

# HOW TO Deliver Bad News

Empathy is at the heart of how you communicate in difficult times.

BY KAREN FRIEDMAN

**M**y father used to say that having a problem is like being stuck in a tunnel. The only way out is to go through it. Simple words, but sound advice in both our personal and business lives. Leading during a pandemic or crisis is clearly more challenging than navigating your way out of a smaller problem. However, the lessons learned for responding and communicating as events unfold are the same.

Whether you've been forced to lay off employees, shut down a business, or cancel a conference or special event, no one looks forward to delivering bad news. Yet, at some point many of us will find ourselves in that difficult position. And even when intentions are good, it's easy to make mistakes. How you communicate during difficult times can define your character and, in some cases, your company's reputation.

Let's contrast two examples.

Recently my company received a letter from our local tax collector's office informing us we were being penalized for failing to pay school taxes last year. It threatened that if we didn't send money by a certain date, there would be additional consequences.

I looked at the letterhead and didn't recognize the name of the tax collector, which seemed odd as I've known the local collector for years. The tone was also terse—not at all like Patti, who was kind and understanding. This made no sense to me. So, I called the office.

Imagine my surprise to learn that Patti had unexpectedly died. The letter we received was from a newly appointed temporary tax collector. After my initial sadness over Patti's loss, anger set in.

Instead of sending a threatening letter, why didn't this individual introduce himself and tell us his predecessor had died? Why didn't he say something nice about her and offer to help people who may have missed a payment during this surprising and upsetting transition?

Contrast that with a different approach. My company is working with a client that is going to have to shut down their business of many decades. Heartbroken over the impact this will have on so many, they have spent months developing communications that are heartfelt, thoughtful, and project the right tone. For example, instead of crafting a single correspondence that will be sent to everyone, each communication is tailored to the specific concerns of the person receiving a letter or email. The importance of putting those affected before the company itself is paramount to the organization's CEO, who is one of the most empathetic leaders I have ever met.

Empathy is at the heart of all business and personal crisis communications. Think about times you may have delivered tough news to a friend or family member. It's likely you did so in a way that was caring and understanding. While information is important, it's how that information is delivered that forms long-lasting impressions. If you find yourself having to be the bearer of bad news, consider these important tips:

## Take Responsibility

Instead of blaming others or focusing on mistakes made, take responsibility, be accountable, and tell people what you're doing to improve the situation. Let them know they can count on you for information, support, and resources.

## Communicate Early and Often

In the absence of information, innuendo and rumor fill the gap. Make sure you have the facts and communicate as quickly as possible. If you don't know something, avoid speculating. Be honest and say you don't know. In a 24/7 news cycle, media will update as often as possible even if there is nothing new to report. Frequently reiterating timely, accurate information helps you control the message.



and empathetic, which will make you relatable and credible.

### Collaborate

This is not a time to be a know-it-all or go at it alone. Demonstrate unity by collaborating on partnerships for expert guidance and advice. It is a time to seek multiple opinions from different vantage points to make the best decisions for all involved.

Communicating effectively during tough times will instill confidence, ease fears, and help others prepare for change even when you don't have all the answers.



### Manage the Message

Developing and delivering clear, consistent messages will help alleviate fear, panic, and confusion. It's imperative that your spokespeople not contradict each other. Additionally, if you decide to do something such as eliminate travel, explain why. Set up a hotline, website, or multiple touch points where people can access the latest information.

### Consider Tone and Demeanor

When addressing the public during a crisis, show concern and speak in a calm, reassuring voice. Don't sugarcoat the facts or minimize the problems, but come across as sincere, transparent,

My father, who was not a crisis manager, also had another piece of advice. He said when you get out of the tunnel, you need to look forward, not backward, so you can plan for the road ahead. When a crisis subsides, leaders must do the same by assessing what worked, what didn't, and how those lessons can be used as a blueprint for the future. **T**

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## CRISIS TIPS

### Communicate immediately

If you don't communicate, someone else will, and you risk losing control of the message. Even if you don't have all the facts, acknowledge what happened, tell people what you're doing about it, and say you'll share more information as it becomes available.

### Never say "no comment"

Saying "no comment" can make you sound like you're guilty or you have something to hide. Instead, share what you do know and why you can't comment. For example: "It is company policy not to discuss personnel issues."

### It's not about you

Years ago, BP's then-CEO Tony Hayward was publicly vilified for saying "I'd like my life back" following the Deepwater Horizon oil spill that left 11 people dead after

hundreds of thousands of gallons of oil spilled into the Gulf of Mexico. He came across as someone who cared more about himself than those affected by the spill.

### Be honest

Trying to minimize a problem or bury the truth will almost certainly backfire. Reporters will always ask, When did you know about it and what did you do about it? If people think you are hiding something, they will turn against you. So, even if the news is bad, it's better that your audience, employees, or customers hear it from you in your own words.

### Stay cool and calm

It's important to keep your emotions in check as a crisis unfolds, and unexpected events come your way. Losing your temper can scare others and damage your credibility.