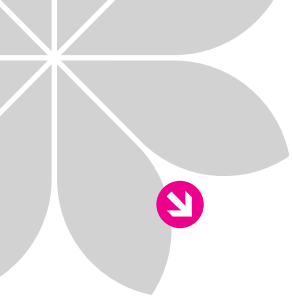




How to break bad news



At some stage in our lives, we all have to break bad news. Unfortunately, it's a common occurrence at work. For employers, delivering bad news is a reality of the job, a fact that has come into sharp focus since the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020.



And when it's your turn to communicate the difficult decisions that are being made to safeguard the future of the business, you will be in the spotlight. If you fail to master the art of delivering bad news respectfully, gracefully and clearly, then the person on the receiving end may suffer more than they have to.

Understandably, the leaders making difficult decisions will feel anxious when the time comes to communicate change, which is why the team at workplace communication experts Magenta Associates have produced this guide on how to break bad news well.

Research conducted by WkSpace between 30 March 2020 and 7 June 2020 reveals:

- * 16% of UK employers might be making redundancies in light of COVID-19
- * 28% might be cutting staff hours or pay
- * Only 4% of UK businesses expect to grow
- * 55% of employees would judge a potential employer on how they treated their staff at this time

The science behind why disappointment hurts

We are living in a climate of fear. More than half of the employees surveyed in a recent study by workplace strategy consultancy WkSpace were concerned about job security. It appears employers sense this anxiety too: 51% recognised that their employees are concerned about their job.

Elsewhere, there is a growing body of evidence that human beings can be profoundly affected by negative news. Even before the outbreak, the UK was a stressed nation. According to a survey commissioned in 2018 by the Mental Health Foundation, 74% of respondents admitted to feeling 'overwhelmed or unable to cope' at some point that year. The media headlines since mid-March 2020 suggest stress levels are rising.

Stress can cause headaches, muscle tension, anxiety, chest pain and fatigue. It can even impact mood and behaviour, like overeating or excess alcohol consumption. High levels of stress for prolonged periods of time is also linked to high blood pressure, obesity, heart disease and diabetes. So it is in the nation's interest to recognise the negative impact that stress has on people's lives and to take steps to lessen the burden on the populace.

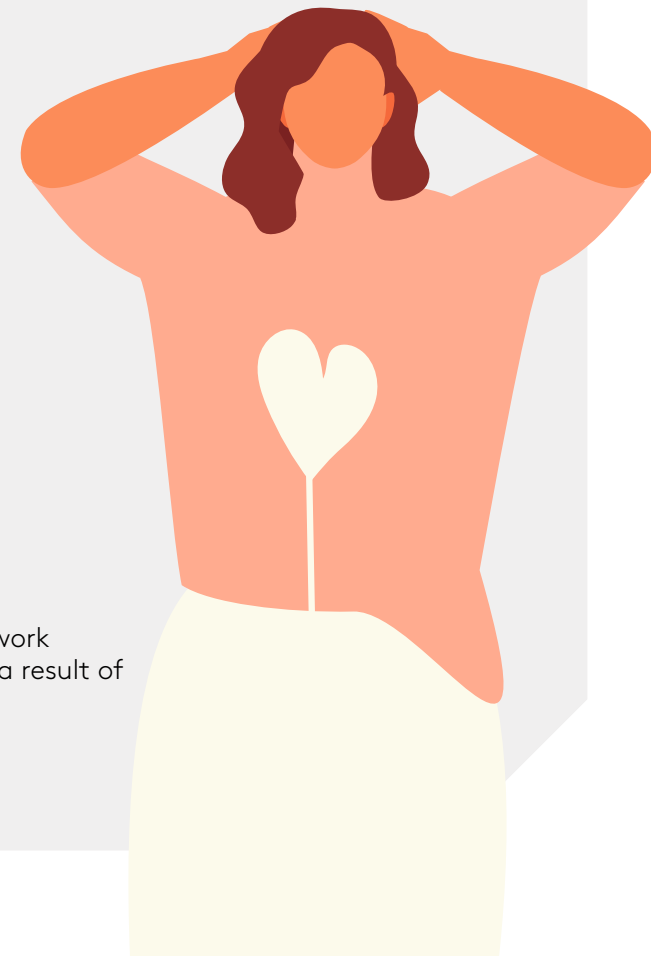
When delivering bad news, it is important to understand how the mind and body responds to negative stimuli. Writing for Vice, Kristen Dold suggests that disappointment, no matter how it's caused, triggers a very predictable physiological response:

"The limbic system in your brain—all the parts that work together to generate emotion—fires up. Something bad is happening. Your lateral habenula (a small region of the brain scientists have dubbed 'the disappointment centre') lights up and shoots off directions to the midbrain to halt the production of dopamine, also known as the brain's pleasure chemical. Without the hormone, you start feeling rejected and disconnected from your expectations. This isn't happening. As you begin to process the bad news, the stress hormone cortisol seeps into your bloodstream..."

The GDS special edition on COVID-19 was developed as part of a global effort to understand the impact of the pandemic on people's lives.

The Global Drug Survey that has so far amassed more than 73,000 (at the time of writing) shows that:

- * Nearly **47% of Brits who drink** reported doing so earlier in the day than in February
- * **49% reported tension** in their intimate relationships, an increase of 7%
- * More than **40% cited poorer physical health** as a consequence of increased drinking
- * Respondents also reported work **performance problems** as a result of changing drinking habits



Stress not only stimulates the alarm bells in the brain but also kills neurons in the hippocampus, the part of the brain that is associated primarily with memory. The experience of stress physically changes the structure of the brain, meaning stressed out people can, over time, become even more sensitive to stress. Receiving bad news has a tendency to increase cortisol levels, so employers need to ensure that any communication is as stress-free as possible (we will cover this in the 'BREAKING THE NEWS' chapter).

Humans are blessed (and cursed) with what social psychologists call 'negativity bias'. We are hardwired to let bad news weigh on our minds more heavily than good news. Good news, such as praise for a job well done, might make you feel great at the time, but the happiness that comes with it is fleeting. It doesn't take long for the good news to bounce off us. In contrast, bad news, such as criticism for a piece of work that didn't quite make the cut, is more likely to sink in and play on your mind repeatedly.

This is "an evolutionary response to maximize our survival," says neuroscientist Christophe Proulx. "We feel disappointment deeply, so we don't make the same mistake again in the future."

In other words – once bitten, twice shy.

Thanks to this Stone Age bias, most people struggle to let go of bad news. A failure sticks for longer than a success.

So, as a leader, when delivering disappointing news, you need to find empathy and think about what you can offer the receiver to relieve the burden, whether it's additional support or simply the opportunity to have their say while looking you in the eye.

- * As per LSE's British Politics and Policy blog, newsstand magazine sales increase by roughly **30% when the cover is negative** rather than positive.
- * A Russian newspaper reported that a 'good news day' resulted in a **66% decrease** in its online readership.

What does effective change communication look like?

A study by management consultancy McKinsey suggests numerous leadership traits that can make an enormously positive difference when it comes to business transformations. Communication is key. But communicating change is not just about being clear or avoiding ambiguity. It involves much more than that, including using language, tone and the power of pause to engage and energise your audience. It's also about understanding when to drop the microphone and listen. Listening is a skill in itself, and it's vital when delivering bad news because it will help you respond in an empathetic way. When delivering bad news, don't be afraid to show that you care about the recipient's feeling. It's OK to inject a bit of passion into the exchange.



