



DELIVERING BAD NEWS

Giving someone bad news is never easy, but there are right ways and wrong ways of going about it.

Set and manage expectations beforehand if you can

Sometimes, bad news comes completely unexpectedly. Other times, however, if the bad news comes as a complete surprise, it means someone failed to fully prepare the recipient ahead of time. If you believe that something you attempt might turn out unfavourably for a client or customer, let that person know first. Above all, be careful about guaranteeing results or saying that a particular outcome is a certainty. If necessary, outline all the risks and potential issues that might prevent the desired result. You may not always be able to do this. But if you can set expectations, your job of delivering bad news will be much easier.

Do a proper setup for the moment

Don't deliver bad news casually or in passing. Set up a time to talk with the other person. If you need to deliver the news right at the moment, say, "I need to talk with you about [the matter]." In other words, establish a setting and a context for the conversation, instead of just springing the news.

Get to the point

Bad news will not improve with keeping. You could preface the bad news with background information and details of everything you did and everything you tried. Better, though, simply to cut to the chase and tell the person the bad news. Chances are, that person won't even be listening to all your preliminary words anyway.

Explain the background and give details

After you give the bad news, you can provide background and details. In particular, you will want to explain what happened as well as the steps you took. The person who gets your bad news will want to know this information and probably has a right to know it.

Be sitting down

Delivering the news to someone while both of you are sitting offers less chance of the delivery getting emotionally out of control. In plain terms: it is harder to physically fight someone when you're seated than when you're standing.

Be sensitive to physical position

In the same way, be sensitive to how you are seated relative to the other person. If you're behind a desk, keep in mind that that desk can serve as a psychological as well as physical barrier. If you feel comfortable doing so, and if you believe the other person is comfortable, consider sitting on the same side, or at least sitting at right angles. Either way, you will have signalled that you are "on that person's side."

Separate yourself from the message

Sometimes the bad news you deliver is not your fault. Even so, the person who hears it will take out his or her frustration on you. The classic example, of course, is the help desk analyst who tells a caller that the system or network will be down for another three hours. If you are that hapless analyst, be prepared to be the messenger who gets shot. Unfortunately, it comes with the territory. However, the more you can remind yourself that they aren't upset at you personally, the greater the chances of keeping your stress under control.



Be sympathetic

Remember that when you deliver bad news to a person, you must deal with two issues: the technical matter of the news itself, but also the emotional reaction to the bad news. In fact, this emotional reaction is the aspect of your encounter that is far more critical. To reduce the chances of being the shot messenger, let the other person know that you are aware of their emotional reaction.

Reframe the situation

Maybe the bad news you are delivering concerns your (or your group's) inability to achieve some objective. Nonetheless, is there any silver lining news you can give? In other words, can you reframe the situation?

Offer solutions

If you must deliver bad news, maybe that bad result need not be the end of things. Do you have a plan to address or resolve the situation? If so, keep it in mind and offer to share it with the other person or group after you have delivered the bad news. In doing so, you will demonstrate a willingness to work through the problem and an ability to think and plan ahead. If the person receiving bad news is a key client, planning ahead could be valuable to your future relationship with that client.