reputation by showcasing reliability and accountability.

NURSE then stands for, firstly, *naming the emotion that the patient is feeling* (**N**) as the first step in responding empathetically to a hurt subject. With the feeling clearly defined, it is expected that the physician attempts to interpret and understand the message that the patient is conveying (**U**), both directly through their words and indirectly through their body language and facial expressions. To best reassure the patient (**R**) that their feelings are valid, the medical team is then expected to respect what the patient is going through, as well as supporting (**S**) them in whatever way they can. Finally, the physician is invited to *explore what the patient is feeling* (**E**), by asking questions and guiding them through the processing of the harsh emotions' consequent to the bad news.

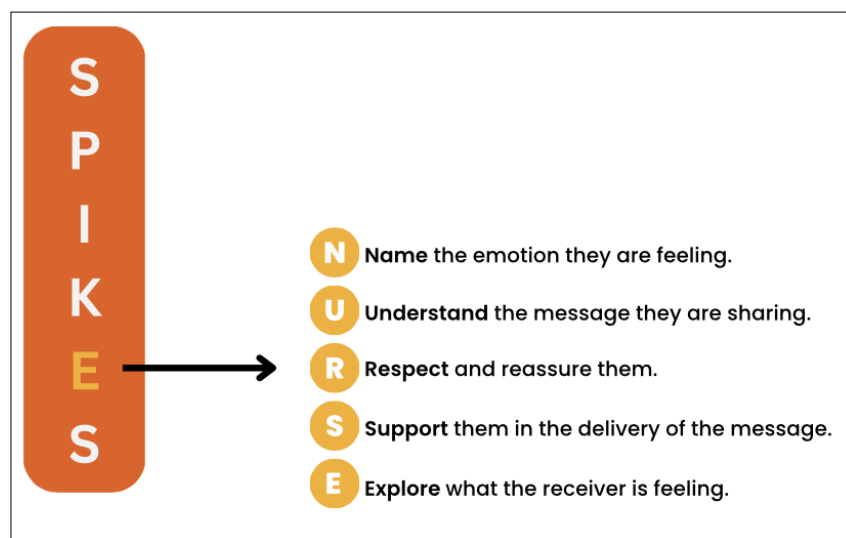


Figure 3 - SPIKES Model and NURSE Model Integrated (adapted from Kolb 1978 and Back, Arnold, and Tulsy 2009)

As part of the **(E)** within the SPIKES Model, standing for Emotions & Empathy, the NURSE model is a way for individuals to build upon their empathetic positioning to satisfy the **(E)** within the SPIKES Model (***Please refer to Figure 3***), therefore the NURSE model will be supplementary to the SPIKES Model for the purpose of these training sessions.

2.4.5. Training Assessment Model: Kirkpatrick's Four Levels of Evaluation

The Importance of Assessing Training Interventions

To better design, implement, and analyze the impact of the training intervention at hand, added research was conducted on training development and assessing its results. As stated by Kirkpatrick (1998), because investment in training is often not part of the core business of the company, unless the professionals responsible for said teaching prove the relevance and beneficial nature of their work – by showcasing the positive results of the interventions, they will be the first discarded when the company urges to become more cost effective. In other words, assessing the training's impact is crucial to determine whether the intervention was effective or not.

Moreover, evaluating the results of the training offers the necessary information required for deciding whether the program should endure and provides constructive feedback to improve on the training materials and methodology before new training sessions (Kirkpatrick 1998). To successfully extract this data from training, Kirkpatrick classified training evaluation into four levels, which are explained in a succinct fashion in table 1 below.

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Table 1 - Kirkpatrick's Four Levels of Evaluation (adapted from Kirkpatrick 1998)

Reaction	Reaction of the participants to the intervention. This evaluation category is compared to a <i>measure of customer satisfaction</i> (training as a service). If the reaction to the training is positive, the trainees retain better the information stated during the training session, will recommend the training to prospect participants and ensure the longevity and continuity of the training module. Evaluating reactions allows participants to offer comments or suggestions as constructive feedback for future sessions.
Learnings	How participants have improved their knowledge, increased a specific skill, or changed their attitudes. Analyzing the learnings is crucial to understand if the exchange of information was effective. To better cater the learning experience to the training's conditions, the trainers must establish clear objectives to then test the effectiveness of the learning strategies implemented.
Behavior	How participants have changed their behavior posterior to the training. Behavior change is a more complex goal to attain as it requires (1) the desire and motivation to change, (2) the knowledge on how and what to change, (3) the right conditions and climate, and (4) to have a positive reinforcement upon the behavioral change. A trainer can only influence (1) and (2), which may complicate the measurement of this learning level.
Results	The impacts and targets that are attained because of the training intervention. Measured through specific objectives and KPIs that are related to the core business of the company and performance based.

3.2. Results

The following section will explore the findings from the three training sessions in which were produced from the Pre- and Post-Training Feedback Surveys. These findings will first begin by observing the characteristics of the trainees/participants who attended the sessions, then by using *Kirkpatrick's Four Levels of Evaluation*, the results will be broken down into: Reaction Assessment Results and Learning Assessment Results (Knowledge and Attitudes). A statistical analysis will then be performed based on the findings, in which a Friedman Test was then conducted to determine the efficacy of the overall training program.

3.2.3. Participant Characteristics

Over the course of three in-person training sessions, **twenty participants (trainees)** attended the workshops, all of them being Nova School of Business and Economics master's students. With ages ranging from **21 to 29**, the average age was 23.55. 35% of the participants identified as male, 60% female and one participant preferred not to disclose this information. **Most of the participants were Portuguese**, totaling 13 trainees, while 7 were of other nationalities. Regarding the participants' field of study, **70% were enrolled in the master's in management program**, while three were students of the master's in economics, one in the master's in finance and one studying business analytics (*please refer to appendix F for more information*).

3.2.4. Reaction Assessment Results

To assess the feedback of the participants regarding the training sessions, the trainees completed a Feedback Section within the first Post-Training Survey (immediately after the training session) where their opinions were classified on a **Likert scale from 1 to 5** (1 being '*Not Satisfied*' to 5 being '*Very Satisfied*'). The opinions presented were relatively positive, with most of the

respondents considering the training useful for their current and future professional lives, with **12 out of the 20** trainees selecting ‘5’ on the Likert scale for the question “*How useful do you think the training session will be for your future career?*”, with **7** of the participants selecting a ‘4,’ and **1** participant selecting a ‘3’ (*Please refer to Figure 6*).

