

## 7.5: Bad News Messages

A bad news message (or negative news message) delivers news that the audience does not want to receive. Delivering negative news is never easy. Whether you are informing someone they are being laid off or providing constructive criticism on their job performance, how you choose to deliver the message can influence its response (Bovee & Thill, 2010).

Some people prefer their bad news to be direct and concise. Others may prefer a less direct approach. How you break bad news will also depend on your culture, your family and norms of your industry. For example, people in India might be very direct with their family and close friends, but use an indirect approach in a workplace setting.

Regardless of whether you determine a direct or indirect approach is warranted, your job is to deliver news that you anticipate will be unwelcome.

In this section we will examine several scenarios that can be communicated internally (within the organization) and externally (outside the organization), but recognize that the lines can be blurred as communication flows outside and through an organization or business. Internal and external communication environments often have a degree of overlap. The rumour of anticipated layoffs may surface in the local media, and you may be called upon to address the concern within the organization. In a similar way, a product that has failed internal quality control tests will require several more tests and improvements before it is ready for market, but if that information leaves the organization, it can hurt the business reputation, prospects for future contracts, and the company's ability to secure financing.

### Goals of Bad News Messages

When you break bad news, you first want to think about the best possible outcome for everyone involved. For example, if you have to lay off a good employee because of budget cuts, the best case scenario is that the person is upset but understands that the layoff wasn't about their work performance. If you handle the news with professionalism, you might be able to preserve the working relationship in the future. If you're firing an employee who hasn't responded to multiple Performance Improvement Plans, however, you would want to break the news clearly and compassionately, but you might not care as much about preserving the relationship.

This also applies to external communication. Sometimes, an angry customer might complain on social media. You might not be able to preserve the relationship with that customer, but other customers will be watching to see how you handle it. If you deal with the angry customer in a fair, professional manner, you will leave others with a positive impression of your company.

There are seven goals to keep in mind when delivering negative news, in person or in written form:

1. Be clear and concise to minimize the chances of confusion or back-and-forth communication.
2. Help the receiver understand and accept the news.
3. Maintain trust and respect for the business or organization and for the receiver.
4. Avoid legal liability or erroneous admission of guilt or culpability.
5. Maintain the relationship, even if a formal association is being terminated. (Note: this only applies to situations where you want the relationship to continue. When dealing with an abusive client, for example, your goal might be to clearly sever the relationship).
6. Reduce the anxiety associated with the negative news to increase comprehension.
7. Achieve the designated business outcome.

### Scenarios

Let's go through some scenarios. Let's say you're a supervisor and have been given the task of discussing repeated lateness with an employee called Brian. Brian has frequently been late for work, and the problem has grown worse over the last two weeks. The lateness is impairing not only Brian's performance, but also that of the entire work team. Your manager has instructed you to put an end to it. The desired result is for Brian to stop being late and to improve his performance.

You can

1. stop by Brian's cubicle and simply say, "Get to work on time or you are out"
2. invite Brian out to a nice lunch and let him have it
3. write Brian a stern e-mail
4. ask Brian to come to your office and discuss the behaviour with him in private

While there are many other ways you could choose to address the situation, let's examine each of these four alternatives in light of the goals to keep in mind when presenting negative news.

### Scenario 1

First, you could approach Brian in his work space and speak to him directly. Advantages to this approach include the ability to get right to the point right away. However, this approach could strain your supervisor-employee relationship as a result of the public display of criticism, Brian may not understand you, there is a lack of a formal discussion you can document, and there is a risk that your actions may not bring about the desired results.

The goals of delivering a negative message include the desire to be clear and concise in order to avoid having a back-and-forth conversation where you're continually providing clarification. The approach described above does not provide the opportunity for discussion, feedback, or confirmation that Brian has clearly understood your concern. It fails to address the performance concern and it limits the correction to the lateness. Overall, it fails to demonstrate respect for all parties. The lack of tact apparent in the approach may reflect negatively on you as the supervisor and your supervisors or managers.

When you need to speak to an employee about a personnel concern, it is always best to do it in private. Give thought and concern to the conversation before it occurs, and make a list of points to cover with specific information, including grievances. Like any other speech, you may need to rehearse, particularly if this type of meeting is new to you. When it comes time to have the discussion, issue the warning, back it up in writing with documentation, and don't give the impression that you might change your decision. Whether the issue at hand is a simple caution about tardiness or a more serious conversation, you need to be fair and respectful, even if the other person has been less than professional. Let's examine the next alternative.

### Scenario 2

Let's say you invite Brian to lunch at a nice restaurant. There is linen on the table, silverware is present for more than the main course, and the water glasses have stems. The environment says "good job." Your words will contradict this nonverbal message. The juxtaposition between the environment and the verbal message will cause tension and confusion, which will probably be an obstacle to the receiver's ability to listen. If Brian doesn't understand the message, and the message requires clarification, your approach has failed. The contrast between the restaurant setting and the negative message does not promote understanding and acceptance of the bad news or correction. Furthermore, it does not build trust in the relationship, as the restaurant invitation might be interpreted as a "trap" or a betrayal. Let's examine yet another approach.

