



Delivering Difficult News - Annotated Bibliography

Leaders at all levels of academic organizations are often engaged in difficult conversations. Delivering unwanted or problematic news to subordinates is a common, and yet often stressful, part of being a leader. In such conversations, both participants may be uncomfortable, as delivering and receiving hard information are differently anxiety-inducing.

Handling these situations straightforwardly— while respecting the dignity of the recipient—is the mark of a trustworthy leader willing to act in the best interests of the organization.

The following resources, representing views of leaders from a wide range of backgrounds, offer a variety of techniques for these conversations. These skills can be useful from family and personal situations to office and business interactions.

How great leaders deliver bad news

In this informal article, Erika Andersen gives six cardinal rules for delivering bad news well. She presents examples from her experience of how news was delivered poorly, and how it should have been given. Her six cardinal rules are: (1) Speak up – it is wishful thinking to hope the bad situation will just blow over. (2) Be accurate – having to repeatedly explain again will undermine your credibility. (3) Take responsibility – courageously admitting that you failed will gain recipient’s confidence. (4) Listen – be willing to hear people’s responses to the news. (5) Say what you will do next – say how you’re going to turn around the bad situation. (6) Do what you say, and repeat as needed – if you fail to deliver on promises, you will be seen in worse light than before.

Andersen, E. (2013, March 6). *How great leaders deliver bad news. Forbes/Leadership. Online: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/erikaandersen/2013/03/06/how-great-leaders-deliver-bad-news/#73f84b793dc6>*

SPIKES—A six-step protocol for delivering bad news

In the medical profession, delivering adverse news to patients can be part of the job. This scholarly article covers how to deliver bad news to cancer patients and proposes SPIKES, a widely used six-step way to deliver difficult news that can be adapted to any situation: Set up the interview and rehearse; assess the person’s Perception; obtain the person’s Invitation; give Knowledge and information to the person; address the person’s Emotions; and strategy and Summary.

Baile, W. F., & others. (2000). *SPIKES—A six-step protocol for delivering bad news. The Oncologist 5/4, 302-311. Online summary; full article online: <http://theoncologist.alphamedpress.org/content/5/4/302.full.pdf+html>*

How to communicate a difficult message

This blog post offers numerous pointers for delivering difficult messages, grouped under five main points: start with yourself, look for a mutual purpose, use the CEO (cushion, evidence, opinion) structure, mind your words and your body language, and listen actively (look and be interested, inquire with questions, stay on target, test your understanding, evaluate the speaker’s message, neutralize your feelings).

Bendell, J. (2017, January 7). *How to communicate a difficult message. (Blog post). Center for Strategy and Communication Ltd, London. Online: https://www.the-centre.co.uk/blog/post/how_to_communicate_a_difficult_message*





21 rules for delivering difficult messages

This concise 32-page booklet contains 21 rules for conveying difficult messages. Following these rules will allow individuals in your organization to thrive and help your organization move forward.

Gaffney, S. (2014). *21 rules for delivering difficult messages*. JMG Publishing. Online: <https://www.stevengaffney.com/>

Demonstration: Kendall Zoller on delivering difficult news

In a pair of demonstrations, Kendall Zoller acts out both a less and more effective way for delivering difficult news in the context of supervisor critiquing an employee's presentation. In the less effective way, Zoller demonstrates use of direct eye contact, squared-off shoulders, facing the other person, use of confrontational tone, and too-close proximity.

In the recommended method, he shifts to a 90-degree angle with the other person, uses a visual, uses the "power of the third point," separates discussion of the work from the relationship, and uses an approachable voice.

Zoller, K. (2018). *Kendall Zoller on delivering difficult news (Demonstration video)*. National Center for Research in Professional Ethics, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Online: <https://ethicscenter.csl.illinois.edu/leadership-collection-dashboard/communication/>

The 10 commandments for delivering bad news

After spending 29 years researching how managers deliver bad news, the author presents ten "commandments" he relies upon. The commandments provide ethical and moral guidelines for delivering bad news. They are: (1) Always treat people with dignity and respect; (2) always follow up and follow through; (3) always remember your multiple audiences; (4) always bring solutions; (5) always look for the silver lining; (6) always justify; (7) always put it in writing; (8) never hide the truth; (9) never delay; and (10) never surprise.