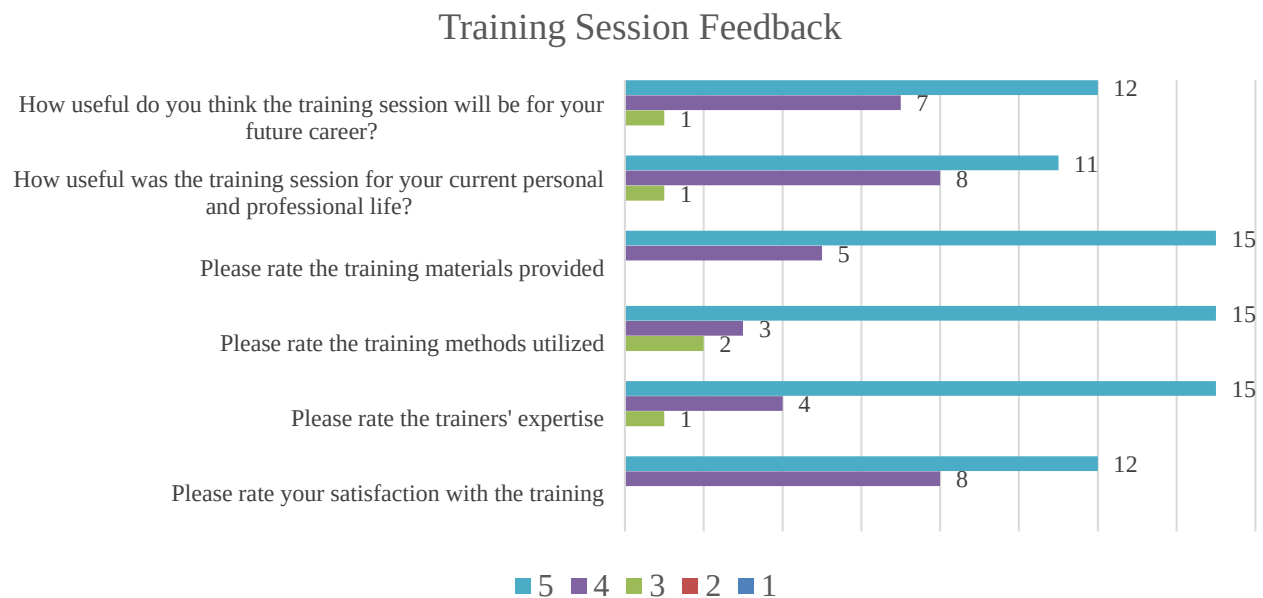


Figure 6 4 - Post-Training Feedback Results for Reaction Assessment (own presentation)

In addition, the trainees showed contentment with the training materials provided during the sessions, the training methods utilized, and the trainers’ (instructors) expertise, with **15 of the 20 trainees** selecting a ‘5’ on the Likert scale in response to these questions, as visually described in **Figure 6**.

The average ranks for each of the prompted questions (*summarized in table 3*) were all equal or surpassed the 4.5 score on the Likert scale, thus inferring that the trainees were satisfied with the training session.

Table 2 - Reaction Assessment Mean Scores

Question	Mean Score
Please rate your satisfaction with the training.	4.6
Please rate the trainers' expertise.	4.7
Please rate the training methods utilized.	4.6
Please rate the training materials provided.	4.7
How useful was the training session for your current personal and professional life?	4.5
How useful do you think the training session will be for your future career?	4.5

3.2.5. Learning Assessment Results

Knowledge

To assess the knowledge retention of the participants, three identical surveys were offered at three specific points in time: immediately *before* the session (designated as pre-session), immediately *after* the training, and *two weeks later*. In the diagnostic assessment, the participants scored, on average, a grade of 87%, demonstrating that they were already somewhat familiar with the topic and aware of the impact that empathetic communication can have on a recipient in a situation of organizational crisis. It was positive to note that the participants already had a good grasp of the topics that would be addressed in the training. Under this same theme, all respondents correctly answered questions 2, 3, 6, and 7, as shown in table 4. It is inferred that this all-around positive result may be due to the nature of the four questions mentioned, as they referred to general statements and best practices on bad news delivery that all participants should have experienced during their academic and personal lives. On the other side of the spectrum, stood questions 9 and 13, where only 50% and 75% of the participants, respectively, were able to correctly answer: this is due to the theoretical nature of question 13, that most students may not learn the frameworks presented in the training session, and to the cultural norms that diverge from region to region, where countries like Germany tend to be more direct when offering negative information, whereas Southern-European often have a more passive approach (Hofstede 2002).

Table 3 - Questions with the most and least correct answers on the pre-session survey

Questions with 100% success rate		Questions with the least correct responses	
2	Empathy can lead to effective leadership.	9	The best way to deliver bad news is just to do it straight to the point.
3	Empathetic Leaders can generate more productivity in their teams.	13	The SPIKES model does NOT consider the next steps after the conversation.
6	Ideally you should give bad news in a public place, with a lot of bystanders.		
7	If you need to give bad news to an employee, email is preferable.		

Nevertheless, there was a notable evolution from the first diagnostic assessment to the survey done immediately after the end of the training, with the average grade now rounding up to 93%. While it is satisfactory to notice the improvement between the two surveys, the discrepancy in the average grade is small, arguably because the students, most of them being from a managerial field of studies, might have had previous academic courses on soft skills and understand the need for empathetic communication. Deep diving into this survey's results, one notices that all participants correctly answered eight questions, doubling this number from the pre-session questionnaire. Questions 9 and 13, which were the most difficult for our participants before the training session, suffered a very positive evolution, with five and two more participants correctly answering the respective questions (*Please refer to table 5*). Even so, question 9 was still the most challenging, followed by question 8, which had a slightly positive evolution with the training but there were still four wrong answers to the latter.

Table 5 4 - Questions with most and least correct responses on the post-session survey

Questions with 100% success rate		Questions with the least correct responses	
1	SPIKES is the acronym for a model of giving bad news.	8	There is a right and wrong way to speak to people that is universal.
2	Empathy can lead to effective leadership.	9	The best way to deliver bad news is just to do it straight to the point.
3	Empathetic Leaders can generate more productivity in their teams.		

- 4 Workers avoid delivering bad news because they fear personal consequences on their job.
 - 5 A crisis is an unpredictable, disruptive, human driven or natural cause event.
 - 6 Ideally you should give bad news in a public place, with a lot of bystanders.
 - 7 If you need to give bad news to an employee, email is preferable.
 - 11 The news you are giving is the important thing, not the way you give the news.
-

Finally, the average grade two weeks after the training session was also 93%, which leads one to believe that the participants effectively retained the knowledge acquired in the training session. By analyzing the questions one by one, it is possible to denote that all participants responded correctly to the same questions as they did immediately after the training session, which leads one to believe that the retention of knowledge has been effective for many participants (*Please refer to table 6*). From a more negative perspective, questions 9 and 13 once again were the ones with the least correct answers, with lower results than immediately after the intervention. With all this information in mind, the retention of the acquired knowledge becomes ambiguous.

