When Should You Probably “Shoot the Messenger?”
Four Messengers You Can’t Enable

“Mr Corleone is a man who insists on hearing bad news at once.”
-Tom Hagan (actor Robert Duvall), The Godfather

You’re the Captain!

One of my favorite sports movies is Remember the Titans. It is a story set in Alexandria, Virginia against the backdrop of the racially turbulent early 1970s. Two schools are combined to fulfill government school integration and busing requirements. The movie deals with the culturally charged atmosphere in many cities in the US at that time. Denzel Washington stars as Coach Herman Boone working with a young player named Gerry Bertier.

Bertier is best friends with another player, Ray. But Ray decides not to play to his best ability (in a form of protest to the new players from the other school). Gerry, the defensive captain of the team, approaches Coach Boone and asks permission to have his former best friend dropped from the team. A purposeful missed block by Ray has injured the star quarterback for most of the remainder of the season.

Bertier tells Coach Boone, “Sometimes you just got to cut a man loose.” The coach responds, “Well, you're the captain. You make your decision, but you support that decision.”

Have you ever heard the term, “Don’t Shoot the Messenger?” It refers to not blaming the delivery person for bad news. Wikipedia says the term probably dates back to Plutarch in ancient Greece.
He wrote: "The first messenger that gave notice of Lucullus' coming was so far from pleasing Tigranes that he had his head cut off for his pains, and no man dared to bring further information. Without any intelligence at all, Tigranes sat while war was already blazing around him, giving ear only to those who flattered him.' 

The advice 'Don't shoot the messenger' was expressed by Shakespeare in *Henry IV*, and in *Antony and Cleopatra*. When told Antony has married another, Cleopatra threatens to treat the messenger's eyes as balls." Prior to that, a related sentiment was expressed in *Antigone* by Sophocles as "'no man delights in the bearer of bad news.'" So it is a saying that has been around for most of Western Civilization.

**In the Dumpster?**

In your business is it wise to blame the bearer of bad news more than the news itself? Most of the time the answer is “No.” But there are times you cannot condone messengers who break the rules of your organization’s spirit and culture.

1. **Dumpsters** - When the messenger collects trash like a dumpster. In a church I worked in years ago, the pastor was nice and almost all of the people were, too. But an irritated deacon was in charge of the greeters each Sunday morning! He was the crabbieest guy in the congregation. I don’t think I ever spoke with him that he didn’t share some gossip or complaint someone had told him.

   John Maxwell tells about a similar situation which he dealt with. He did so by labeling the individual “The Church Dump.” Everyone came to deposit their garbage on this person and walked away relieved. The problem with dumps is they… stink! Maxwell told the gentleman in his church that he needed to quit taking complaints from everyone because it was causing him to “stink.” The man got the message.

   Imagine you find your dream house. It has all the rooms and extras you want, but it is located next to the city dump. Would you spend top dollar for this house? Of course not! The odor would make your life miserable!

   The messenger who receives bad news constantly is your dumpster. They are creating a stench in your organization. Customers, staff and outsiders have learned that they can “dump” on your messenger and walk away free of their concerns.

2. **Trash Collectors** - They go around looking for trash... in places others wouldn’t think of going. The difference between the dump and the trash collector is that one is a destination; the other goes looking for it purposefully. The trash collector is reliable in that they come to your
door looking for your refuse. But the trash collector in your business looks for other people’s garbage to bring to your door.

Betty was a member of the senior staff. At each meeting she reported on angry customer stories and non-cooperative staff members to the leadership. It appeared that nobody was without blame in her stories in meetings. She became known as “Bad News Betty.” There was never a meeting without her chiming in about someone’s shortcomings or lack of support for her ideas.

A staff member remarked one time, “I don’t know who Betty likes. She seems to have a case against everyone she knows.” And then they said a telling statement: “I wonder what she is saying to others about me?” Her executive manager wondered the same thing. Their suspicions were well founded and she was terminated. A positive attitude would have made her a key member of the organization, but lacking that, she was a detriment to morale.

3. Whistleblowers - When messengers feel they are more important than the organization so they try to bring it down. The term “whistle blower” refers to someone who is reporting activity to authorities in order to stop bad things from happening to good people. It can be well-intended. It can also be selfish. I witnessed this one holiday season.

While working on a Christmas show, Carl wanted more attention every year but never got what he thought he deserved. We had a pyrotechnical expert using regulation safe explosives in two cannons. This guy previously worked for Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus as a professional technician. Carl thought he should have had the job instead.

One night Carl called the city fire marshal to report the lack of a proper permit to use the cannons. He could have gone to our technician or to the director of the program. Carl chose instead to report it to the local authorities to just get us in trouble. It was needless because the fire marshal not only saw no violation, but stayed to enjoy the program!

The next night our tech had a permit displayed in public on the stage door to silence further disruptions. Later the director said to me, “If Carl was on a fortress wall with his gun to protect us, he would almost naturally aim the gun back at us instead. It is hard to know whose side Carl is on.” You and I know, though. Carl was on Carl’s side… and no one else’s.

4. Dramatists - When they never offer a positive solution, but only bring up problems to keep everyone running around. Carrie liked to be the center of attention. Every meeting she would have some drama going on or stir up trouble. The CEO was a kind, nice gentleman. He treated everyone fairly and always tried to look on the bright side of every situation.
Carrie took advantage of his generosity, though. She would undermine whoever got more attention than she did. She was jealous of anyone working harder than she did… which didn’t take much! One time, she came to a weekly staff meeting with a “dust bunny” in her hand. “I planted this in a corner of my office last week to see if the cleaning crew would sweep it away. They haven’t yet!”

Another time she accused a coworker of breaking into a storage closet and taking needed supplies. Her administrator checked into the crime. It was discovered that the missing supplies were in her private office. When confronted, she produced a key to the closet in question. She was a gifted and talented individual who could contribute a lot to the team on her best behavior. Sadly….that rarely was the circumstance.

We hear both good and bad tidings every day. Most people like those who can present a problem and have a possible working solution - without just complaining. They make us feel like they are working with us, rather than against us. Nobody likes bad news. Hearing support from loyal employees and staff is always better than just hearing gripes and negativity. It is unhealthy to surround yourself with negative people!

**Easy Action Step:** Give your negative messengers two opportunities to complain AND bring a solution, then let them go somewhere else to be free to complain. Otherwise you are enabling bad behavior and allowing everyone else to witness it. People who get away with misconduct under your watchful eye will learn to misbehave more… and lose respect for your authority.

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