Bies, R. (2012, May 30). *The 10 commandments for delivering bad news*. *Forbes/Leadership*. Online: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesleadershipforum/2012/05/30/10-commandments-for-delivering-bad-news/#7ad101ef2169>

Delivering difficult messages

This article presents a three-stage process for delivering bad news that can be used at home and all private and business occasions: (1) gain clarity about the message, (2) overrule avoidance with courage, and (3) the actual delivery of the message. Examples show how the delivery was handled poorly, and the writer gives suggestions for handling them better. The biggest obstacle is avoidance. Delivering the message requires directness and sensitivity (what Engels calls "tough compassion"). To disarm defensiveness and prevent argumentativeness, avoid "you" language; use "I" language instead.

Engels, J. J. (2007, July 1). *Delivering difficult messages*. *Journal of Accountancy*. Online: <https://www.journalofaccountancy.com/issues/2007/jul/deliveringdifficultmessages.html>

Delivering difficult news

This Quick Tip distills advice about adeptly delivering difficult news into five basic principles: (1) Get to the point, own the decision; (2) pick the right time and place; (3) come prepared; (4) the only behavior you can control is your own; and (5) be hard on the problem, soft on the people.

Gunsalus, C. K. (2017). *Delivering Difficult News – Quick Tip*. National Center for Research in Professional Ethics, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. <https://ethicscenter.csl.illinois.edu/files/2017/05/Delivering-Difficult-News-Quick-Tips.pdf>





5 ways to deliver bad news with a minimum of pain.

This article summarizes experimental psychological research articles about communicating bad news. It describes the downside of the MUM (keeping mum about undesirable messages) effect and the idea behind “politeness theory” (saving face). The article offers five principles: (1) Tell at least part of the truth if you think the person needs to hear it; (2) sugarcoat it if you think the person can’t handle it. (“It’s me not you.”); (3) follow the principles of politeness theory (allow the other person to “save face”); (4) take your time to prepare your message; and (5) rely on others to help you.

Whitbourne, S. K. (2015, July 25). 5 ways to deliver bad news with a minimum of pain. *Psychology Today*. Online: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/fulfillment-any-age/201507/5-ways-deliver-bad-news-minimum-pain>

For Further In-Depth Reading

How to have that difficult conversation you’ve been avoiding

This book covers the broad range of the difficult conversations one might have with all persons in one’s life, from workplace to family. The chapter “The Essentials of a Good Conversation” (pp. 35-77) gives focused advice on the face-to-face aspects of delivering difficult news, including being clear about “you” and “I,” being clear about the problem, staying on task, avoiding “should,” and being specific. It also includes examples of good and poor ways of expressing ideas.

Cloud, H., & Townsend, J. (2005). *How to have that difficult conversation you’ve been avoiding*. Grand Rapids: MI. Zondervan.

What do we know about giving bad news? A review

Delivering bad news to patients and families is a common and stressful situation for doctors; this article summarizes research articles from the medical literature about teaching physicians how to give bad news. Although it is narrowly focused on delivering bad medical news, it summarizes advice about delivering bad news and includes recommendations of several mnemonic protocols for practical advice: SPIKES, ABCDE, and the Six-Point Protocol.

Harrison, M.E. and Walling, A. (2010). What do we know about giving bad news? A review. *Clinical Pediatrics*, 49(7), 619-626.

Effective difficult conversations: A step by step guide

This book has broad coverage of preparing for difficult conversations (such as getting clear on the topic, gathering needed sources and documents, and clarifying the message you want to deliver, and following up with a written letter.) The chapter “During the Conversations” (pp. 33-56) gives detailed advice with example speeches about conducting the actual face-to-face conversation. Advice covers topics such as stating the facts, asking questions, listening, engaging to understand, paying attention, and exploring options for resolution.

Soehner, C. B., & Darling, A. (2017). *Effective difficult conversations: A step by step guide*. Chicago: ALA Editions.