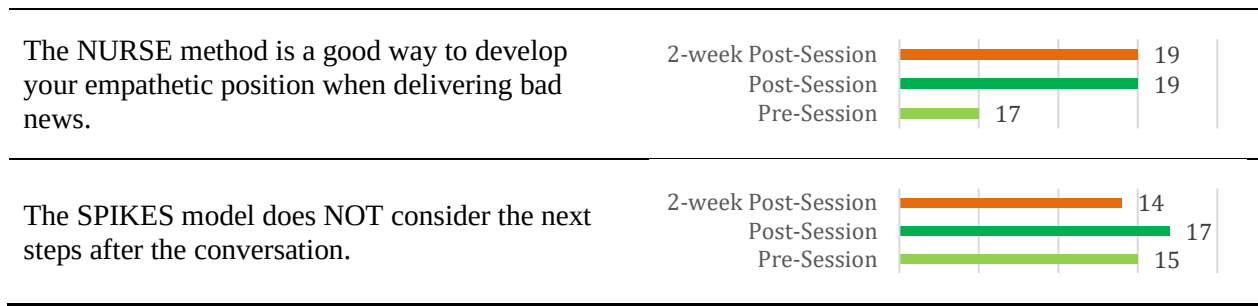
Table 6 5 - Most and least correct answers on the 2-week post-session survey

Questions with 100% success rate		Questions with the least correct responses	
1	SPIKES is the acronym for a model of giving bad news.	9	The best way to deliver bad news is just to do it straight to the point.
2	Empathy can lead to effective leadership.	13	The SPIKES model does NOT consider the next steps after the conversation.
3	Empathetic Leaders can generate more productivity in their teams.		
4	Workers avoid delivering bad news because they fear personal consequences on their job.		
5	A crisis is an unpredictable, disruptive, human driven or natural cause event.		
6	Ideally you should give bad news in a public place, with a lot of bystanders.		
7	If you need to give bad news to an employee, email is preferable.		
11	The news you are giving is the important thing, not the way you give the news.		

The progression of the participants' answers can be visualized in **Table 7** below.

Table 6 7 - Evolution of Pre- and Post-Training Surveys

Questions	Evolution of correct responses		
SPIKES is the acronym for a model of giving bad news.	2-week Post-Session		20
	Post-Session		20
	Pre-Session		17
Empathy can lead to effective leadership.	2-week Post-Session		20
	Post-Session		20
	Pre-Session		20
Empathetic Leaders can generate more productivity in their teams.	2-week Post-Session		20
	Post-Session		20
	Pre-Session		20
Workers avoid delivering bad news because they fear personal consequences on their job.	2-week Post-Session		20
	Post-Session		20
	Pre-Session		19
A crisis is an unpredictable, disruptive, human driven or natural cause event.	2-week Post-Session		19
	Post-Session		18
	Pre-Session		18
Ideally you should give bad news in a public place, with a lot of bystanders.	2-week Post-Session		20
	Post-Session		20
	Pre-Session		20
If you need to give bad news to an employee, email is preferable.	2-week Post-Session		20
	Post-Session		20
	Pre-Session		20
There is a right and wrong way to speak to people that is universal.	2-week Post-Session		16
	Post-Session		16
	Pre-Session		15
The best way to deliver bad news is just to do it straight to the point.	2-week Post-Session		14
	Post-Session		15
	Pre-Session		10
Bad news at work is business, and business is never taken personally.	2-week Post-Session		19
	Post-Session		18
	Pre-Session		17
The news you are giving is the important thing, not the way you give the news.	2-week Post-Session		20
	Post-Session		20
	Pre-Session		19



To assess whether the evolution of correct answers was significant over the course of the three assessment periods, a Friedman test was performed, as the sample distribution could not be considered normally distributed, but the test is suitable for assessing the same group of participants over different points in time.

Assuming a significance level of 0.05, the Friedman test resulted in a critical value of 13.12, when computed with two degrees of freedom. By comparing the chi-square value attained from the test (0.0014) with the significance level chosen, it is possible to conclude that the null hypothesis (there was no evolution in knowledge retention after the intervention) is rejected.

The results from said Friedman test are summarized in **Table 8** below.

Table 8 7 - Friedman test results regarding knowledge retention

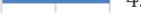
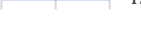
Friedman									
	<i>SR</i>	<i>SSR</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>F(t)</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>Chi-square</i>
Pre	17.5	306.25	23	3	2	2198.5	13.11538462	5.991464547	0.001419157
Post	30	900							
2week	31.5	992.25							

Attitudes

To assess the attitudes towards bad news communication, the process was like knowledge assessment: the participants were surveyed before the training session, immediately after, and two weeks later. The questionnaire included different statements on the trainees' possible attitudes when communicating during an organizational crisis and prompted the participants to classify their

stance on each statement by using Likert scales. The average responses to each question, in the three assessing moments, are presented below, on **Table 9**.

Table 98 - Mean responses regarding attitude change (Pre, post, and 2-week post-session)

Questions	Evolution of Attitude Responses			
Rate the importance of empathy as a characteristic in managers.	2-week Post Session		4.7	
	Post-Session		4.65	
	Pre-Session		4.6	
Rate the importance for managers to have references on how to deliver bad news.	2-week Post Session		4.65	
	Post-Session		4.6	
	Pre-Session		4.55	
When I am a leader and I need to deliver bad news, I am likely to use the SPIKES model.	2-week Post Session		4.5	
	Post-Session		4.5	
	Pre-Session		3.85	
When I am a leader in a team and I need to deliver bad news, I will prepare the conversation beforehand.	2-week Post Session		4.75	
	Post-Session		4.75	
	Pre-Session		4.6	
When I am a leader in a team and I need to deliver bad news, I will adapt the conversation to the employee.	2-week Post Session		4.45	
	Post-Session		4.55	
	Pre-Session		4.4	
When promoting an empathetic discourse, I am likely to offer any help I can give.	2-week Post Session		4.7	
	Post-Session		4.6	
	Pre-Session		4.45	
Rate the importance of the interpretation of the message when communicating bad news.	2-week Post Session		4.35	
	Post-Session		4.35	
	Pre-Session		4.3	
Rate the importance of allocating a generous time slot for bad news communication.	2-week Post Session		4.3	
	Post-Session		4.2	
	Pre-Session		3.8	
When I am a leader in a team and I need to deliver bad news, I am likely to do it personally rather than through an intermediary medium.	2-week Post Session		4.6	
	Post-Session		4.5	
	Pre-Session		4.3	

When I am a leader in a team and I need to deliver bad news, I am likely to offer clarifications, no matter if the employee wants to know the full content or not.



Before the training session, the results were already relatively high on the Likert scale, with most enquiries averaging around rank 4. Participants were the most skeptical or uninformed about the usage of the SPIKES model in bad news delivery and the importance of allotting a generous timeslot for bad news delivery. Immediately after the intervention, the results increased slightly, with more participants rating higher marks regarding the importance of putting the SPIKES model into practice when delivering bad news. A fortnight later, the participants repeated the questionnaire, allowing the results to reflect the knowledge retention that had already occurred. The results were, as predicted, very high, with all the questions prompted ranking an average between 4.3 and 4.75. This allows one to suppose that the participants became more aware and conscious of the need for proper constructive communication when delivering bad news.