### Scenario 3

You've written Brian a stern e-mail. You've included a list of all the recent dates when he was late and made several statements about the quality of his work. You've indicated he needs to improve, and stop being late, or else. But was your email harassment? Could it be considered beyond the scope of supervision and interpreted as mean or cruel? And do you even know if Brian has received it? If there was no reply, do you know whether it achieved its desired business outcome? A written message may certainly be part of the desired approach, but how it is presented and delivered is as important as what it says. Let's examine our fourth approach to this scenario.

### Scenario 4

You ask Brian to join you in a private conversation. You start the conversation with an expression of concern and an open-ended question: "Brian, I've been concerned about your work lately. Is everything all right?" As Brian answers, you may demonstrate that you are listening by nodding your head and possibly taking notes. You may learn that Brian has been having problems sleeping or that his living situation has changed. Or Brian may decline to share any issues, deny that anything is wrong, and ask why you are concerned. You may then state that you've observed the chronic lateness, name one or more specific mistakes you have found in his work, and end with a reiteration that you are concerned. This statement of concern may elicit more responses and open the conversation up into a dialogue where you come to understand the situation, Brian sees your concern, and the relationship is preserved. Alternatively, in case the conversation does not go well, you will still keep a positive attitude even as you document the meeting and give Brian a verbal warning.

Regardless of how well or poorly the conversation goes, if Brian tells other employees about it, they may take note of how you handled the situation, and it will contribute to their perception of you. It guides their expectations of how you operate and how to communicate with you, as this interaction is not only about you and Brian. You represent the company and its reputation, and your professional display of concern as you try to learn more sends a positive message. While the private, respectful meeting may not be the perfect solution, it is preferable to the other approaches we have considered.

One additional point to consider as you document this interaction is the need to present the warning in writing. You may elect to prepare a memo that outlines the information concerning Brian's performance and lateness and have it ready should you want to present it. If the session goes well, and you have the discretion to make a judgment call, you may elect to give him another week to resolve the issue. Even if it goes well, you may want to present the memo, as it documents the interaction and serves as evidence of due process should Brian's behaviour fail to change, eventually resulting in the need for termination.

This combined approach of a verbal and written message is increasingly the norm in business communication.

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## 7.6: Delivering a Bad News Message

There are two approaches you can use to deliver a negative news message—the direct approach and the indirect approach. We'll go through each of these in turn.

### Direct approach

The direct approach is often used when the audience values brevity, the message needs to be concise, the message is very complex and might not be understood easily, the message is related to a known issue or problem (and bad news won't be a surprise), or you're terminating a business relationship.

As shown in Figure 4.11.1, the bad news is announced in the opening or introduction of the message.

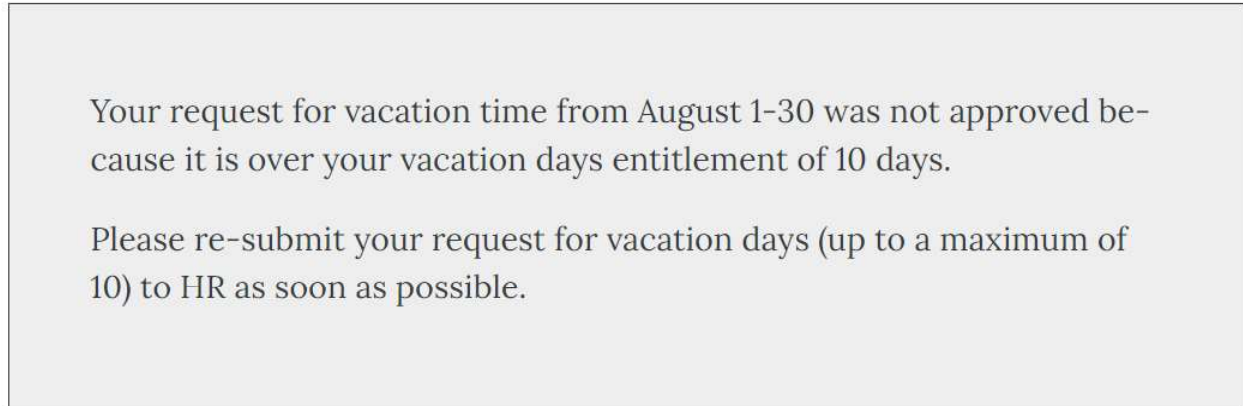


Figure 4.11.1 An example of a bad news message delivered using the direct approach

### Indirect approach

When the bad news may have a significant impact on the recipient or you don't know them very well, you may prefer to use the indirect approach. Figure 4.11.2 shows an example of a bad news message delivered using this approach.

