



Giving bad news

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How will you handle it when you are called upon to give bad news?

Introduction

Coaching is in the main a positive process. Of course, it has its ups and downs, and we run into difficulties of various descriptions. Rarely do we run into the extreme of giving very bad news, such as telling somebody their dog has been run over, or they are redundant or – unless we are in the medical profession – telling somebody they are terminally ill.

Having said this, we do occasionally have to give people bad news. This module deals with how to do it, and how to handle the responses that are likely to arise from it.

Overview

Bad news is any information that the client perceives as changing their view of the future in a negative way. Examples may be telling a client that they are not meeting the standard required or that you are withdrawing as a coach.

How bad news is presented may affect the client's comprehension of, and adjustment to, the news as well as their satisfaction with you, their coach. Barriers to the effective communication of bad news include the coach's fears – the fear of being blamed by the client, of not knowing all of the answers sought by the client, of inflicting pain on the client, and even the coach's own fear of receiving the same sort of bad news; for example, of being rejected as the coach.

The most important factors for clients when they receive bad news are the coach's competence, honesty and attention; the time allowed for questions; a straightforward and understandable explanation; and the use of clear language.

Coaches cannot make assumptions on behalf of clients. For some clients, for example, no opportunity for promotion would

be very bad news, while for others it might provide relief. The key to giving bad news is perhaps to try to anticipate when news may be traumatic for an individual, to try to plan the way in which news is given, to anticipate the impact when possible, and to provide support appropriate to the client.

It is clear that the reaction in individuals varies considerably. To some extent, this will depend on how they perceive the situation and their expectations.

Starting point

It is essential that you plan before you sit down with the client. As the coach, you will know a lot about your client. Use the Situation plan (see page 2) to remind you of the skills and techniques you can use to improve your interactions with your client in order to achieve the outcome.

Bargaining

The client may want specific things to happen, and may want involvement from you or somebody else. The client may make statement such as 'I don't want this to happen yet.' This example implies a timeframe. Listening for such clues is vital.

Hopelessness and dejection

The client now understands the bad news and is likely to move into hopelessness and dejection. With a client in this state, it is important not to be cheerful or to make glib statements such as 'It's not that bad' or 'It might be a good thing in the long run.' This sometimes has the effect of making the client lose respect for the coach. Maintain a positive, professional, helpful and forward-looking stance.

Acceptance

As the client moves into acceptance of the situation, be a friendly helper. The person may not be happy, but they are being realistic and no longer feel the intense emotions they felt earlier in the cycle.



Fig. 1: Stages of response

Follow-up

The bad news has been delivered and accepted. Do we leave it there or is there something else we can

do? We believe there are two elements in follow-up action.

Firstly, what do you as a coach do for yourself? We suggest that you review what happened. This amounts to asking a number of questions of yourself.

- **What did I do well?** This is not just about outcomes. It is about the behaviours that you used and the effect of them on the client. It is also about the process used and the feelings/emotions that you had and how you handled them. From this you will learn what to repeat.
- **What mistakes did I make?** We never get everything totally right, and we will learn what not to do next time.
- **What shall I do differently next time?** We can all improve. We don't know whether if we try something different it will be an improvement, but that is learning experience.

The other element of follow-up is what you will do with your client. That is simple – whatever is required to move them onwards.

References

- 1 Paul S Mueller, *Postgraduate Medicine*, vol 112, no. 3, 2002; R Buckman, *How to Break Bad News*, Papermac, 1994.
- 2 E Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, Macmillan, 1969.
- 3 L Huxley, *You are not the Target*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1963.

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Gaining the skills

Breaking bad news is a skill that can be developed and improved with experience; watching others give bad news and reflecting on this experience appears to be seldom done in practice as such opportunities rarely arise.

For the acquisition of behavioural skills, experiential workshops often work well. A number of elements go into the learning: for example, rapport building, interactive skills, planning to handle giving bad news and working through a simulation. The approach gives the opportunity to do, receive feedback, observe and give feedback. The emphasis is on how to do it. This methodology is well within the skills profile of an experienced coach.

Conclusion

We have explored giving bad news. We have considered the perceptions and skills needed. In conclusion, we should like to suggest that these are the key elements:

- 1 Planning
- 2 Setting up the conditions
- 3 Breaking the bad news
- 4 Handling emotions
- 5 Follow-up.



Empathise, but don't say you know how they feel – you don't

Situation plan

What is the **outcome**/purpose? How will I know I have achieved it? That is, what will I see or hear?

What are *my* **thoughts** and **feelings**? Am I in a calm and constructive frame of mind?

What might the *client's* **expectations**, **thoughts** and **feelings** be at each stage of the process?

What **information** do I need? Have I organised it effectively and clearly for the person? What information will I give the client, and what information will the client want? Of that information, what will I tell or use only if the client asks?