7 principles to guide sensitive communications

- 1 Be respectful
- 2 Be sensitive
- 3 Be timely
- 4 Be honest
- 5 Be clear
- 6 Be a good listener
- 7 Be human

WHATEVER THE NEWS, STRONG AND FOCUSED COMMUNICATION IS KEY TO ENSURING EMPLOYEES HAVE A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF WHY CHANGE IS TAKING PLACE

How and what you communicate will ultimately be determined by the scale and complexity of the information you have to relay as well as its likely impact on the receiver. Whatever the news, strong and focused communication is key to ensuring employees have a clear understanding of why change is taking place and how it is likely to affect them, personally.

Some of the most common business changes are redundancies and restructures. In this current climate, other changes are likely, particularly in terms of how back-to-work programmes will work. Over the coming weeks, corporate offices will start to reopen their doors. This reoccupation will be gradual – there won't be an immediate influx of people in the same way that there was a sudden exodus in mid-March. Some people will be desperate to head back to the office, while others will be anxious about returning. It is inevitable that a few people won't get their way. When that time comes, break the news gently and consider the impact on people's motivation when coming up with alternative suggestions for how to improve their workplace experience (whether that's at home or in the office) and wellbeing.

In order to reduce the risk of infection, certain companies are opting for 'split grouping' strategies, whereby the workforce is split into two teams. There are whispers of organisations organising office usage based on A teams and B teams. If you're opting for a similar model, consider the connotations of such labels. What may be an arbitrary lettering system to senior management may be seen as a second choice or a silver medal for those in the B team.

If the pandemic triggers a recession, businesses will once again have to adapt in line with fresh financial pressures. Working for a company that is fighting for survival is a different experience to working for a company that was once doing well. Employees are working just as hard, and yet there are fewer celebrations and rewards. This has the potential to fuel resentment and deplete enthusiasm. What can you do as an employer to continue to inspire, engage and motivate while in survival mode?



BREAKING THE NEWS

People look to their managers for trusted information and guidance. They will want to be kept informed should any changes affect them or their teams, and they will want to be updated in a clear and timely manner.

Here are Magenta's top tips for delivering bad news:



1 Consult the experts

It goes without saying that managers need to consider the legal and HR policies of decisions affecting employees to ensure that the company is acting by the book. If there is a change to people's employment status, for example, make sure you have consulted the experts prior to delivering the news.

2 Don't be dragged into speculation

Follow the Government's guidance and plan for different eventualities, but do not jump the gun. To help with this, plan a series of communications phases based on what and when the nation expects government to provide clarity on. The return to work is likely to be gradual with some organisations not planning for 100% occupation until mid-2021.

3 Employees first

Sometimes employees find out about changes to their organisation via the news. The excuse offered in these situations is that the company in question did not want to compromise confidential information before they were ready to go public. That is a poor excuse. It is also unfair. People are a business's biggest asset, so it's important to trust them and show that you respect and value their opinion. Tell them first and deal with the media later.

4 Timeliness is next to Godliness

If people are left guessing about what's happening, they will make their own minds up. That is how rumours start. Make sure everyone knows how, where and when future updates will be provided. When is the best time to deliver that news? In almost all cases, the sooner you do it, the better it is for everyone. Consider the time of day too. Perhaps delivering a disappointing decision before lunchtime or close to home time is a good idea because it will give the receiver time to process what has been said.

5 Don't drip-feed

There is this idea that you shouldn't give people all the bad news in one go. That is a misguided idea. Bad news is not like wine; it does not get better with age. Don't massage the situation or deliver the news piecemeal. If you do, people may feel more disillusioned as time goes on, and their confidence may wane. Once you get the bad news out of the way, you can start to build positive momentum again.

6 Choose the right platform

The scenario will determine the best way to deliver the news. But if you're unsure, put yourself in the other person's shoes to consider the most appropriate communications channel. In almost every situation, bad news is best delivered in person. At the moment we can't make the most of the intimacy that face-to-face meetings offer, but that doesn't mean we can't deliver the news in a way that is sensitive and considerate. Video calls still allow people to make eye contact and to ask questions in real-time, whereas hiding behind an email denies a recipient those benefits. Sending an email to deliver bad news is a recipe for misunderstanding. There's also a risk that tone will be misinterpreted. People will respect you more if you put the effort in and consider their feelings.

