

Handling Bad News – Effectively and Elegantly

Many Gulf-based employees will receive what they consider to be “bad news” this week – bonus awards or renegotiated packages that fit the challenging times our organizations are facing. HOW we handle bad news – intra-personally and interpersonally – can have a lasting impact on our reputation, relationships and career standing at work.

Dr. Brendan McCann offers these five top tips on how to handle “bad news” with presence, poise, professionalism and style.

Step 1. Understand what is happening – Mind and Body

When we are confronted with bad news, we humans have a series of predictable responses. The limbic system of our brain immediately alerts us to danger and we enter fight-flight mode. As our heart starts to rule our head we experience “emotional hijacking” - adrenaline pumps, cortisol (our stress hormone) spikes, our heart beats faster and our stomach churns. There’s solace in understanding that these are inevitable, normal, and universal responses. Know the inevitability of this process and analyze and plan for conscious and positive action in stressful situations

Tip: Do your homework – Reflect on past experiences, know yourself within the context of stress – what catalyzes your stress? How do you typically react? What behaviors does that lead to and what impact does it have on you and others?

Tip: Access Successful Coping Mechanisms – Remind yourself of successful coping mechanisms or hardships that you have successfully navigated in the past – what was different and/or effective in this process? Re-engaging past success will help inform and bolster your future strategies.

Step 2. Stay Present and Gain Baseline Composure

Once you have identified your “emotional hijack”, it is important to find ways to quiet the body and mind and establish baseline composure. Our thinking and feeling systems are re-engaging past memories and our body is in shock mode – it is critical for our health as well as our professionalism that we quickly achieve a stable state.

Tip: Stabilize – Stay present in the moment and breathe, listen to the pattern of your breathing. Distance yourself from the emotion by sipping some water. Some people find repeating the word “calm” to themselves can assuage the mood.

Tip: Separate Time and Motion – Access (remember) a memory that helps you achieve a positive, composed and confident mood (maybe you are on a beach or remembering a successful presentation that you delivered at work). Separating yourself from the catalyst and your reaction can be powerful in helping you achieve and exhibit a professional posture.

Tip: Adopt a “Power Pose” – Our body posture shapes our confidence levels – internally and externally – assume a big, open (uncrossed arms, no face covering, erect shoulders, alert eye contact, open arms and palms) posture, try to find a hint of a smile and engage your hands as you begin to speak. These body strategies will help reduce stress hormones and help position us for success.

Step 3. Engage the rational and put the news in perspective

While most of think of emotions when thinking about bad news – anger, sadness, – our thinking processes are important too. What we think and how we think is critical to centering ourselves and putting the news in



perspective. Bad news at work has an impact level and a shelf-life, it rarely disavows us of our experience, accomplishments or talents; it almost never impacts how our loved one's see us – once we remember the smile on our loved ones' faces achieving perspective comes easily.

Tip: Bottom-Out – Ask yourself “what is the worst that can happen?” This question is a great leveler. Once you have bottomed-out like this it becomes much easier to gain perspective and become more positive.

Tip: Get On The Balcony – Imagine you are a casual observer of the situation, not an active actor or recipient of the bad news. What are you observing and what is the logic in the situation? What would you advise another person to do who was in your position?

Tip: Don't Globalize or Future Trip – Break any dysfunctional thinking patterns that drive you to speculate or fantasize on worst-case scenarios.

Step 4. Handle the Conversation

In a “bad news” scenario both parties typically feel bad – the sender and the receiver. In handling the conversation we don't want to destroy hope or our counterpart. Our goal is to acknowledge an understanding of the news and its implications, to respect yourself and the other person, to analyze the situation and identify next steps.

At OLE Consulting we have a proprietary tool called TAQA (“energy” in Arabic) that we use to help our “coachees” effectively handle themselves and others and drive constructive conversations, specifically:

- **T**hank you
- **A**cknowledge that you understand the nature of the bad news
- **Q**uestions to gain a better understanding
- **A**ction that the participant can take to address or correct the bad news scenario

Consider this conversation:

Boss: “Sara, these are tough times for our company, revenues are flat and we have reigned-in our expansion plans - the Board have asked for senior managers to accept a diminished bonus this year. Despite your outstanding performance this year, we need to ask you to accept a 50% bonus award.”

Sara: “Well, firstly, thank you, Ahmed, it can't have been easy for you to give me this news. I understand that these are tough times for our company and industry. If I understand you correctly, you are saying that my bonus award is at 50% of my target? May I ask what rationale or criteria was used in this decision? Is there a right of appeal? May I respectfully request some time to digest the news so that I can come back to you with my thoughts, analysis and recommendations, please?”

Step 5. Turn The Bad News to Good News – Reflect and Plan

Arguably, bad news is one of the purest and most actionable forms of feedback that we receive at work. It provides an unbridled and unvarnished view on our organization's health and its priorities and a clear view on our standing - reputation, importance, performance and potential quotient - within the organization. Turn bad news to good news by reframing the bad news as direct feedback into your career planning efforts.

Tip: Leverage the Feedback to Stoke Your Career Planning – Leverage the feedback to re-evaluate your priorities, re-analyze your fit with the organizations and to ask yourself the “killer” question: Is my career on-track?

Bad news is rarely good to hear but it is feedback in its purest form – unbridled, unvarnished – leveraged correctly it can drive transformative change.