

How to deliver—and receive—
bad news in business.

business issues

GOOD ADVICE ON BAD NEWS

BY ANNE SCARLETT

IN THE PROFESSIONAL SERVICES REALM—regardless of your industry—you will repeatedly experience disappointments, setbacks, unwanted surprises, conflicts and even devastations. Let's collectively call all of this “bad news.”

Maybe the bad news comes from the client. Maybe it's internal. Maybe *you* have to tell a client something negative. Maybe you are partially responsible. Maybe it's an act of nature, beyond anyone's control. Whatever the cause or context, bad news in business is inevitable.

As a seasoned business developer, you must manage the situation, cope with the challenge, resolve the issue and move forward. Here are a few things you can do to make the process easier, whether you have to deliver bad news or receive it.

Delivering Bad News

Be direct. Most people appreciate direct, crystal clear messages. Some people try to soften the blow by deflecting, burying the real message or being coy. Doing that, however, can make the situation worse and leave people with a bad impression of you. (Speaking of coy, I just heard about the COO of an esteemed construction firm who fired a senior manager. The first thing he said to him was, “Are you familiar with COBRA?” That is completely unacceptable.)

Practice your delivery. Practice your delivery aloud, not just in your head. Ideally, you will role-play with someone you trust. Commit to brevity, using just a couple of key messages. Experiment with different delivery techniques and monitor your body language in a mirror. Do you look suspicious, closed or uptight? Or do you look honest, open and transparent? Through practice, you will gain an aura of confidence (or at least become more comfortable with your message) even if the real-life version comes out different than what you rehearsed.

Rein in your emotions. Bad news should be delivered in a timely manner. Be mindful of how withholding the news could impact others. If, however, it's possible to wait a few hours or even a day, then take that time to fully compose yourself. Breathe through your own emotions on the subject. Acknowledge what you are feeling, name it and then try to reach a level of acceptance.

Stop talking. Let them express. Reaction to bad news is unpredictable; it varies from person to person. You must let recipients speak early in the meeting for two reasons:

1. They may get stuck on something you said and don't hear anything else you subsequently share.

2. You will have the chance to modify your delivery approach once you gauge their initial reaction. Will they be emotional (expressing anger, sorrow, hurt, frustration, resignation, hopelessness, hopefulness or denial)? Will they want to know the “why” and the details? Or will they immediately ask, “So what's next? Is there a plan?”

Try not to surprise them. With the exception of things that happen completely beyond our control (terrorist attack, economic disaster, etc.) the bad news that you share should not come as a total surprise. If a client's business has been struggling and they no longer need your firm's consulting services, your team should be somewhat aware. If you need to dismiss a direct report, that person should already have received your candid, detailed feedback (with ample opportunity to modify). If you experience extensive delays getting a permit for a new building project, then your client should have confidence that your firm can mobilize quickly with a Plan B.

Encourage them to ask questions. You may not have all the answers, but try to anticipate questions that might be asked upon hearing your news. The recipients may be in shock (though they shouldn't be if you follow the advice mentioned above) and thus not be able to formulate questions on the spot. It's up to you to offer specifics on how they can reach you (after hours, on your cell phone, etc.). If it makes sense, you can schedule a follow-up meeting for the next day, once they've had a chance to digest the news.

Are you on their side? If yes, then wholeheartedly express your support and empathy. How can you best show support? Easy: Make it clear that you will “be there.” You stand ready to take action. You are accessible. You are available to

Anne Scarlett is president of Scarlett Consulting, a Chicago-based company specializing in AEC-specific strategic marketing plans, marketing audits and coaching. She is also on the adjunct faculty of Columbia College of Chicago and DePaul University. She can be contacted through her website, www.annescarlett.com.



hear concerns and fears. You are working on a plan. You have initial ideas on how to divide and conquer. You will not quit until the problem is resolved.

Admittedly, bad news will sometimes involve anger or blame between the deliverer and the recipient. In those cases, offering your *personal* support won't make sense. To that end, make sure you include the right people in the meeting just in case there are other resources that the recipient of the bad news might be able to use.

Share the news in person (or at least by voice) first. Even if you are the type that prefers to communicate the tough stuff in writing (like me), people receive bad news far better when it's delivered orally. Why? Because rather than obsessively reading and re-reading the news, they will hear the information just one time. Also, your message will be clear, thanks to your body language and tone. If you need to document what happened, follow up with a written summary.

Take ownership, if needed. Was this bad news caused by you? Or by people who report to you? If not, was this bad news something that you could have steered in a different direction? Whatever your level of responsibility and involvement (or lack thereof), admit it up front. Be as honest as possible about your participation in this problem, and aim to work toward a positive plan of action.

Identify the bright side(s). Speaking of positive, you must mull over what good could come from this problem. Let's say your company needs to close down an entire regional office because they haven't been pulling their weight. The "bright" side might be difficult for the soon-to-be-fired office to see. But think further. Can you point out that their stress and burden will now be lifted? Or that while at first glance, the news seems something to mourn, it will actually expose new opportunities? I'm not suggesting a dishonest spin. Rather, I'm suggesting you help the recipients consider the positive components that they may not be able to identify in the first moments of hearing the bad news.

Incidentally, I've personally experienced all of the above-mentioned situations. Many times, I had to deliver the news to

clients or colleagues (often after I had to hear it from someone else). In that spirit, I thought it would be worthwhile to share a few lessons learned about how to *receive* troubling news. (By the way, several of the aforementioned tips also apply when you are on the receiving end.)

Receiving Bad News

Don't "shut down." In the past, I would occasionally shut down when hearing bad news—whether it was discovering my client champion was leaving his organization or one of my booked projects was cancelled. Instead of accepting the news and reviewing the situation from all angles, I would become unresponsive. In other words, I became a part of the problem rather than an instrumental part of the solution. This behavior does not serve anyone well.

If you need help, get it. Don't wait. Sometimes, it takes an outside perspective to get you and your firm over the hump of the bad news. Sharing the news with trusted advisors makes the situation real, plus unbiased advisors offer clarity, perspective and encouragement. They help those of us who are stuck deep in the mess to elevate our thinking, and they help enable us to make wiser next-step decisions.

Get a commitment to reconvene. Upon hearing the news, you may need some time to collect yourself. Rather than having later regrets of "I should have responded by saying X," set a specific date and time to continue the conversation. This will give you a chance to think through the situation, help propose next steps and respond to the plan of action.

Remember that everything is relative. Nothing is truly the end of the world. When a group of key superstar engineers leave your firm together to join another company, it is disappointing. When three of your top-tier clients (responsible for over 60% of your annual earnings) drop your firm, it is devastating. But. It. Isn't. The. End. Of. The. World.

For many of us, effectively delivering (and receiving) bad news in business is a work in progress for our professional personas. Hopefully, we will all get better as we advance in our careers. ■

With the exception of things that
happen completely beyond your control,
any bad news that you share should not
come as a total surprise.
