

Giving bad news



Giving bad news may not be an enjoyable experience, but it is an inevitable part of the role of a leader. It can be stressful for both the receiver and for the giver – no one likes to hear it, and no one really likes to give it either. But being able to do it well can have great effects on what happens next. You may not be able to change the facts of the situation, but bad news delivered sensitively can make the difference between the receiver facing the future with optimism or without hope.

In this 'Hints & Tips' article we show why it can feel so stressful and more importantly, how you can give bad news in the most effective way.

Bad news – are you sure?

Bad news can be delivered to an individual, to groups of people or even to an entire organisation. It can be about performance, redundancy/downsizing, pay cuts, in fact just about anything. So what is 'bad news'? Two definitions are:

'[That which] results in cognitive, behavioural or emotional deficit in the person receiving the news and that these deficits persist'

'...any information which adversely and seriously affects an individual's view of the future'.

That means that you can never really know what 'bad news' is – redundancy for one person might mean fear of not being able to pay the mortgage, for another it might mean the kick he/she needs to finally start up that business that they always dreamed about. Of course, we can make some educated guesses about what might be seen as bad news and in any case, at the moment you deliver the news, it is unlikely that on hearing it, even the most positive person will jump up and shake you warmly by the hand. People need time to make sense of their situation.

Key point: 'Bad news' has cultural aspects and how 'bad' that news is will be interpreted differently by every individual that it affects.

So why is it so hard to give bad news?

Alison Sigmon believes that much of our adverse reaction is based on our early experiences of such situations; our own emotional responses and seeing how significant others handle such events. These early experiences are essentially connected to feelings of rejection. The pain we feel from being rejected is just the same as any physical pain we have experienced. This translates into feelings of anxiety when faced with the prospect of having to give bad news to others. ('I didn't like it when it happened to me, so you are not going to like it either, and that makes me feel bad'.) Our tendency is to avoid or procrastinate, so we do not develop effective strategies for dealing with these tricky situations.

Although bad news can be stressful for both giver and receiver and that both stress responses may be triggered by fears of rejection, it is important to realise that these stress responses are at different stages for each party. For the giver, much of the anxiety is experienced before and to some extent, during the transmission of the information. (Essentially, worrying about events that have not yet happened.) For the receiver much of the stress experienced occurs afterwards, as the full implications of the facts (what it means to them, personally) start to sink in.

What can we do to make the process as pain-free as possible?

Dianna Booher says that if a leader does not communicate the message clearly, it can have a detrimental effect on their credibility. It can appear as if he/she is overwhelmed and incapable of handling the situation. Booher sees the role of the leader in times like this as shaping a realistic vision of the future that people can believe in and that provides hope that there is a way through the difficult times. She calls this '**mature optimism**'.

For Sigmon, if we are going to give bad news, we first have to monitor our own responses. We don't need to make the situation worse by transmitting our own stress on to the receiver. It is possible to prevent this happening by doing the following:

- **Check your own responses** – what is your own reaction to the news? What are you anxious about in having to deliver the news? (Be specific – sometimes our concern about the other person's reaction is, in part, driven by a need to protect ourselves).
- **Check your own assumptions** – just because you see the news as 'bad' will it be seen as such by the receiver(s)? Remember, the facts will be interpreted differently by each individual.
- **Prepare your message.** Think about what, where and how you are going to give it.

Being on the receiving end of bad news generally triggers a strong emotional response. The most common emotions experienced are shock, anger, acceptance and sadness (Lobb, 1999). But, afterwards, if you ask, 'Would you rather have been told the news or not?' **most people would rather know.**

Key point: Treat people as adults. Be honest yet sensitive.

There is something else that will affect how the message is received – how much trust exists between the giver and receiver. In their 2003 **Harvard Business Review** paper, '**Enemies of Trust**', Robert Galford and Anne Siebold Drapeau define **three interrelated types of trust**, by which the receiver may judge you: **Organisational trust** (do employees trust the organisation's ethics, processes etc. to be consistent and fair?), **Strategic trust** (Do employees trust management to run the company?) and **Personal trust** (Do your employees trust *you*?). Although only one of these is based on the individual, at the moment a leader communicates any message (including bad news) he/she is the living representation of all three forms of trust. When you are a leader, you are not just an individual but a representation of the organisation as a whole. When delivering bad news, you need to do two things simultaneously – 'own' the message and separate the issue from yourself. Owning the message means communicating it in such a way that it comes from you. Even if you are being required to relay a decision that has come from higher up the organisation, you still need to take responsibility for what you say. Saying, 'I've been told to tell you...' won't wash. Separating

yourself from the issue means not adding your own discomfort into the melting pot, even in the face of adverse reaction from the receiver.

