

The Psychology of Leadership

Apology Case Study

Dane, the Lead Project Manager at Markitech Green Marketing, LLC ¹

Dane Anzit, the lead project manager for the senior marketing team at Markitech Green Marketing LLC, was feeling a little anxious. The team, Charlotte, Brandt, Fiona, and Roger, had worked for months on landing the rebranding campaign for a local supermarket chain, Findelts. Dane could not quite pinpoint the anxiety that he was feeling. This was the best team in the company. Professionally, they had worked together as a cohesive branding team for the past 9 years, winning multiple advertising awards, and bringing in 40% of the organization's business. Although Dane was formally the supervisor, personally, the team was like family, seeing each other on weekends, for barbeques and going to sporting events together. Dane and Roger had purchased homes in the same neighborhood, Brandt's son played basketball with Fiona's nephew, and Charlotte and Fiona were even Godparents to each other's children. Dane had nothing to be nervous about. They had been working for the past few weeks on the direction for the campaign rebrand as well as some of the ideas for how they would pitch the rebrand to the executives at Findelts. The team figured that they would have the pitch complete and ready to go by the two-week out deadline, May 21. Dane had a problem though. When he got to work this morning, he'd clicked on his computer and saw a puzzling subject line in his email from the administrative assistant, Ben, over at Findelts.

RE: Confirming the presentation tomorrow May 12, at 2:00 pm.

When Dane clicked on the email, he became even more alarmed at the body of the email.

Hi Dane:

We wanted to confirm the pitch tomorrow for the rebrand for Findelts. As we noted a few weeks ago, we want to get the new campaign launched by June 1, and we are eager to see what the team came up with. As discussed, we will be there tomorrow, May 12, with the CEO and the VP of Marketing at 2:00 p.m. See you then!

Best,

Ben Willows

Assistant to Craig Findelt

“No, no, no, no,” thought Dane. Dane checked through the stack of notes on his desk and found the paper he had written on when the call came through that they had won the pitch. Clear as day, Dane had written May 12 for the pitch on the paper that he’d used to jot down the details. When he checked the marketing team’s shared calendar, he realized he had made a mistake and had transposed the numbers to read May 21 instead of May 12. As far as the team knew, the pitch was set for May 21. Dane knew that although the team was great and they were all senior level campaign managers who were good under pressure, even this mistake might be too much for them to handle. Dane thought for a minute, “Maybe I can tell the team that the company emailed me to push the date up to tomorrow.” Then he thought, “No, that’s a terrible idea. You made this mistake. You better do something to fix it!”

Dane walked out to find the team and break the bad news. “Hey team. I have some terrible news and you are not going to like what has to happen. The meeting that we thought was on the 21st is actually tomorrow. On the 12th.”

“What?!” Charlotte said, “What do you mean? How does something like this happen?”

“Well,” said Dane, “I found the paper that I wrote on when I was taking notes from the client. I wrote down the 12th but I accidentally put the meeting in the team calendar for the 21st. We are

going to have to work through the night because the clients are expecting this pitch at 2:00 tomorrow.”

“Dane, I have my son’s baseball game this evening,” said Fiona. She was angry.

“And I am supposed to meet up with some friends from out of town,” said Roger.

“Team, I know that I messed up here when I transposed the dates and I know that you are angry. Nonetheless, I need you to stay and help finish this pitch. I am so sorry because I know that this is going to cause a lot of personal issues. Fiona, I know that you have your son’s game, and Roger, I know that you are supposed to meet up with friends and that I cannot give you that time back. I promise that in the future, I am going to double check the dates, and have one of you double check as well. Since we all have to stay tonight, please choose whatever dinner you want, and it will be on me. Additionally, I want to give you each 15% extra commission on this project because of my major mess up.”

“Dane, this is a huge mess up and I am angry. I told my son that I would be there.” She paused, “I do appreciate the commission on this though,” said Fiona.

“I will call my friend and see if I can meet with them tomorrow. If we get this pitch, I am cutting out early tomorrow, and maybe taking Friday too,” said Roger.

“Yes, that’s fine,” said Dane. “What about you, Brandt? Charlotte?”

“I mean, it sucks but my husband can walk the dog,” said Charlotte. “I am getting the big steak from Pearson’s though, so I’m forewarning you now.”

“Oh, yeah, me too,” said Brandt, “and I am also getting desserts. Two.”

“Yes, you can order what you like,” said Dane. “I definitely deserve that!”

Later when they were sitting around the conference room finishing up the presentation, Dane got a call that their delivery was arriving downstairs. “I’ll go grab the food,” he said. When he walked out, Charlotte said, “I am glad too, I am starving.”

“Me too,” said Roger, “and I am glad that he offered dinner. To be honest, not a lot of bosses would have handled this mess up like this. They would have said, ‘You need to stay and fix it,’ with no offer to assist, or even making it out to be like it was Findelt’s fault.”