7 Honour the truth

Leaders must be honest and transparent. When breaking the news, don't embellish or exaggerate. Keep it simple and truthful. Give detail as to what has happened, how it happened, and then move on. It's OK to admit that you don't have all the answers. This is a fast-moving situation and things will change rapidly – but you must have a plan, and you must believe in that plan.

8 Find the silver lining

If possible, try and layer the bad news with the positives. Is it a learning opportunity or a catalyst to do things differently? Where possible try to find the silver lining and express what, if anything, can be learned from the experience.

9 Know when to be quiet

Once you've broken the news, sit back and let the person receiving the news take the stage. Let them share their feedback and their feelings. Really hear what they have to say. Some people may have great ideas which you can take on board. Allowing people to address their concerns there and then will make them feel valued. Encourage them to ask questions. Promise to get back to people if you don't know the answers – and deliver on that promise.

10 Show a united front

While leaders may have differing views during a period like this, it's essential that they present a united front to teams. This will generate trust and buy-in. Create clear communication channels so that people know where to get correct, accurate and up to date details.

When it comes to external communication, make sure that employees understand what they can and cannot say to other stakeholders, such as customers, suppliers and the press. Make sure the message is consistent and, if you're making changes to the guidance, make it clear where those changes are.



10 steps to break bad news

- 1 Step into their shoes – how would YOU like to hear this news? – then choose the right platform (call, email, video call, face-to-face, etc.)
- 2 Deliver the bad news as soon as possible, and all in one go
- 3 Come armed with solutions – ‘this is what’s happening, and this is what we’re going to do about it’
- 4 Explain why – offer context and a rationale
- 5 Present a clear vision of the future – but don’t overlook the seriousness of the ‘now’
- 6 Map out the milestones – what is going to happen and when?
- 7 Be clear about the impact – answer their main question: ‘what will this mean for me?’
- 8 Avoid ambiguity and pre-empt concerns
- 9 Focus on the positives but don’t sugar-coat it
- 10 Give people the chance to have their say – listen and be empathetic

Communicating bad news is a complex subject. This guide has merely scratched the surface. The advice provided here will, however, help ensure you approach the challenge in the right way and incorporate the right elements in your communications plan.

MAGENTA GUIDES

- ▶ [Magenta guide to Communicating the return to the office](#)
- ▶ [Magenta guide to Top communication tools for remote working](#)
- ▶ [Magenta guide to Communicating with remote teams](#)
- ▶ [Magenta guide to Communicating with furloughed employees](#)

RESEARCH SOURCES

- ▶ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk>
- ▶ <https://ed.ted.com>
- ▶ <https://edition.cnn.com>
- ▶ <https://icthrive.com>
- ▶ <https://www.inc.com>
- ▶ <https://www.projectmanager.com>
- ▶ <https://www.ted.com>
- ▶ <https://www.tedxmarin.org>
- ▶ <https://www.theguardian.com>
- ▶ <https://www.vice.com>



Do you need comms support?

For almost 10 years, Magenta has been the communication expert in the built environment, designing and delivering bespoke internal communication strategies. During this unprecedented period, we are here to advise and support organisations of all sizes through the remote working and internal comms minefield.

Many organisations have in-house built environment and comms teams who can manage most aspects of workplace communications and just need some extra support at either a strategic or operational level. Others require more comprehensive support. Whether you need a bespoke communications strategy or support in creating engaging material to deliver a strategy you’ve already produced, we can help.

With teams in London and Toronto, together with partners around the world, we can seamlessly support your organisation. Get in touch at www.magentaassociates.co or email info@magentaassociates.co

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