Twitter Thread by Bryan Cantrill



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This is so true! I imagine everyone accumulates a story that serves to make this point, but I'm afraid I can't resist sharing mine... 1/

> This is very important for people in leadership positions. \u201cHey, have a second?\u201d can send someone with anxiety into a world of panic. Did I mess something up? Am
> I getting fired? Is my manager quitting? Is the company going under? https://t.co/AFltjJ0NNe
>
> — Seth Vargo (@sethvargo) January 23, 2021

Once, long ago, my manager came to me on a Friday afternoon: "Are you going to be here on Monday?" 2/

Now, this is the 1990s: to work from home, you needed a modem (!!) -- and at the time, I owned no computer so even that wasn't happening. So I was emphatically going to be there on Monday, if for no other reason that I had nowhere else to work. 3/

"Yes, of course I'm going to be here on Monday."
"Okay, we need to talk Monday."
"Is there something wrong? Can we talk now?"
"Let's talk Monday." 4/

My early-twentysomething self was (obviously?) very anxious, so I immediately went to the office of the senior engineer in the group (and my mentor), Jeff Bonwick to see if he knew of anything that I might have screwed up... 5/

Somewhat to my surprise, he was less interested in brainstorming ways in which I might be in trouble -- and much more dismayed at the clumsiness of our manager. "Wait here." He left. 6/

I heard him enter our manager's office several doors down. The walls were thin. I could hear that Bonwick was... emphatic. He was there for a few minutes, and returned: "Now go back to your office." 7/

I went back to my office, and my manager appeared, sheepishly. "Do you, um, have a second to talk now?" Of course I did! 8/

And as it turns out, it was... nothing. It was not that I had even upset anyone (which, um, happened), it was that he needed to ask me a purely technical question. He didn't want to ask me on Friday afternoon because he wanted to start his own weekend early! 9/

It highlighted a couple of things: first, never, ever do this. Do not ruin someone's weekend (or their evening or their morning) letting their minds run wild. If you need to telegraph a meeting like this (which you generally shouldn't!), ALWAYS provide enough context. 10/

This is especially important with engineers who, as worst-case thinkers by nature, are much more likely to run to worst-case outcomes! (And indeed, the best ones are most likely to be most creative this regard!) 11/

So if it's good news, TELL THEM. "Hey, let me know when you have a second; I've got some good news." (It will come as no surprise that those calls get returned very quickly!) 12/

If it's not bad news but rather just a needed conversation on some issue there should be -- as per Seth's comment and the blog entry that it references -- complete context. 13/

If it IS bad news, there should be no telegraphing it, ever: it should be done in person (or over video) -- especially if it's the exceptionally bad news. (Even when "it shouldn't be surprising", this news is always shocking at some level; telegraphing it doesn't help.) 14/

In my case, I was protected by a senior engineer who was willing to act as an advocate, saving me from the mediocre atrocities of poor management. I am deeply grateful for this, and have tried myself to be that senior engineer for others over my career. 15/

Empathy in communication is essential! Always communicate to others the way you yourself would want to be communicated with -- and if in a leadership position, you must be especially mindful of the extra weight that your words (or lack of them!) carry! 16/16