“You know,” said Brandt, “I thought about that. I worked at the bank before I had this job and they always pulled something like that, keeping us late last minute, blaming the client, and we would find out later that our direct bosses messed up and we would pay the price for it. I am glad that even though Dane messed this up, he stood by that mess up. I have no guilt about my two desserts.” The team laughed as Dane walked back in with their order.

Bennet, the Principal of Blue Rock Ridge Elementary

Bennet Martin hit the key fob on his car to lock the doors. He grabbed his coffee and walked into the main entrance of the elementary school. He passed by Mrs. Campinelli, who was adding more lines to the red fundraiser thermometer posted prominently at the entry to the school. Every child who walked into school passed by the red fundraiser thermometer and delighted in watching the lines tick closer and closer to the “GOAL” line, which represented a special event held at the end of the school year. This year, the students at Blue Rock Ridge Elementary were raising money to be able to host a carnival with a real Ferris wheel, bounce house, fun maze, and entertainment. They were about 80% of the way towards the goal, which was about USD 45,000.

“Principal Martin, can I talk to you, please – this is urgent,” said Maureen, the custodial staff manager. “I really think that you need to take a look at the pipe situation in the gym. We were able to do some of the repairs, but to be honest, I don’t think those repairs are going to hold. Those pipes are 40-something years old.”

“Hey Maureen. Thanks for looking into that leak situation. Please just make sure that it’s fixed,” said Principal Bennet. He started walking toward his office.

“We did that,” said Maureen, “but this is the same situation as we had last month. I mean, what I am saying is that I don’t think this patch is going to hold for long.”

“Just get it done, thanks, you’re doing a great job,” called Bennet, over his shoulder. He walked into his office and shut the door. “I should call a repair person,” he thought, “but I think the patches Maureen has done should be fine.”

Two days later, as Bennet walked up to the entry of the school, he noticed that there were water rivulets running out of the hallway and down the main staircase to the parking lot. “What is going on here?!” yelled Bennet.

“That pipe I told you about in the gym burst. The patches we did couldn’t hold,” said Maureen.

“This is not good,” thought Bennet. “I don’t have the repair budget allotted for this.”

3 days later

Bennet banged the gavel on the podium. The Parent Teacher Association had called an emergency meeting to discuss what should be done. “Please, we can only progress through this meeting if we can collectively stop yelling and listen to each other,” said Bennet. He was struggling to keep order in the meeting that was quickly getting carried away.

“Bennet, we have tried talking to you about this pipe issue before, so now we aren’t going to calm down and stop yelling,” said Maureen. “What are you proposing to do to get the funds to fix this issue? I told you the patches weren’t going to hold.”

“I—yes—well—I mean, you did, but I thought it would be fine?” Bennet sputtered. The parents and the teachers were not going to like what he had decided.

He took a big breath in. "I have given this a lot of thought," said Bennet. "I didn't know how bad the condition of the pipes was and I didn't expect that they would burst like this. We just don't have the budget to fix the pipe fully. We cannot let the leaks go unrepaired. I know that the students spent the year raising money for the carnival. We are going to need to use those funds to repair the pipes in the gym. We will have to hold the carnival next year."

"That's not right, Bennet!" yelled one of the parents. "My son has been raising his funds for months in anticipation of this carnival. You can't just do that!"

"Bennet, we tried to tell you about the pipes before. You didn't listen. There has to be more that can be done here that doesn't jeopardize the carnival. What do you propose?" said Maureen.

Bennet felt rising panic. "Listen everybody. I know that you are not happy, but this is what I have decided. There is nothing more that I can do about it. We will have the carnival next year," Bennet said weakly.

As the parents filed out of the meeting, Bennet could hear snippets of the angry conversations.

"...some leader he is. We need to figure out what to do here. I am going to write to the superintendent and let them know how badly this was handled."

"Do you think what that lady said about the pipes was correct? That he knew?"

"He seems incompetent. I don't know if he knew, but I am going to post about this on the County Blog. People need to know..."

"Do you think that we can figure out how to hold the carnival anyway? Get donations from some local places in town..."

"...no remorse from that guy. He's a cold fish."

Mrs. Campinelli walked up to Bennet. "Well. I don't think that went well at all," she said.

“No, I don’t think so either,” said Bennet. “And I think it’s going to get worse. I DO feel bad about this. I didn’t want to use the carnival money, but what was I supposed to do?”

“I can think of a few things,” said Mrs. Campinelli.

“I need to fix this and fast,” said Bennet. “What should I do?”

Discussion Questions

1. In the case of Markitech Green, where do you see the four steps to the proper apology in Dane’s communication to the team?
2. How can you tell that Dane’s apology was successful in repairing or restoring the relationship?
3. What might a discursive leadership opportunity have looked like if Dane had not delivered this apology?
4. Our second leader Bennet had two leadership failures in this case study. What are the two communication failures that lead to such a large failure?
5. Describe the signs and ramifications of each of Bennet’s communication failures.
6. Craft a proper four-step apology as if you were Bennet in the instance of the elementary school predicament.

Note

- [1.](#) All companies and organizations mentioned in the case studies are fictional.