

# Giving Bad News Well

## 1. The information

Draft the information as though you were reporting an emerging news story—as simply, clearly, directly, and neutrally as possible. (You may want to leave the information simple, clear, direct, and neutral or you may want to orient it to your listeners. See 3.)

## 2. The audience

Assess your audience—get in their heads. What do they think the problem is? Not the topic, but the *problem*? What do they think and feel now? (You may have a mixed audience with differing views.)

Anger, sadness, and fear are appropriate reactions to bad news. If you get some combination of troubled reactions to your message—including responses that are not logical or on-topic—that does not mean that something is wrong with the news, the way you said it, or the people who heard it. If you design the delivery of your news to avoid troubled reactions, however, you may distort the message. If you have trouble dealing with negative reactions, work on that. You may need to be extra-ready for Q&A if negative reactions are difficult for you or if your audience wants to shoot the messenger.

## 3. The message

After the first draft of the information and your assessment of your audience, craft your message in the sense that you are taking the simple, clear, direct, neutral information and orienting it for your listeners so they hear it as you mean them to understand it.

- Your audience may be looking to you in order to know how to take the news. Part of your message would then be designed to steer their thinking on the news.
- You may need to clarify both what the news is and what the news is not. For example, if the news is urgent and your audience, for whatever reason, doesn't think it is, then you may need both to tell them that it is urgent and to make an argument for why any view that allows for complacency or delay is a mistake.

## 4. The delivery

Treat bad news with dignity and respect. Don't infantilize your audience by trying to jolly them or pretty up the news. On the other hand, don't swing the other way and tell the news more luridly, provocatively, dramatically, ominously, or heavily than is correct.

Neutral delivery is an acquired skill. If you have neutral delivery in your repertoire, you will have two advantages: you will make your words do most of your work for you in communicating every aspect of your message and you will be able to calibrate any modification of your delivery that you want to make.

If you must give bad news that is very hard for people to accept, then straight repetition—neutrally and temperately delivered—is often better than changing phrasing or delivery. You need to be ready for misinterpretation and resistance, which is why the first draft wants to be the simplest, clearest way you can deliver the information. Don't put craft ahead of clear content.

### Examples: Planning the purpose of your message

A young manager needed to present the new organization plan of two merged departments to an audience of both groups who were uneasy about the change, concerned about issues of turf and precedence, and perfectly capable of making the merger either cooperatively smooth or very, very rough. When asked what the purpose of the presentation was, he said, "To show them how the new department is going to be organized. We've got the new chart and I'm going to walk them through it." Acknowledging that he knew about the two groups' wariness, he laughed uncomfortably and said, "I'll have back-up for Q & A."

If the manager had begun to plan the purpose of the news by asking "What do the listeners want and need?" and "What do I want them to take away?" the new chart would still be a presence. But it would be a reference point for much more genuinely anticipating and addressing the pressing interests of the listeners.

It is useful for speakers to look inside and ask frankly about their own purpose. If the speaker's interest and the listeners' interests coincide, the presentation will gain strength.

A COO had announced a decision and then, with new information, was reversing it. While rehearsing the new announcement, he had an unusually stern, almost pugnacious manner, suggesting that he expected to be challenged. When asked about his manner during rehearsal, he said, "I hate doing this. Changing this decision is the right thing to do, but I know what it's like to gear up one way and then have to tear that down and start again. I don't want people to think this is going to keep on happening."

His distaste for his task was making him appear curt and defensive, and was very likely to be misread. When, however, he acknowledged to himself the message he actually wanted to give to his listeners, he saw that he could connect with his audience rather than inviting resistance to his decision. He used those same words—"Changing this decision is the right thing to do, but I know what it's like to gear up one way and then have to tear that down and start again. I don't want you to think this is going to keep on happening." All he did was change "people" to "you." But he couldn't see the difference between his first, defensive opening and his second, genuine opening as long as he focused narrowly on a purpose that tried solely to communicate his content—his decision—and sidestepped his and his listeners' valid concerns.

### Examples: Determining the focus

At a time of serious cost-cutting, Sam, a manager in a technology company, was preparing a presentation to his much reduced staff about a move to smaller, less expensive office space. Following other, less-than-

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ideal presentations around the lay-offs, Sam did not want another confrontation and sought help preparing this presentation.

He had an opening ready that he hoped would set the right tone: “I know we’re all very excited about this new move and see it as a fresh start.” The opening continued in this vein and when he finished it, he looked up with quizzical eyebrows and a “how’m I doin’?” smile. When asked how he had chosen this approach, he said, “Well, I want to keep it upbeat. This is not a great deal for most of us—changing commutes, health clubs, even child care arrangements for some. The old neighborhood had better restaurants. This place is a lot smaller and, of course, it’s also a symbolic come-down. So at least I can make it sound good.”

Sam was well-intentioned, and there is some internal logic there somewhere. But the focus of this opening can only create dissonance with the restive staff. The “very excited about” is so blatantly misused that it signals inauthenticity.

Sam sat down and took a turn in the listener’s role while his coach delivered Sam’s opening. His reaction was strong. “That isn’t true. There’s nothing true there. The problem is that I don’t want them to be mad, but they *are* mad. Actually, they should be upset—I’m upset myself—just not upset with me.”

He began again: “We’ve had a rough quarter and we may not have reached safe haven even now. This move is a further disruption to our most important work, to our necessary routines beyond the office, and to our affections for Jefferson Street. But the hardest decisions have been made and they have been made well. This move is consistent with the goals we have chosen and committed to as a company, and it’s the right thing for us to do now. We have some details to iron out this afternoon and some problems to solve, but we’re good at that.”

### Examples: Planning delivery

A powerful manager who minimized a problem of foreign investment while talking to his audience believed that he was modeling his competence, his confidence, and his ability to resolve the problem. But his colleagues thought that he couldn’t tell how serious the problem was, and although his strategy made sense, his unconcerned manner undermined their confidence in him. He and his counterparts in the conversation exaggerated each other’s behavior: the more the counterparts kept trying to suggest that this was serious, the more the manager kept trying to reassure them that this was manageable.

In fact, the problem of foreign investment was both serious and manageable, but the manager had not correctly anticipated his counterparts’ point of view. Even when he

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began to see that his difficulty in persuading them to his view was increasing, he couldn't change his approach without getting angry and embarrassed. The conversation continued to degenerate.

### Blueprint for speaking well in tough moments

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Clear content</b> <b>Neutral tone</b> <b>Temperate phrasing</b></p>
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- **Clear content:** Let your words do your work for you. Say what you mean. Put the weight of your communication on your words.
- **Neutral tone:** 'Tone' here means the non-verbal part of your delivery: facial expression and body language as well as tone of voice. Neutral tone makes you put the emphasis on words, instead of giving the counterpart something to read that competes with the words.
- **Temperate phrasing:** This is the place to exercise your tact. Have you ever prepared for an upcoming difficult conversation and told yourself, 'You can't say *that*.' If your message is correct, maybe the alteration you really want is, 'You can't say that *that way*.' English is a huge language; there are lots of ways to say things. Temperate phrasing keeps your counterpart focused on the content of your message, rather than reacting to the way you've phrased it.