To assess whether the previous assumptions were accurate and whether the evolution of the means was significant between the three assessment periods, a Friedman test was performed, since the sample size is not proven to be normal and thus prevents an ANOVA test from being correctly computed. Interpreting the results attained, with two degrees of freedom and a significance level of 0.05, the outcome of the Friedman test resulted in a critical value of 16.25. The corresponding chi-square value (0.000296), when compared with the chosen significance level, is abruptly smaller, thus allowing one to infer that the positive evolution in the attitude assessment is statistically significant and thus that the participants positively increased their emotional positioning towards bad news communication.

The results from said Friedman test are summarized in **Table 10** below.

Table 10 9 - Friedman test results regarding attitude change

Friedman Test									
	<i>SR</i>	<i>SSR</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>F(t)</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>Chi-square</i>
Pre	10	100	10	3	2	1362.5	16.25	5.991464547	0.000296045
Post	22.5	506.25							
2week	27.5	756.25							

3.2.6. Reflection from the performed analysis

Reflecting on the data analyzed about the training intervention, the first positive conclusion is that the participants, although already knowledgeable about the topic, absorbed new information about the theoretical basis for bad news communication. Moreover, the attitude change was also statistically significant, thus allowing one to state that Kirkpatrick's second level of evaluation was accurately examined and fruitful. The feedback received about the training sessions was considered positive, suggesting that the training session may be replicable in the future. From another perspective, it is evident that there were still some time limitations in the data extraction period of this study, thus continuing this study for a longer period will likely lead to a more accurate evolution of the knowledge retention from the training intervention.

Overall, based on the statistical testing computed, the training module produced positive results among trainees and could be considered effective based on the statistical analysis and positive feedback from trainees.

4. Discussion

In guiding the discussion of this research paper, *five key topics* will be addressed, including: the effectiveness of the developed training program, relevancy of the training program, the

implications for the management practice, and finally, the limitations and recommendations for future research.

Effectiveness of The Developed Training Program

The effectiveness of the training program was a critical component taken into consideration at all stages within the development of this research paper. To design an effective training, the trainers considered Kolb's four stages of learning through the entirety of the designing process, so that participants could effectively assimilate and consolidate the learnings presented about communication skills in an organizational crisis. The training's effectiveness is proven by the notable discrepancy between the results from the pre-session survey to the post-session surveys: regarding the theoretical knowledge section, all questions enquired had a better correct response rate after the training than in the diagnostic survey; regarding attitude change, the analysis also showed a more conscientious attitude towards bad news delivery, with more participants understanding the importance of having an empathetic positioning when communicating in a time of crisis. Besides the data proving the intervention's effectiveness, using a well-regarded model for structuring this learning opportunity as Kolb's played an important role in guaranteeing that the knowledge retention would be successful. Finally, it can be inferred that, since the training was held in a comfortable setting for our participants – the school's campus – and there was an active effort to break the ice between the trainees, this effort pushed the trainees to be engaged and improve their skills in delivering bad news in an easy-going and relaxed environment.

Relevancy of The Training Program

After having proven the efficiency of the interventions conducted and understanding the progressive spotlight that soft skills have been getting over the past years, it is safe to say that the

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training program was of extreme relevancy for the participants' current and future professional endeavours. With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the business world was alerted about the need to learn how to act in an organizational crisis: difficult situations such as layoffs, industry shutdowns, or personal matters force managers to be responsible to be the motor of change in situations of discomfort as the ones presented. Because of this added challenge to the managerial profession, soft skills have become the biggest differentiator in job candidates, as hard skills have become an equalizer, with the democratization of higher education.

Although the business world recognises the importance of soft skills as key components in a manager's arsenal, a management study track is still designed around hard skills and theoretical knowledge (and many seasoned managers did not have formal education), thus trainings like the one implemented are crucial for management students and managers alike to expand their transferable skills, ensuring that the managerial workforce is capable and feels confident when tackling bad news delivery in a crisis situation. Taking all of this into account and considering the impacts that a crisis can have on an organization – such as damaging the employer's branding or the relationships of trust between managers and employees -, it is safe to conclude that the training program designed poses as a relevant and useful tool for the managerial workforce and it is recommended that management students take the initiative to embark on extra-curricular trainings as to expand their communication skills and other soft skills that will be relevant to their future profession.

The Implications for the Management Practice

Within the review of various literature sources, a common theme was that the current research directed towards crisis communication and more specifically, the delivery of bad news, within the

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organizational context is limited. Rather, most research and models have been conducted within the healthcare sector, suggesting the need for more concrete research which can assist managers in carrying out difficult conversations. This training program was designed specifically for managers, or soon-to-be-managers to equip themselves with the knowledge and awareness of using adequate communication within the delivery of bad news in an organization setting. By incorporating real-life scenarios and case studies into the training program, as in the 'Roleplay' unit, this training program would help prepare managers to navigate complexities that exist within crisis communication and the delivering of bad news. The training program focused on the face-to-face interaction between manager and employee, and the ability to show compassion and empathy during the delivery of the news, which considered non-verbal communication such as body language and facial expressions. From this training, managers would be exposed to an approach which would allow them to help their employees (the recipient) cope with the news more effectively and to help cultivate a more supportive work environment.

This training program overall addresses a gap within the current managerial education, where hard skills and theoretical knowledge have often been emphasized in the past. Though as soft skills have increasingly gained recognition for their impact within the workplace, there is a growing need for programs in which can allow managers to exercise and enhance crucial soft skills in which they likely did not receive through their past formal education. Therefore, this training program provides an opportunity for managers and management students alike to expand their transferable or more 'human' skills, ensuring they are well-equipped to handle crisis situations and the delivery of bad news.

Limitations

Although the training was successful in achieving its main objectives of awareness about the importance of an empathetic positioning when delivering bad news, there are limitations to this study. Firstly, the sample of participants were master students, as opposed to older professionals. One can then infer that there may be different results when working with more experienced trainees. On the same line of thinking, all the trainees were studying at Nova SBE, which might justify the similar answers and pre-test answers already being very positive. Besides this, the sample of twenty participants, although divided by three training sessions, is small, thus the results may be skewed positively, when compared to a hypothetical larger sample. Ideally, this tool would be implemented both on a larger scale and over a longer time frame, but because the training was free and dependent on voluntary participants, the adherence was small. In, it is normal to expect that the people who volunteer for a training session on communication are often those who are already aware of the importance of transferable skills in the workplace. Finally, the training module not being tested in an online setting may be a limitation against the utility of the materials for the future. Although importance was given to testing the session virtually, there were scheduling conflicts with the online trainees that prevented an online training during the research period.