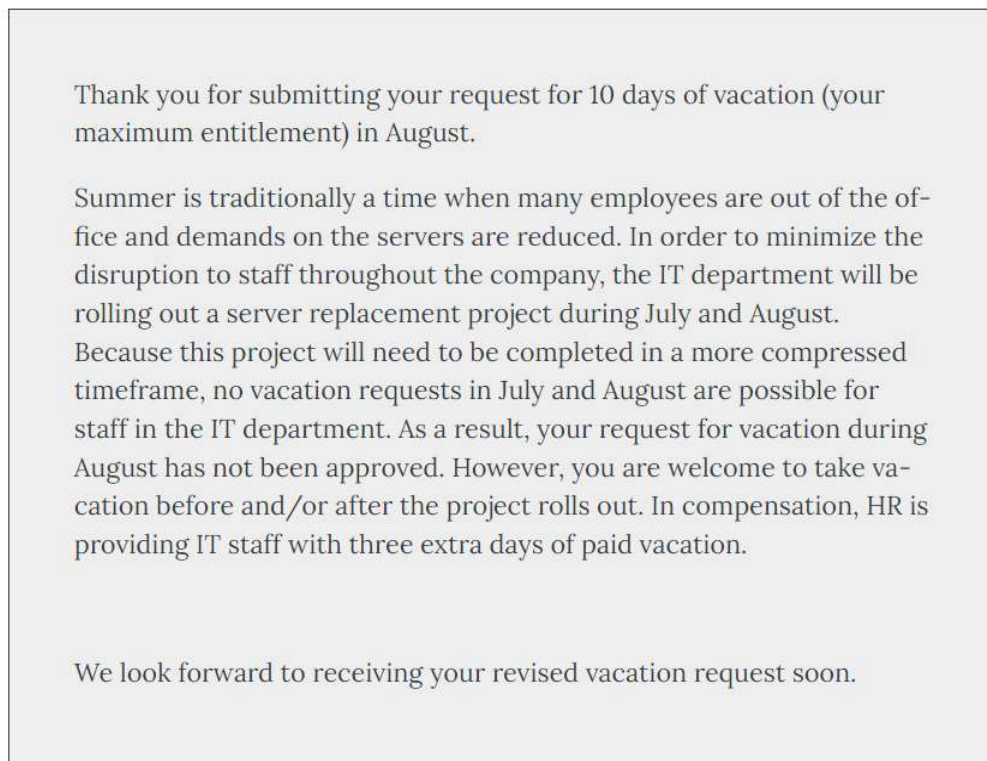


Figure 4.11.2 An example of a bad news message delivered using the indirect approach

The indirect approach for delivering bad news has five main parts:

1. Open with a buffer statement
2. Explain the situation
3. Break the bad news
4. Redirect or provide alternatives
5. End politely and forward-looking

We'll go through each of these parts in detail.

### Buffer statement

The first part of a negative news message, verbal or written, is a buffer statement. It provides neutral or positive information. It sets the tone and often serves as a cushion for the information to come. It is important that the buffer not be overly positive because this can be misleading or set up the reader to expect a positive news message instead.

### Explanation

Next, an explanation discusses why there is an issue. This may be relatively simple, quite complex, or uncomfortable. While an explanation is important, never admit or imply responsibility without written authorization from your company cleared by legal counsel. Try to avoid labeling the bad news, such as calling it inconvenient or disappointing, because this can assume the feelings of your reader and create a negative impression. The person receiving the message may not have felt badly about receiving the news until you pointed out that it was indeed inconvenient or disappointing.

### Break the bad news

The third part of the negative news message involves the bad news itself, and the emphasis here is on clarity and accuracy. While you want to break the bad news clearly, try not to spotlight it.

### Redirect or provide alternatives

The fourth part of a bad news message is the redirect, where you refocus attention on a solution strategy, possible alternatives, or the subsequent actions that will take place.

### End politely and forward-looking

Last, you want to end your message politely and looking to the future. Don't mention the bad news again!

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## 7.7: Breaking Bad News on Social Media

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When someone complains about you or your company on social media, you might be tempted to ignore it. Unfortunately, the conversation about your company will continue whether or not you respond, so responding gives you an opportunity to control the message.

Let's say that a customer, Amir, posted on Twitter that the watch your company sold him broke within a week. Your goal is to help resolve Amir's complaint and also show that your watch company has great customer service. Getting into a back-and-forth exchange with Amir will make you look unprofessional, so the best thing to do is to reply to Amir with a short message like: "Thanks for bringing this to our attention. Please follow me so that we can DM (direct message) each other and find a solution. Or, you can email me at \_\_\_\_."

Hopefully, this will take the conversation offline so that you can resolve it. Maybe it will turn out that Amir's watch is under warranty and you can repair or replace it. Or maybe Amir broke his watch in a way that's not covered. You can break the bad news using the strategies above in a private manner.

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