

Home > Insights > 7 steps great leaders take before, during, and after delivering bad news

Daily Briefing

## 7 steps great leaders take before, during, and after delivering bad news

September 19, 2019 · 5 min read

Conveying bad news is one of the most stressful situations leaders face. Their jitters often lead them into one of two mistakes: either they take an overly harsh approach or sugarcoat the message.

Here are the steps leaders should take to deliver bad news and navigate difficult conversations, according to research from organizational behavior and leadership experts.

### Before the conversation

#### 1: Clarify your purpose

When preparing for tense conversations—such as letting someone go or providing negative feedback—we often worry about how we'll come across: What will others think of me? Will what I say create conflict?

But these short-term motives prevent you from seeing the long-term implications of avoiding difficult conversations, writes business social scientist Joseph Grenny for the *Harvard Business Review*. For example, if you have a low-performing employee you know you need to let go, it's usually easier and less awkward in the short term to postpone the conversation. Yet avoiding the difficult conversation not only hurts your team's morale, but also prevents your employee from finding a job he or she can really succeed in.

To get your motives straight, Grenny recommends asking the following questions. "What do I really want? What do I really want for me? For the other person? For the relationship? For other stakeholders?"

Once you reflect on these questions, you will begin to see that having a difficult conversation now will solidify your role as an ethical and caring leader in the long term, writes Grenny.

#### 2: Outline your conversation

Difficult conversations inherently involve opposing viewpoints, writes Grenny. Without the proper preparation, you'll spend the conversation in a back-and-forth argument over who's right.

To have a productive conversation, gather all the data and facts you used to come to your conclusion, suggests Grenny. And rather than beginning the conversation with your conclusion, explain the logic behind your decision and build your case in a "patient, honest, and vulnerable way," he adds.

#### 3: Choose your location carefully

It should be private, which reduces the risk of embarrassment for the person you're speaking with, recommends Andy Molinsky, a professor of management and organizational behavior at Brandeis University, who has interviewed more than 40 leaders about how they deliver bad news.

## While delivering the news

### 4: Bring an open mind

When you listen deeply and sincerely, others feel less of a need to resist you in order to be heard.

Joseph Grenny, business social scientist

"The most important attitude to bring to a crucial conversation is a blend of confidence and curiosity," writes Grenny. Though you need to be confident in the merit of your position, you should still remain open to what the other person has to say. "When you listen deeply and sincerely, others feel less of a need to resist you in order to be heard," he adds.

### 5: Be direct, but compassionate

Get to the point as quickly as possible and leave no possibility of misinterpretation. And while you shouldn't try to suppress your emotions, you *should* try to regulate them towards a constructive purpose, according to leadership expert Deborah Rowland. In some situations, it might help to think of yourself and the other person as partners trying to solve the same problem, rather than adversaries, says Monique Valcour, an executive coach and former management professor at the EDHEC Business School.

## After delivering the news

### 6: Avoid negotiating

After hearing the bad news, some employees may try to bargain their way out of the situation or try to debate the decision. Molinsky recommends sticking to your core message, even if things get emotional.

### 7: Follow up

If the conversation becomes heated, it might be best to call a time out and continue it later, says executive coach Amy Jen Su. Either way, at the conclusion of the conversation, let the other person know that you're available to answer any questions that come up later. This can help you maintain a positive relationship with the person, she explains.

(Grenny, *Harvard Business Review*, 1/22/19; Molinsky, *Inc.*, 1/30/18; Valcour, *Harvard Business Review*, 5/22/2017; Rowland, *Harvard Business Review*, 4/8/2016; Su, *Harvard Business Review*, 8/13/2015)