Recommendations for Future Research

Considering both the positive results acquired during this study and the limitations that this research was submitted to, it would be recommended to attempt the training program in an online setting. Since all three pilot sessions were conducted in-person, the transferability of the training exercises to a virtual setting was not tested, but it may be widely beneficial for this intervention to reach a larger number of interested trainees. Besides that, since all participants were exposed to the same

roleplaying scenarios, it is recommended to expose future trainees to diverse prompts, to understand the implications that may derive from other realistic scenarios in knowledge retention. Finally, this training program should be offered to demographically different pools of participants, namely experienced managers, as to understand in a posterior timeframe, whether the training is as helpful to older generations and seasoned professionals, as it is for management students.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper presented a training program in which was designed to help develop managers' communication skills for better outcomes in the delivering of bad news within crisis situations. The statistical analysis in which was performed, based on trainees' responses, reflected that this training program, which was based on Kolb's Experiential Learning Model, and the frameworks in which were taught, such as The SPIKES and NURSE Model, were in fact of benefit to developing the trainees' theoretical knowledge and attitudes towards bad news delivery. As the current literature surrounding bad news delivery and crisis communication often occurs within the healthcare setting, this paper can contribute to the growing need for more managerial-focused research. The relevancy of this work is extremely relevant considering the increasing importance for soft skill development, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic emphasizing the need for managers to be equipped with more effective skills regarding bad news delivery. The implications for the management practice can again be seen by soft skills training becoming more relevant, to address the limitations of a traditional management education in which often has prioritized hard skills over soft skills. However, it is important to acknowledge that limitations in which impacted this study, such as the small sample size of management master's students, in which training sessions were done in an in-person setting. Future research should focus on replicating the trainings

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within a larger sample, with actual professional managers, and with an online option available.

Overall, the training program presented has offered a relevant and useful tool to be explored further, in which managers are given an opportunity to enhance their skills in bad news delivery.

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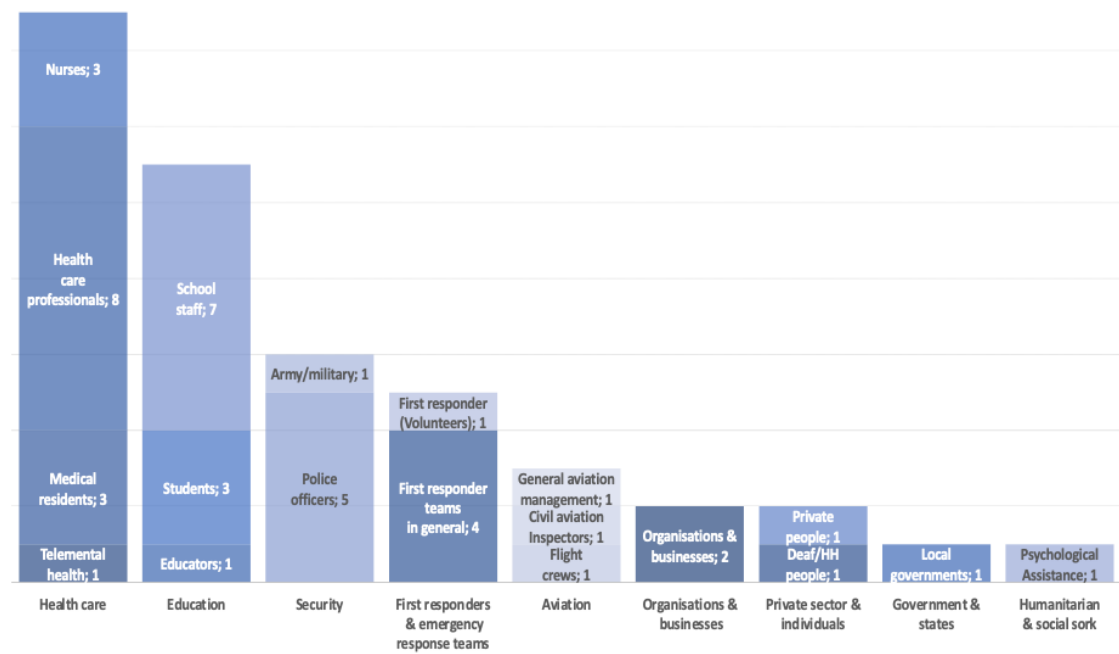
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Appendix

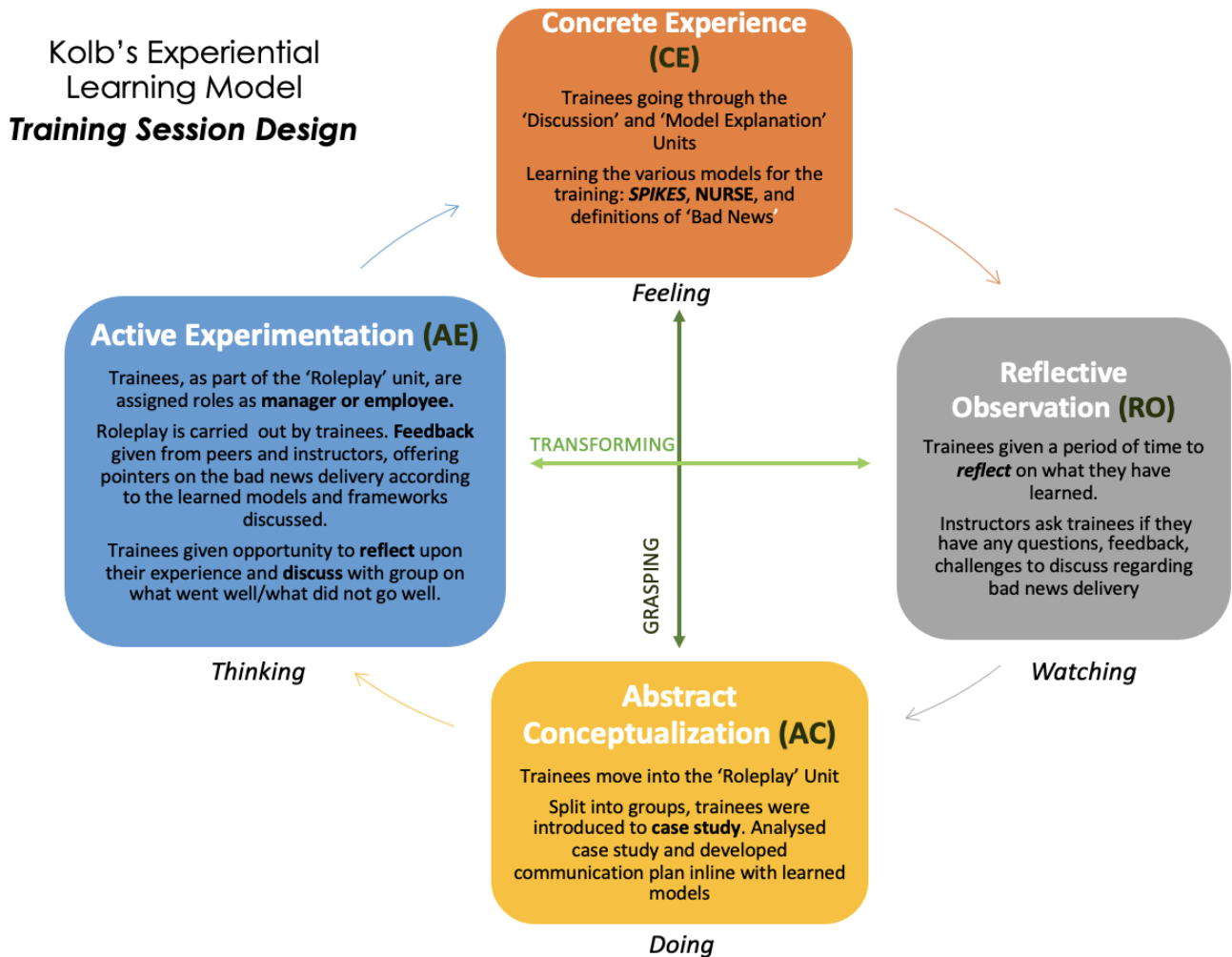
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Appendix A: Frequency Analysis of Industry with Most Crisis Communication Literature



