



## DELIVERING DIFFICULT NEWS - QUICK TIPS

*Five quick tips for how to adeptly deliver news that someone doesn't want to hear.*

### *Get to the Point, Own the Decision*

- When the news you're delivering to someone is negative, don't beat around the bush. Get to the verdict without trying to "soften the blow." Know what you must say, and say it early and clearly.
- Remember to be polite—don't confuse being direct with being rude.
- Sometimes you will have to deliver bad news that doesn't leave much room for a positive outcome, such as a negative tenure decision or terminating employment. Ultimately the news must be delivered, and most people will appreciate you being forthright and honest about it.
- It can be compassionate to be sympathetic and express regret that the decision being made was not the one the person was hoping for, and even offer support or advice if it is sought. At the same time, take care that you do not risk confusing the message. Stay on point, be concise, and listen more than you talk.
- If the decision was yours, take ownership of the decision. Do not pass it off as having been someone else's choice. Prevaricating will undercut your leadership and credibility.

\* After carefully considering all the issues at hand, I am afraid I cannot give you the raise you were seeking at this time. I'm sorry this news is not what you were hoping for. We can discuss the matter again at your next evaluation.

**SAMPLE SCRIPT**  
articulating boundaries

### *Pick the Right Time & Place*

- Choose the right context for having a potentially difficult conversation with care. People always take feedback, criticism, and bad news better when it is done in private.
- Your goal should be to maximize the likelihood that your comments will be heard and acted upon, and it is your responsibility to select a location conducive to that outcome.
- If it puts the person more at ease, you can let the individual to select a time for the discussion to take place. Be clear that the discussion will occur – set a deadline if you want to make sure the issue is addressed in a timely fashion.
- Choose a location suitable to the nature of the conversation. Don't, for example, strike up a conversation with an employee about hygiene habits in the middle of the office hallway.

### *Come Prepared*

- Know ahead of time what actions or outcomes you seek. Invest the time to prepare thoroughly. Prepare personal scripts for your key messages and for responses to questions you are likely to receive.
- Gather pertinent materials and review them before your meeting. This can include documentation of problems, applicable policies, and samples of work that may be of concern.





- Take the materials with you to your meeting. This will support you in presenting your position clearly, and tie your comments or feedback to facts relevant to the purpose of the conversation.
- Use the supporting materials as a “third point” to focus the conversation on the problem to be solved, or the conduct to be addressed. This approach can lessen the feeling of the person whose conduct is being discussed of being under attack.
- If the person is unstable, consider holding the conversation with another colleague present.

## The Only Behavior You Can Control is Your Own

- Remember that all you can do is manage yourself and your own behavior and reactions—and that it is always your job to do that.
- Before a difficult conversation, take a moment to recall what conduct by others “pushes your buttons,” that is, that trigger disproportionate emotional reactions in you. Are you likely to encounter any of those behaviors in the coming discussion? Be prepared to manage yourself, so that the focus of the conversation is not lost.
- Take measures to focus the conversation on identifying and articulating interests for both parties and to maintain a fair and open affect.
- No matter how well prepared you think you are, sometimes new information emerges that may require you to reconsider your position. Keep listening and, if necessary, adjourn the meeting for additional fact-finding or review.
- Have a plan for what you will do or say if the other person has a strong adverse reaction to the conversation, and try not to take it personally. Your ability to be effective will be undermined if your fear of an outburst leads to overly softening the ultimate message.

## Be Hard on the Problem, Soft on the People

- Focus on issue/s, and not on personal characteristics or motives. Avoid making accusations.
- Ask questions and find out what could help fix the problem under discussion.
- Seek a balance between focusing on solving the problem with a sense of empathy and understanding for the other person’s perspective and position.
- Focus on your desired outcome: If the individual you are talking to is usually a strong worker or colleague who has made a mistake or misstepped, your goal is to leave with both of you clear on a plan of action moving forward to improve matters. If the person’s performance is seriously sub-par or is on the path to discipline, your goal is similarly a very clear message by the end of the meeting.
- If specific conduct of an individual is the central issue, discuss only the person’s conduct, with dates, times, locations, and specifics. Do not make comments or generalize from specifics about the person’s character.
- To help you stay on topic with an upset or defensive person, rely on your personal scripts. Tears can be difficult to handle - show empathy but remain firm in delivering the message. Some circumstances may require you to repeat the same comments to stay on track.

