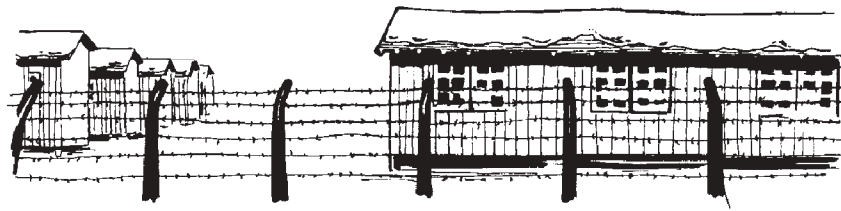


Insight 35

Delivering Bad News



“Even when confronted with a hopeless situation, you still have a chance to make life meaningful ... in turning personal tragedy into a triumph or by transforming your predicament to an accomplishment.”

Victor Frankl

Not all presentations are about promoting great ideas or fabulous products. Sometimes you may not be particularly excited about sharing your news with your audience. There may be times when you are responsible for delivering bad news to a group. Imagine being asked to announce to a company that half of the staff will be retrenched. With accelerating change around the world we see presenters delivering bad news more often. Mergers and acquisitions, rationalisation and redundancies mean presenters must be skilful in delivering bad news.

David Nomchong, international motivational speaker and the author of the bestselling book on bad news, “Leukaemia: a minor inconvenience,” shares his thoughts on how to deal with bad news. The book allows you to feel how the audience would feel with bad news and then what needs to be done to shift their thinking on what to do next.

Don’t Shoot the Messenger

In these situations, the natural reaction of the audience is often to hold the presenter responsible for the news. Therefore, it is important to present the message independently from yourself. You should not point the blame at someone else. But you should try to detach yourself from the message and empathise with the audience—put yourself on their side by saying something like, “I know this is terrible news. I am unhappy about this too”. This way it will be the message versus you and your audience.

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Out of Your Depth

The scale of bad news will vary. Where the news is something that you have no experience in or think is out of your field, you may consult with an expert. For example, a presentation to teenagers about drugs would probably be better dealt with by a doctor, psychologist or counsellor. However, if they are not actually involved directly in the issue you should not delegate the entire responsibility for the presentation to the expert. If you have called them in to provide expert advice, they should follow from your introduction.

For example, you might begin by explaining to students the reasons you are concerned about their exposure to drugs. You might include a story about an anonymous person you know who has lost a friend or family member through a drug addiction that started out harmlessly enough, but soon became more serious. After explaining why you are concerned for them, you could introduce the expert by saying, "Dr Bob Smith has joined us today because he specialises in treating people for drug addiction. He chose this career when he was 25, after seeing one of his friends lose a battle with drug addiction. I have asked him to speak to us today from both a personal and medical perspective. Please make him welcome."

In a sensitive situation where people will be deeply affected by the news, it might be better to let people absorb bad news before bringing in experts and action plans. If your audience is hearing the news for the first time, they will need time to accept what has happened, before they can hear solutions. If there are no solutions or positive points, the bad news should be a sharing process. People will want to think about the issue in their own time and talk about how they feel.

The Formula

Announcing bad news requires discretion and sensitivity. As with every presentation you give, it will vary depending on your message and your audience. However, the basic formula for delivering bad news is:

1. Warn the audience that you have bad news.
2. Announce the bad news.
3. Identify with the audience.
4. Emphasise any positive points.
5. Create an action plan.

Warn the audience that you have bad news. Begin by warning your audience that you are about to share some bad news with them. This way they will be able to prepare themselves for what you are about to say. It will ease some of the shock if they are mentally primed.

Announce the bad news. For example, “The bad news is that this year’s staff bonuses have been cancelled”. Having heard this, the audience will probably be angry.

Identify with the audience. Make a statement that empathises with the audience. For example, “I am sure that some of you are very angry and upset at this decision.” Or “some of you will disagree with the decision.”

Typically you cannot change the decision. So, be **firm** that the decision cannot be changed, but **flexible** about dealing with the consequences. If people are in shock or denial, you may need to patiently and calmly repeat the message several times. It helps to have a written announcement for people to take away and read, after recovering from the shock.

One method of calming an upset audience is to summarise your perception of what the audience feels. For example, “Clearly, you are angry and upset and you think there are too many redundancies. I do not necessarily agree with you but I do understand what you are saying.” If they agree with your summary, then you can move on, if not ask them to tell you what you missed and then try to summarise and get agreement again.

There may be a risk of people using your words in legal actions, so make clear that you are trying to understand their opinions and that you do not necessarily agree with them. As insurance to protect themselves, some presenters will make notes of the meeting afterwards. Others might ensure there is a neutral witness in the room.

Emphasise any positive points. Follow up with something to appease their anger. Do not make up an excuse, but try to emphasise any encouraging aspects of the message. For instance, “While these redundancies are not good news, if the hard decision had been delayed, more people would have lost their jobs. For the people who are staying, the company will be more competitive and your jobs will be more secure.”

Create an action plan. Once the audience has digested the bad news you may like to propose an action plan for dealing with the events. Guide the audience through what you or an expert on the issue recommends as the best course of action. Or, where applicable, offer some alternatives. For example, “We want to help you all as much as possible. So we have contacted an industry recruiter. The recruiter will be conducting interviews next week and hopefully will be able to find new jobs for most of you. We have also arranged for two secretaries to format new resumes for you. Additionally, we will have a counsellor on site for the next three days and we encourage you to talk to him.” Providing an action plan may help people focus on solutions.