Source: Lehmann and Dollmann (2022)

Appendix B: Kolb's Experiential Model with Own Training Design (enlarged and adapted from Kolb 1978)



Appendix C: Training Workshop Factsheet Handout

DELIVERING BAD NEWS

The definition of a crisis, what is empathy, and the SPIKES Model

Training Workshop Handout

What is Empathy?

The ability to perceive and relate to the thoughts, feelings, or experience of others

What is a crisis?

"A sudden and unexpected event leading to major unrest amongst the individuals at the workplace".

Characteristics of a Crisis :

- Unpredictable
- Disruptive
- Human-driven or natural causes

The SPIKES Model



DELIVERING BAD NEWS

Using the NURSE Model

Training Workshop Handout

Training your Empathetic Positioning



- N** **Name** the emotion they are feeling.
- U** **Understand** the message they are sharing.
- R** **Respect** and reassure them.
- S** **Support** them in the delivery of the message.
- E** **Explore** what the receiver is feeling.



DELIVERING BAD NEWS

The importance of empathy, effective communication, and training models within the modern workplace

Training Workshop Handout

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

In a post-covid era, bad news has become a recurring theme since 2020, where small and large organizations worldwide have had to deliver bad news - from performance related feedback to company-wide layoffs.

Now, more than ever, it is apparent that a well-founded model is needed to assist managers in the delivering of bad news.



WHAT DO WE KNOW NOW?



Though a lot more research is needed, what we know now is that ineffective managers are costly. Empathy however, has a way to positively impact performance, and the literature suggests that empathetic leadership can lead to effectiveness.

It can be hypothesized that through proper training on delivering bad news, empathy can be developed in managers and communication of bad news more effective.

WHAT IS NEEDED?

A standardized model in how to train managers (in all industries) on how to deliver bad news in crisis situations.

Currently, most models are used exclusively within the Healthcare sector.



WHAT ARE WE DOING?

We have gone through the literature and concluded that the SPIKES model (commonly used within the Healthcare sector) is one that should be applied within a more traditional organisational setting in times of crisis and the sharing of bad news. We are using this model, and adapting it to fit into a training program for managers. From the SPIKES Model the 'E' (Emotions & Empathy) will be emphasised by following the NURSE Model.





Having Difficult Conversations

Creating more effective managers in the delivery of bad news for crisis situations

Training Session 2023



Meet the Training Team!



Professor Helena Martins
Human Resources Department



Megan Wallz
Master of Management Student



Beatriz Frasco
Master of Management Student

The Schedule for Today's Training Session



Warmup! (20 minutes)



Discussion (20 minutes)



Model Explanation (15-20 minutes)



Roleplay (45 minutes)



Wrap up! (40 minutes)



Warm up!

LET'S WARM UP!



Discussion!

Can you think of a time that you had to deliver bad news? What was the outcome?



Discussion!

What exactly is considered "bad news"?



Discussion!

"Any news that drastically and negatively alters the patient's view of his or her future"



In this case, the employee!



Discussion!

General Tips for Delivering Bad News

Focus on the **timing** of the news (*Avoid delay*)

Consider **how** the delivering should take place (*Face-to-face, virtual, etc.*)

Understand that you are a **signal sender** (*Body language, face management*)

Ensure enough **information and explanation** is provided (*Length, clarity, solution?*)

Focus on telling the truth and disclosing as much information as possible (*Trust building!*)

Source: *The Delivery of Bad News: A Multiphase Model* by Bies (2013)



Discussion!

Now, let's explore the main models!



Model Explanation

The Key Communication Model

To help structure the sharing of bad news in times of crisis



SPIKES Model



NURSE Model



Model Explanation

SPIKES Model



Developed by Buckman, commonly used in the medical profession



Model Explanation

S Set-Up & Prepare

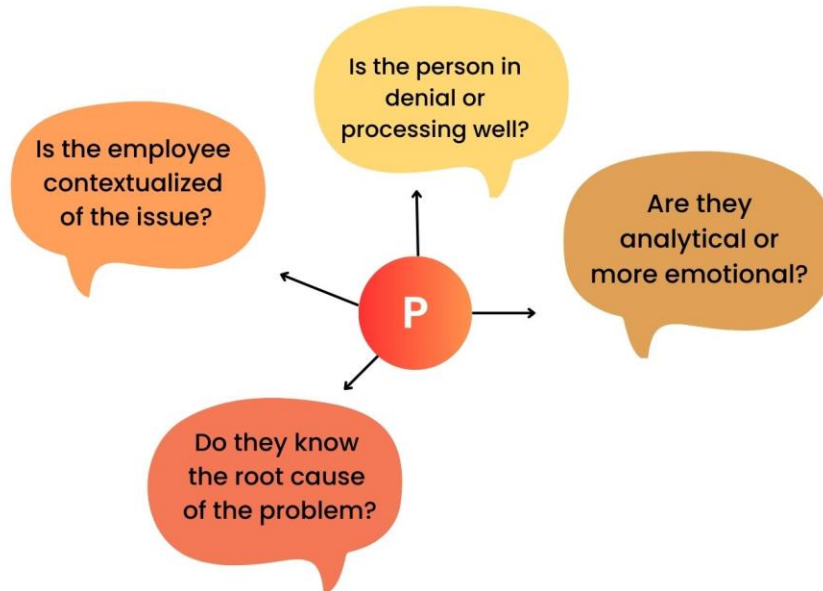


- 1 Where is the conversation happening?**
It tends to be easier to receive bad news in an in-person setting, rather than over the phone. The setting should be private to allow for the receiver to process the information.
- 2 Who is delivering the bad news?**
The sender should be someone who has emotional intelligence and can empathise with the situation.
- 3 How long should the conversation be?**
When receiving bad news, the information may be very difficult to process. Allotting enough time for questions shows compassion and helps digest the difficult part.
- 4 What is the content and tone?**
Prepare what you must say, so that both the content is truthful as well as the tone is correct for the situation.



