



It's Not That Bad – Is It?

“Don’t shoot the messenger!” Sometimes it seems that’s our only defence when we are in the unfortunate position of delivering bad news. It’s normal human behaviour to respond adversely and uncharacteristically when given a nasty surprise. How do we limit the damage when we have to communicate bad news?

Here are some principles that may help to limit the pain involved:

1. Don’t wait for the problem to get better or fix itself. It will probably only get worse so it is better to face up to the problem. Don’t delay the communication, as this will only chew up more time and create more mental anguish.
2. Decide whether to behave like a master or a victim. Masters take responsibility and own the resolution. Victims shirk responsibility and blame others. (eg “ I should have allowed more time for systems development” v “The IT department has let us down again”). Choose carefully...
3. Recognise that this is an emotional situation. It is normal to feel pain, especially if we have contributed to the problem. If we begin with an acknowledgement of our feelings (eg “I am really embarrassed about this”) we behave as a person and improve the chances that we may be treated as a person in return.
4. People prefer solutions over problems. Hence, without sugar-coating the issue, we should come prepared with a proposed resolution or next steps or at least some options to consider. For example, we wouldn’t announce that we will miss an important deadline without either a revised timeframe or an offer of partial delivery within the original deadline.
5. Remember to think about the other person’s personality and perspective. There are lots of aspects to take into account under this principle. Consider their preferred communication medium. How would they like to receive the news? Consider how the message might be supported. For example, would a diagram be more helpful, for them, than a detailed explanation? Consider who else they might need to inform as a result of our intervention. How might we help facilitate the next communication step? We might also consider what is important to the other person. For us, for example, running late might represent a serious crime but for some people a few days’ delay is neither here nor there if we can assure them of a high quality product.

Remembering these principles is unlikely to make us feel any better before we announce the bad news – it is certainly not easy to “own up”. However, application of these principles may make the communication more effective and the aftermath more palatable.