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"I Have Some Bad News for You"

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One of the most difficult letters or memos to write is the one containing bad news. A subordinate requests a salary increase which you cannot grant. A community organization asks for a contribution which you do not wish to make. An unqualified applicant asks for an appointment to discuss a position with your company, and you do not wish to take the time. You decide to have to dismiss a good worker because declining business mandates cutbacks. In each case you have some unpleasant news to deliver—but you wish to deliver it in a way that does not offend or alienate. How do you accomplish this difficult task? Let me offer some general guidelines and then explain the specific techniques.

The first guideline is to remind you that the successful manager is people-sensitive, able to empathize with others. When you receive a request, you stand in the shoes of the petitioner. You realize, to begin with, that from the standpoint of the asker there are no foolish requests. People ask for things that they need, that they believe they are entitled to, that they hope to receive. And you also realize that there is really no good way to break bad news. No matter how empathic and tactful you may be, your bad news will inevitably cause disappointment and will often cause distress.

The second guideline derives from the first: remember that bad news is best delivered face to face. People getting bad news have some strong needs. They want an opportunity to express their negative feelings. They want the chance to press the request or appeal the decision. They want to explore the reasons more fully to be sure that there is no hidden message. These needs can best be met in a face-to-face meeting. So if you have bad news to give to an employee or a valued client, the best method is to confer with the individual, deliver the bad news in

person, and then, if desirable, follow up with a written statement for the record. Don't avoid the unpleasant confrontation by writing a memo, hoping that the petitioner will go away quietly.

Finally, remember that everyone values honesty and forthrightness, especially when being disappointed. Typically, the receiver of bad news is inclined to be cynical, often resenting your attempts to be tactful and polite. You therefore should be sure that your desire to soften the blow does not beguile you into distorting the truth. Explain as tactfully as possible the real reasons for the bad news, instead of offering lame excuses.

With these general guidelines in mind, you should be able to send two kinds of "bad news" messages: the indirect and the direct.

THE INDIRECT BAD NEWS MESSAGE

The indirect message of bad news uses the soft and gentle approach. It tries to cushion the blow by burying the bad news in the middle of the letter or memo, surrounded by positive expressions of appreciation. You send the indirect message under one or more of these circumstances:

- You want further contact with the petitioner.
- You want to project the image of a caring individual.
- You believe that the petitioner won't be able to handle a more direct statement.

The formula is a simple one: THANKS . . . BECAUSE . . . SORRY . . . THANKS.

Thanks

You begin with a positive statement. You express appreciation for the idea offered, the interest expressed, the petition received. Here's how an indirect bad news letter from an insurance company begins:

Thank you very much for your recent inquiry about our automobile insurance coverage. We are pleased that you have considered transferring your account to our company.

Because

You then continue with the reasons for the bad news. The strategy here is that stating the reasons first cushions the shock, preparing the reader for the bad news to come. Remember to use reasons that will make sense to the petitioner and that will at least project an image of sincerity. If at all possible, state reasons that will depersonalize the rejection, as the next paragraph of that letter does:

In order to keep our premiums as low as possible, we find it necessary to accept only a small number of new accounts. And in fairness to our present customers, we accep

applications only from those whose claims records are comparable to those of drivers we presently insure.

Sorry

You next present the bad news itself, but you state it in a positive fashion. If you can suggest an alternative, do so. If you can find a way to leave the door open, make that clear—but do not give false hopes. Notice how the insurance letter continues:

Even though we would like to include you among our insured drivers, we will not be able to do so at the present time. It seems to us that your best choice at this time is to remain with your present company. If your claims record improves during the coming year, we would be happy to have you reapply for coverage with us.

Thanks

The indirect message of bad news closes with another expression of appreciation—and ends on a positive note, as this example illustrates:

We do appreciate your considering our company. And we hope you will be able to reapply under more positive circumstances.

Figure 1 shows another example of this formula at work.

THE DIRECT MESSAGE OF BAD NEWS

The direct message is a tough no-nonsense statement. While courteous, it gets right to the point and does not try to bury the bad news. It would be used under one or more of these circumstances:

- You want to slam the door shut, discouraging any other request from that petitioner.
- You want to project an image of toughness and directness.
- You are addressing an individual who prefers forthrightness and equates indirectness with softness or dishonesty.

The formula for the direct message is **THANKS . . . SORRY . . . BECAUSE . . . THANKS**. It uses the same ingredients as the indirect message, but it changes the order. And the language is less subtle and more direct.

Thanks

You begin with a courteous expression of appreciation, since courtesy is expected even in the most direct communication. So a firm and direct letter rejecting an applicant might begin like this:

Thank you for your letter and resume. We appreciate your interest in joining Mutual Life

Sorry

The direct message moves quickly to the bad news, to be sure that the message is heard as intended. The bad news is stated forthrightly—but without offending. So the rejection letter continues:

Unfortunately, we do not have a position available that would match your qualifications, and it seems unlikely that such a position will develop in the future.

Because

Now the reasons come, after the bad news has been delivered. The reasons are stated directly but not offensively, as in this example:

We have found that our most successful middle-level managers are those who have had the benefit of working with Mutual in a variety of nonmanagerial positions. We therefore tend to promote from within and do not encourage applications for managerial positions from those who have not previously worked with us.

To: Bill Harkins
From: Joanne Clemens
Subject: Flex-Time Proposal
Date: February 19, 1985 File: A-342

Bill, thanks very much for forwarding your proposal for a flex-time schedule for your department. I appreciate the creative energy—I can always count on getting good ideas from you.

Our data suggest that flex time would result in an uneven distribution of worker hours at a time when uniformity seems desirable. As you are aware, the recent increase in customer demand is presenting us with the right kind of problem: our people and equipment are working at maximum capacity. My experience with other companies using flex time indicates that our productivity would suffer if we instituted it now.

And my concern for maintaining productivity makes me reluctant to implement your excellent suggestion now. However, I have asked our personnel department to review the data. Because of my respect for your leadership, I want to give all of your ideas the most careful consideration.

Thanks again for taking the time to share your ideas with me. I appreciate your developing a very sound proposal at a time when I know you are quite busy.

FIGURE 1 The Indirect Bad News Message