Model Explanation

Perception of the receiver



Model Explanation

Invitation to discuss

Does the employee want to know more?

Should you offer detailed feedback?

Be open and offer clarifications on what the other party wants.

I

Knowledge

K

- 1** Let the employee know that you are about to tell them bad news.
➡ This will help them prepare to digest the hard information.
- 2** Put yourself in the other's shoes.
➡ Understand what they are going through.
➡ Try to present positive aspects or next steps to look forward to.



Model Explanation

Emotions and Empathy

- 1** Responding to someone emotionally is a difficult task.
 - ➔ Train your empathetic positioning.
- 2** Allow the receiver to react negatively and express their emotions.
 - ➔ This will validate their reaction.
 - ➔ Once the emotions are released, you can carry on.

But how can you **train your empathy**?

The **NURSE** framework is helpful!

E



Model Explanation

Emotions and Empathy

E

- N** Name the emotion they are feeling.
- U** Understand the message they are sharing.
- R** Respect and reassure them.
- S** Support them in the delivery of the message.
- E** Explore what the receiver is feeling.



Summary & Strategy

What happened?

Because you offered a lot of information that is difficult to process, it is useful to summarize everything at the end.

What comes next?

Manage their future expectations and trace next steps for them to take.

How can you help?

Offer any help that you are willing to and capable to give.



Now... back to the
NURSE Model!



Model Explanation

NURSE Model

N

N

Name or mirror the emotion they are feeling.

- **Identify the underlying emotion in a suggestive manner**

"You seem to be upset"

"It appears that you may be frustrated"

*"It seems that you may be confused and are
needing more information"*

- N** Name the emotion they are feeling.
- U** Understand the message they are sharing.
- R** Respect and reassure them.
- S** Support them in the delivery of the message.
- E** Explore what the receiver is feeling.



Model Explanation

NURSE Model

U

U

Understand the message they are sharing.

- **Confirm that you understand what the recipient is feeling by discussing their experience, listening actively (not interrupting), allowing for silence. Avoid "I know how you are feeling"**

"I understand that this situation is very difficult"

*"I understand that this is a very stressful
situation/event"*

- N** Name the emotion they are feeling.
- U** Understand the message they are sharing.
- R** Respect and reassure them.
- S** Support them in the delivery of the message.
- E** Explore what the receiver is feeling.



Model Explanation

NURSE Model



Respect and reassure them.

- Give verbal and non-verbal confirmation that their feelings are important.
- Match response to emotion (strong emotion = strong respect and acknowledgement)
- Accept perspective (no judgement). Remember: acceptance of their view is not the same as agreement

N

Name the emotion they are feeling.

U

Understand the message they are sharing.

R

Respect and reassure them.

S

Support them in the delivery of the message.

E

Explore what the receiver is feeling.



Model Explanation

NURSE Model



Support the receiver

- Offer sources of support and any resources they may need, provide opportunities to participate in decision-making, validate efforts to cope
- State your availability for them, preferably in a way that demonstrates a partnership (if appropriate).

"Moving forward, we can..."

"To make this transition easier, we will provide..."

"I am available to discuss...."

N

Name the emotion they are feeling.

U

Understand the message they are sharing.

R

Respect and reassure them.

S

Support them in the delivery of the message.

E

Explore what the receiver is feeling.



Model Explanation

NURSE Model



Explore what the receiver is feeling.

- Ask targeted questions regarding what the receiver has said, and show explicit interest in their emotions

"You mentioned that....., is this right?"

"Regarding your concern of....."

"Tell me more about....."

N

Name the emotion they are feeling.

U

Understand the message they are sharing.

R

Respect and reassure them.

S

Support them in the delivery of the message.

E

Explore what the receiver is feeling.



Model Explanation



**Another important reminder....having
compassion with yourself!**



Model Explanation

How you can have compassion with yourself



BEFORE: Ask yourself these questions!

- Am I the **right person** to give this news?
- Am I **emotionally prepared** to give this news?
- Will I take this news on as **my own**?
- Is there ways I can **better prepare** myself or resources needed to give this news?



Model Explanation

How you can have compassion with yourself



AFTER: Ask yourself these questions!

- How do I feel **after** this conversation?
- If the conversation did not go as hoped, is there anything **I need**?
- Is there anyone I can speak to for **support**?



Roleplay

Roleplay

Role 1: You are a manager of a high-performing sales team. However, one person (who was previously a high performer) on your team has been consistently falling behind and not hitting their sales targets. You know that they are currently having issues within their personal life, however, their underperformance is impacting the morale of the whole team and your boss wants you to address the situation.

Though you know they are trying to improve their performance, you are responsible for relaying the news that they are still underperforming.



Roleplay

Roleplay

Role 2: You are an employee that belongs to a high-performing sales team. In the past, you were a top performer, often surpassing your sales targets.

Over the last few months, due to various personal issues, your performance has suffered. Though your manager and team has shown their support, you feel frustrated and upset that you continue to struggle to meet your targets.





Roleplay

Remember to follow the NURSE Model (while keeping the SPIKES Model in mind!) to guide your response!

N

Name the emotion they are feeling.

U

Understand the message they are sharing.

R

Respect and reassure them.

S

Support them in the delivery of the message.

E

Explore what the receiver is feeling.



Wrap up

REFLECTION & WRAP-UP!



