

## **The Bearer of Bad News: Effectively Delivering a Difficult Message**

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Bad news, no matter how you put it, is going to cause pain, most likely to the person receiving it *and* to the person delivering it. However, if you have been assigned the duty of delivering an unpleasant message to a fellow employee, there are numerous things to keep in mind and many tips that may help to make the experience less painful for all parties involved.

***Follow these proposed principles of delivering news offered by the Harvard Negotiation Project.***

- 1) Hope is good; blame is bad.
  - 2) Action is good; analyzing history is bad.
  - 3) Acknowledging pain is good; wallowing in pain is bad.
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- ❑ Be prepared for the conversation and consider thinking about what it is you are going to say, without seeming too scripted.
  - ❑ Initially, assess the environment in which the message will be delivered. In order to preserve the other party's dignity, you will want to talk to them in a private setting and be certain to have the most professional, non-threatening atmosphere possible.
  - ❑ Once this atmosphere is set, and it may depend on the nature of the conversation, you may begin by asking some general and open-ended questions. For example, questions such as "How are you doing?" and "How are you feeling?" build trust and set the mood for the upcoming conversation.
  - ❑ Conversely, you may choose to begin by announcing that you have bad news to discuss. In some cases, cushioning the blow in attempts to make them feel better will actually be counterproductive and the true nature of the message will not be heard.
  - ❑ Others feel that a more effective approach to entering a difficult conversation is to use softeners for introductions. A possible softener may sound like, "I am sorry that I have tell you this..." Do try to avoid using the word "but" by replacing it with "and" (Boitano, 2001). This will allow the message to feel less threatening.
  - ❑ Whichever method or style fits you best, attempt to tailor the message to the person you are speaking to.

### ***During the Delivery:***

Naturally, you will want to get your message out on the table however, you need to listen and be aware of the other party's explanation or interpretation of events. They may have a very different experience of the situation and it will be important that you also explore his/her story, as well.

***As you listen...***

- Keep an open mind and avoid making judgment. Judging will prevent you from fully hearing the other person's point of view.
- It would also be very easy at this point to over-emphasize your role as a manager or supervisor. Avoid this tendency, as it can cause an unnecessary distinction of hierarchy.
- When in these situations, it is always a good idea to remain as neutral as possible and consider the question, "How would an outsider view this situation?"
- Whenever possible, state your concerns for this person and allow them to know that you have their best interest at heart.
- Be specific and brief with your message as talking at great length can add additional stress to the meeting.

- Make any choices that this individual has overt and openly discuss all possibilities that are available.
- If resolving the difficulty is an option, ask the other party what they would like to see happen in order to remedy the problem.
- Asking questions such as, "Where can we go from here?" can be a nice lead into a problem solving discussion.
- Problem solving will also be aided if you are able to ignore challenges initiated by the other party and attempt redirect or reframe the comment to a product resolution.
- Be prepared to answer questions about how this bad news will affect the future, of the employee, of the agency, etc. Maybe it won't make the future bad at all, but if this is not the cause, be prepared to state this overtly.
- Handle hope carefully. If you feel the need to offer hope to the employee, be realistic.

### ***Managing Emotions:***

Much of the literature suggests that you should deliver the bad news in a direct fashion and express empathy without getting drawn into the problem. Unfortunately, bad news is not like fine wine; it will not get sweeter with age. Attempting to make things look better than they are will only appear insensitive to the other party's feelings. *Do not* try and slip the bad news past the person. This may cause them to feel neglected, unimportant, or cheated. *Do not* minimize the impact of this news on the other person. Validate their feelings. *Do not* try and place blame onto someone else. Take responsibility for your contribution for the way things worked out.

Strong emotions of disappointment are likely to arise, as well as feelings of anxiety, blame, and guilt. Various guidelines have been proposed to help you during these times.

- ❑ Be patient with the employee and give them time to calm down if they have a strong response to your message.
- ❑ Do not try and control their response or reaction. They will need time to feel upset and angry.
- ❑ Treat them fairly. They will tend to quiet down with time, especially if they feel they are being treated with respect.
- ❑ Give them the time to express these feelings before moving into problem solving.
- ❑ Should a time arise when you feel you are being falsely accused or treated unfairly, you do have the right to defend your position, although do so while remaining as neutral as possible with open ears.

Although these feelings will be inevitable in any difficult situation, keep them separate from the facts of the meeting. This does not mean disregard emotions; it simply means acknowledge them while keeping the purpose of the meeting at the forefront of the discussion.