

Delivering bad news in the workplace



Key Messages

1. Prepare, mentally and emotionally – think about yourself, the other person, the news itself, etc.
2. Make sure you have privacy and time.
3. Give yourself enough time to break the news to the person.
4. Always deliver bad news with a second person present—it's better for you and for the recipient if there's more than the two of you present.
5. Deal with the person's concerns before you deal with questions of detail.
6. Give the news in bite-sized chunks and make periodic checks for understanding.
7. Make sure you are supported too—delivering bad news is stressful.

Receiving bad news can be traumatic.

The way that you prepare can make a big difference

What is 'Bad' News?

This might seem like an obvious question, but the answer depends on the recipient of the news: **Bad News is "any information which adversely and seriously affects an individual's view of his or her future."** Robert Buckman

This guide deals with giving bad news to an employee about the death of a relative

1. Prepare yourself

Set time aside (avoid the 'on-the-fly conversation'). Find a quiet private room where you can avoid interruptions (from people as well as from phones or interruptions). Never give important information in inappropriate places such as busy workplaces, open plan offices, corridors etc.

Know all the facts, make sure you have the right worker, and have checked the information you are about to give them.

Make sure you have sufficient time to break the bad news to the worker. Have tissues handy (but discreetly). It is important to stay with the worker and give them time to take in what you are telling them.

If an interpreter is required, organise in advance and avoid delegating interpretation to a relative, friend or colleague.

2. Prepare the worker

Start by inviting the worker to sit down. and introduce yourself and your colleagues(s).—if necessary.

Before launching in to the news, find out what the worker knows—if anything—about the information you are about to give them. (E.g. "Joe—do you know why I have asked to meet with you this afternoon?")

3. Delivering the news

Give a 'warning shot' and pause. For example, "Joe—I have just had a call from (a relative)/the Garda " Remember to pause—let the person take this in before moving on.

Carefully break the news gently, slowly and clearly. Break the news into chunks and check understanding of each chunk. Don't overload the person with information. Avoid euphemisms and jargon – use simple language and drawings can help too.

Track (keep an eye on) the person's reactions and acknowledge their emotional reactions ("I can see this is a shock for you/very upsetting, etc.").

Before closing, ask the person to tell you what they have understood about what you are saying – you can correct any misunderstanding. If necessary, repeat the information.

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Deliver bad news well and you'll never be forgotten.
Deliver it badly and you'll always be remembered.



Some tips and handy phrases

1. Start by finding out what the person already knows
2. Give a warning shot – it allows the person to prepare themselves for what is coming next. For example, “I wish I had better news to give you today” or “I’m sorry, but the news isn’t as good as we’d hoped it might be”.
3. Think of delivering bad news as a process, not a single event. It may take the person a while and several inputs before the person is able to fully grasp all that you are saying.
4. Leave the person with some sense of what can be done to help them deal with whatever they have to deal with.

4. Support the worker

Deal with concerns before details – facts may not be remembered but the way they were communicated will be. Allow for silence and tears and avoid false reassurances.

The person may not be able to take everything in – be prepared to repeat as necessary.

5. Plan and follow up

Give the worker a clear plan as to what will happen next. Have options prepared to discuss with the worker as appropriate and based on worker’s response to the news (e.g. if you are giving news that a relative has died—insist that you will organise transport for the worker for wherever they need to go). Do not allow them to drive themselves—offer to have someone accompany them.

Offer to call relatives and/or a friend/colleague with whom the worker is friendly. Seek the worker’s permission before giving information to others.

Provide a contact name and number to the worker if they have further questions or require support.

Check back with the worker when they have had a chance to process the news.

Delivering Bad News over the Phone



- Find a quiet room and mentally prepare before you start dialling.
- Confirm the worker’s identity. Tell them who you are and what your role is.
- Suggest that the worker sits down.
- Give a warning shot and pause before delivering the news gently, using simple language. Sample phrase: “I’m afraid I am calling with bad news”.
- If there is someone with them, offer to speak to this other person too and/or offer to telephone another family member or friend. Repeat exactly what you said to the first person to confirm the message.
- Stay on the phone until the worker indicates that they are ready to end the conversation.
- Ensure the worker has a contact name and direct line number for you or for one of your colleagues.
- Ensure a member of staff is nominated to liaise with the worker and that the worker has his/her contact number.
- Document and liaise with others as appropriate in the business /organisation/work group.

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