Where there is lack of trust, Galford and Siebold warn:

'Don't be surprised when things you say – even the most innocuous statements – are assigned deep, sinister meaning.'

If you need to create trust, it is built on consistency, clear communication, a willingness to tackle the tough stuff and meeting your promises.

Key point: Without trust, your job gets harder. Trust is depleted in times of crisis.
Key point: When you deliver the bad news you are not just an individual, you are a representative of the organisation. People will decide their level of trust in you on a mixture of the two.

So how do you do it well? Hints and tips

- **Do not delay.** As John Bradley Jackson says, *'Bad news isn't wine. It doesn't improve with age'*. Bad news does not get any better the longer you leave it, so deal with it early. Procrastination never helped anyone, including you.
- **Check your own responses.** Take care of your own emotions. Don't add yours into what is already a difficult situation.
- **Treat people as adults.** Let them take care of their own feelings. The relationship between what you say/do and how a person reacts is probabilistic, not causal. You cannot control how a person is going to react, but you can influence it. Take responsibility for delivering your message honestly and sensitively and leave people to react in whatever way they need to at that moment. Trying to predict and take care of other's feelings before they have even heard the news can rob them of the resources that they need to cope with the situation. Do not rescue, but do not persecute either.
- **Separate the person from the issue.** That includes you too. A person's reaction may be directed at you, but their reaction is more likely about the news, not you.
- **Prepare** – think about the content of your message and the emotional reactions that the receiver is likely to have. If you get the choice, set an appropriate time and place.
- **State the facts** as a way of leading in to what you have to say. Some people advocate starting the meeting by asking the other person a few questions. We would be wary of this. It works in an environment where it is useful to learn how much the person knows about the current situation, but don't use questions as a way of trying to manipulate them round to talking about the issue that you want to talk about. They will only get suspicious, confused or both. Others suggest using the 'feedback sandwich' (putting the bad news between two items of good news). While this has its merits, our own experience suggests that it is often

misused. People know when they are being soft-soaped. If you are going to use it, 'good' and 'bad' news need to be qualitatively equal, all items need to be relevant and the language that links 'good' and 'bad' has to be carefully chosen. Our recommendation is - if you have something you need to tell them, it's best to tell them. Get on with it. They will respect you for that.

- **Say what you have to say.** Be direct but not blunt. Do not sugar-coat the story. Be concise. Balance sensitivity with honesty. Own the message.
- **Let the news sink in.** Let the person respond in any way they need to. Give the person time to recover from the news. Show understanding for their position and how they are feeling. Don't add in too much information – they aren't ready to process it. Having a strong emotional reaction can affect a person's ability to take in information (Known as '**emotional blocking**'). You need to be able to gauge the person's emotion and respond to it. (Some call this 'Emotional Intelligence').
- **Offer hope** but don't make promises you can't deliver. Offer a next step and be specific. (It might be as simple as 'Let's meet again tomorrow to discuss what options you have').
- **Be optimistic but with a dose of realism too.** We've probably all been in the situation where we've been dumped by a boyfriend/girlfriend, only for a well-meaning friend to say, 'Don't worry, there are plenty more fish in the sea'. If this didn't work for you at the time, it's because the vision of the future they provided was too far removed from your current reality. (Maybe something like, 'I can see how much you are hurting right now, and it will pass' might be a bit closer to the mark).
- Afterwards, **remain physically and emotionally available** – people need time to process. Do not run away or hide. Give them time to weigh up the implications of what you have told them. Research suggests that many people want to ask questions, but fewer actually do. Making yourself accessible helps others get the information in their own way and at a pace that suits them. By creating a space where they can ask you questions, you also get valuable information on what you need to do to lead others through the difficult situation. (Their doubts and fears about the future will be different for each individual and may not be the ones you first imagine).
- **Be an example to others** in your own behaviour. How you cope with the situation will have an effect on how others cope too.

Perhaps the best summary of advice for giving bad news comes from Maurilio Amorim's website. If you have to do it, he simply reminds us to:

'Be kind, be honest, be silent, be available'

Further reading and resources:

Amorim, M (2011) <http://www.maurilioamorim.com/2011/01/the-art-of-giving-bad-news/>

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<http://theoncologist.alphamedpress.org/content/5/4/302.full>

Jackson, J.B (2011) <http://www.firstbestordifferent.com/blog/?p=1367>

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Sigmon, A (2012) <http://www.business2community.com/leadership/why-giving-bad-news-on-projects-can-literally-hurt-0159494>

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