



Good ways to break bad news

'Tell Me On A Sunday' is a poignant song from the Broadway musical of the same name. The lyrics are a plea to find a good place, time and method for breaking bad news. Although Sunday isn't the best day for delivering news in business, the message is relevant: tread carefully, be considerate. Working in another language, it can be harder to say the appropriate thing and appear empathetic. Here are some ways to get it right – with a little help from the musical as my headings.

by Garry Britton

'Don't call me as they call your plane'

Bad news delivered over the phone or even by email is rarely appreciated. An in-person discussion, at a time when neither party is in a rush or distracted by other matters, is likely to have the most positive outcome.

- 'I need to share some news in person rather than over the phone. Can you put aside some time at the end of the afternoon?'

'Take me to a park that's covered with trees'

Where and when is important, so find a 'metaphorical park'. A quiet room, away from the noise of the open-plan office and with your mobile phone turned off, prevents interruptions and allows time for explanation and questions. When is the best time? Usually as soon as possible, as delay can lead to rumours and worries, or even cause reputational damage to you or the company.

- 'Thank you for putting the time aside to come over here; it's important that we have a privatespace for discussion.'
- 'There's no good time to announce this, but I wanted you all to know as soon as possible.'





‘Don’t want to know who’s to blame’

Communicate openly, clearly and honestly, focussing on the facts and taking out emotions – but do show understanding that the news is difficult to hear. Blame is not helpful, unless the fault is yours, in which case an apology and admission of responsibility will earn respect.

- ‘The decision was taken higher up, so there’s nothing I can do to change it, unfortunately.’
- ‘I’m so sorry, but I made an error with this customer which has cost us the contract renewal. My fault entirely.’
- ‘I understand that not getting the promotion is disappointing and that you may feel upset. But we do appreciate your work.’

‘Don’t run off in the pouring rain’

In other words, don’t leave the recipient alone in a mess, but offer some solutions. If it’s internal, you may have some positive news that will help them to see a way forward:

- ‘Essentially, the restructuring means that everyone will be offered a new role within the new teams.’

When explaining to a customer something that has gone wrong, it’s essential to offer help or a fix to the problem:

- ‘We have to recall this product immediately due to safety issues. However, we can provide you with a very similar replacement by tomorrow.’

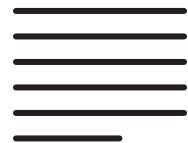
‘Prepare for questions all the same’

I’ve cheated, there was nothing in the musical about preparing for questions! But the song was about a romantic breakup, rather than our more down-to-earth business situations. You can prepare suggestions, advice and even documents to take to the meeting.

- ‘I’d like to give you the opportunity to ask any questions you may have.’
- ‘Although your jobs will become redundant, we offer a generous severance payment and help for you to move on. Some details are in this document for you.’

Bad news can’t often be turned into good. But your attitude, empathy and communication skills can make all the difference at difficult times for you or your team. That alone may be some good news.

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Vokabeltraining

cheated
hier: geschummelt

poignant
schmerzlich, rührend

rumours
Gerüchte

severance
payment
Abfindung

attitude
hier: Haltung