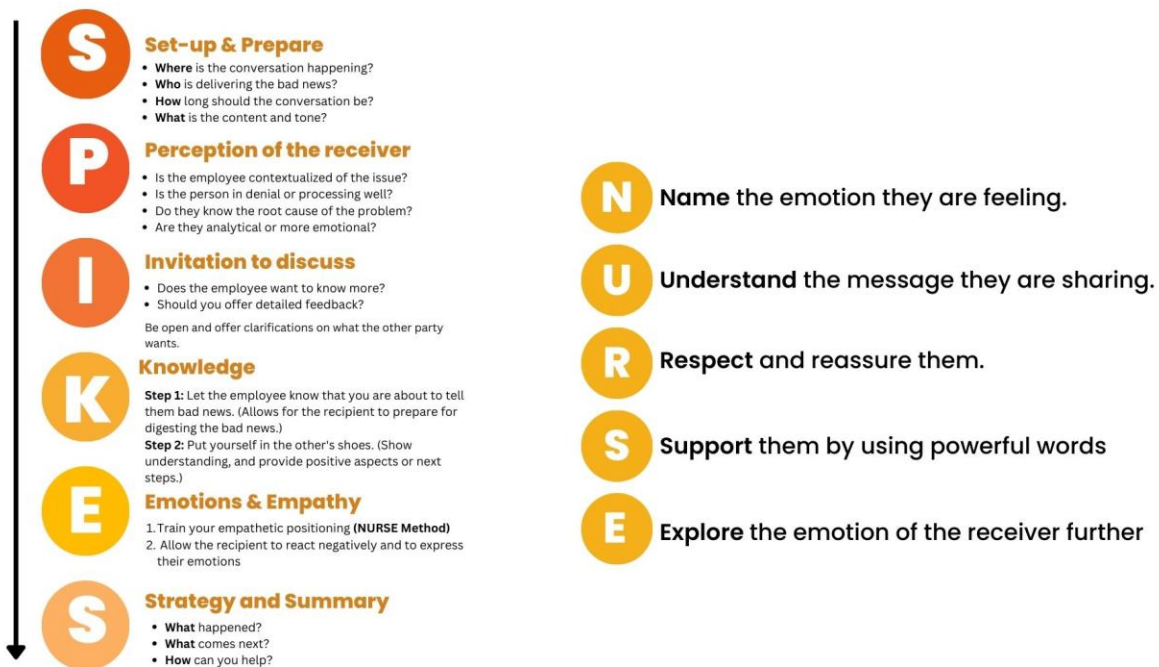
Wrap up

What were the difficulties you experienced?



Wrap up

What went well? Did you see benefits in using the model to facilitate the bad news delivery?



The Primary Objectives of This Training Session!





**Thank you for
your attention!**

Any questions?

Appendix E: Pre and Post Session Training Feedback Surveys

DELIVERING BAD NEWS



We thank you for your participation in today's training session! Please complete the following survey

The session I attended (dd/mm/yy) : ____/____/____

Start time of session: _____

Pre or Post-Training Session (Circle answer): **Pre-Session** **Post-Session**

Age: _____

Gender: Male ____ Female ____ Non-Binary ____ Prefer not to say ____

Nationality: _____

Course currently enrolled in : MSc Management ____ Intl MSc Management ____ Master in Economics ____
Master of Finance ____ Intl Master of Finance ____ Other ____

Please answer the following True or False Questions (circle the correct answer)

SPIKES is the acronym for a model of giving bad news	True	False
Empathy can lead to effective leadership	True	False
Empathetic leaders can generate more productivity in their teams	True	False
Workers avoid delivering bad news because they fear personal consequences on their job	True	False
A crisis is an unpredictable, disruptive, human driven or natural cause event	True	False
Ideally you should give bad news in a public space, with a lot of bystanders	True	False
If you need to give bad news to an employee, email is preferable	True	False
There is a right and wrong way to speak to people that is universal	True	False
The best way to deliver a bad news is just to do it straight to the point	True	False
Bad news at work are business, and business is never taken personally	True	False
The news you are giving is the important thing, not the way you give the news	True	False
The NURSE method is a good way to develop your empathetic position when delivering bad news	True	False
The SPIKES model does NOT consider the next steps after the conversation.	True	False

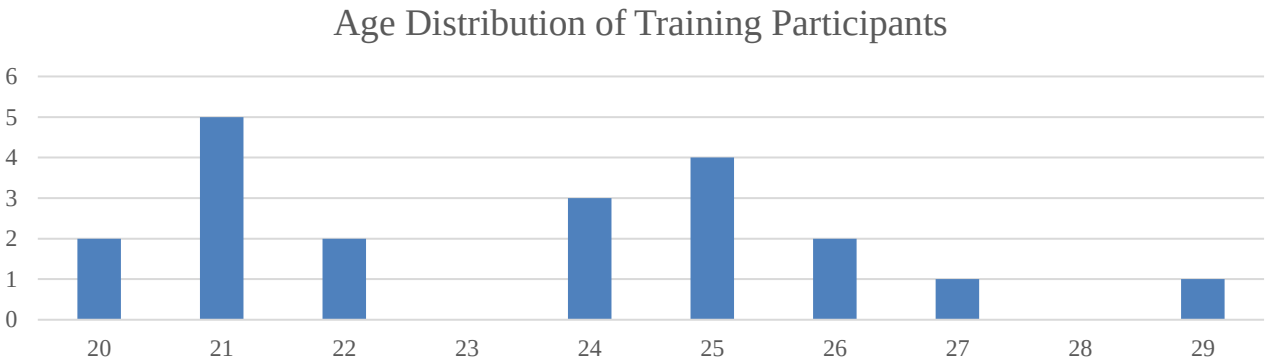
DELIVERING BAD NEWS

Please answer the following questions on a scale of 1-5 (circle the correct answer)

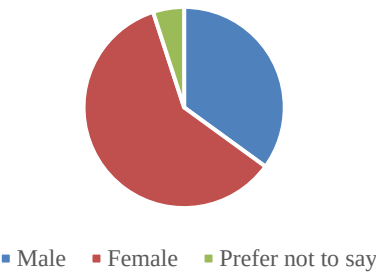
Rate the importance of empathy as a characteristic of managers in a scale from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (very important)	1	2	3	4	5
How important is it for managers to have references on how to deliver bad news in a scale from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (very important)	1	2	3	4	5
When I am a leader in a team and I need to deliver bad news, I am likely to use the SPIKES model (1 being not very likely to 5 being very likely)	1	2	3	4	5
When I am a leader in a team and I need to deliver bad news, I will prepare the conversation beforehand (1 not likely, 5 very likely)	1	2	3	4	5
When I am a leader in a team and I need to deliver bad news, I will adapt the conversation to the employee (1 not likely, 5 very likely)	1	2	3	4	5
When promoting an empathetic discourse, I am likely to offer any help I can give (1 not likely, 5 very likely)	1	2	3	4	5
How important is the interpretation of the message when communicating bad news? (1 not at all important, 5 very important)	1	2	3	4	5
Rate the importance of allotting a generous time slot for bad news communication ((1 not at all important, 5 very important)	1	2	3	4	5
When I am a leader in a team and I need to deliver bad news, I am likely to do it personally rather than through an intermediary medium (1 not likely, 5 very likely)	1	2	3	4	5
When I am a leader in a team, and I need to deliver bad news, I am likely to offer clarifications, no matter if the employee wants to know the full content or not. (1 not likely, 5 very likely)	1	2	3	4	5

Thank you again for your participation!

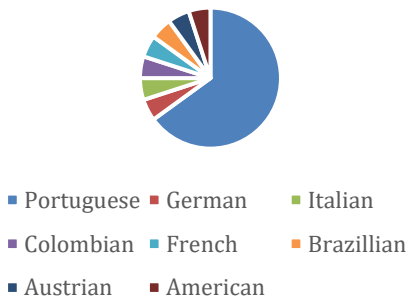
Appendix F: Participant Characteristics Graphic Analysis



Gender Distribution of Training Participants



Nationality Distribution of Training Participants



Study Field Distribution of Training Participants