What **style** should I use? I know the person; what will work best with them? The normal styles to use will be logical thinker and friendly helper.

What **skills** should I use to help myself? Within this area, listening, building rapport and interactive behaviours will be given.

What **structure** shall I follow for the discussion? These are logical stages for the interaction to achieve the outcomes. The main structure is the basis of this module.

After the situation, spend time **reviewing**:

- What did I do well?
- Did I get the message across?
- What could I do differently the next time?

What must I do now?

Environment and conditions

Let's deal with the environment and conditions for breaking bad news. Breaking bad news should be done in private; only you and the client should be present. You and the client should be seated, ideally with no barriers, and with your seats at an angle to each other. Make eye contact with the client. Sufficient time should be allowed to answer their questions. Interruptions (for example, mobile phones) must be prevented. If the client is used to physical contact, use it only before giving the bad news. Never touch the client immediately after giving bad news as it may become a stimulus for the emotions the person is feeling.

Breaking the bad news

Coaches need to obtain the client's permission to share bad news.¹ For example, you may say 'I'd like to share with you the situation we now face. Is that OK?' Notice the use of 'I'. It is essential that when giving bad news you accept full responsibility for it. Bear in mind that you as the coach have a right and duty to give the client bad news.

Before breaking bad news, coaches need to know the client's perception of the situation, if possible. Questions that reveal the client's perception should be tailored to lead towards the bad news you are about to give. For example, ask 'How do you think you have progressed so far?', 'What have you been told about the business situation?' and 'Do you recall why we ...?' Assessing the client's current perceptions allows you to correct misinformation and tailor the news to them.

Acknowledge that the information you are giving is difficult. This gives a warning of what is coming.

Clients need enough information to make informed decisions, so you should convey information at the client's level of comprehension. To help them process bad news adequately, it should be given as small chunks of information rather than as one large pill. Check for comprehension by asking questions such as 'Am I making sense?' or 'Can I clarify anything?' Undue bluntness and misleading optimism should be avoided.

It is essential to reduce the client's anxiety as much as possible when giving bad news. Some approaches that may help are these:

- Use positive language rather than negatives. For example, say 'I wish to explain the situation' rather than 'I am sorry, I have some bad news for you.' Try to eliminate negative words such as 'no', 'not', 'can't', 'failed' and so on.
- Be assertive – that is, be specific, using facts rather than generalisations. Get the basic message across briefly, simply and clearly. Once the bad news has been understood, explanations can follow. To give large quantities of explanation may obscure the message.
- Avoid being apologetic or non-assertive. Equally, never be aggressive. When giving bad news, we often find our own emotions are engaged. We need to monitor our voice pitch, pace, pausing and also our body language.
- Provide silence. This can give a client time to think or ask questions – it may be useful to invite questions.
- Explain briefly what actions you have taken, if any, in relation to

the bad news or the effect of the bad news on the client.

- You may need to explain how and why the situation has arisen. Avoid blame and treat the bad news factually.
- Explore the implications of the bad news for the client. There may be actions the client needs to take and there may be alternatives to what has occurred recently. If possible, present these in a positive frame and always avoid clichés or over-optimistic statements.

Client's response

Shock and denial

On receipt of bad news, it is not unusual for the client to move into shock and denial.² They may say 'No, that is not right' or 'There must be some mistake.' The client is avoiding facing the facts. It is often useful to reflect the feeling you observe – for example, 'I can see that this news has shocked you' or 'I can hear that you are upset by this news.' Such reflection builds rapport. Notice that the means by which you perceive the client's emotions is mentioned. What must be avoided are statements such as 'I know how you feel.' Why? You don't know how the client feels. Only the client knows that. You can only reflect what you observe.

Shock may reduce people to tears. In general, it is better simply to wait for the person to stop crying. If it seems appropriate, you can acknowledge it ('Let's just take a break now until you're ready to start again.') It is often helpful to stay in the room and look out of the window – near, but giving the client space. Try not to act as if tears are an emergency that must be stopped, and don't run out of the

room. You want to show that you're willing to deal with anything that comes up.

Do not assume that you know the reason for the tears (you may want to explore the reasons now or later). Most clients are somewhat embarrassed if they begin to cry and will not continue for long. It is nice to offer tissues if they are readily available (this is something to plan ahead).

Anger

The client may now move into anger.³ Again, it is useful to affirm the client's feelings. This does two things. Firstly, there is recognition by the client that you are aware that they are angry. Secondly, the anger of another person has the potential to 'hook' our own emotions, usually anger or fear. The statement of recognition of the client's feelings tends to quell our rising emotions. If you do feel your emotions rising, state them – for example, 'I am feeling uncomfortable.' Notice that this is an 'I' statement. Expression of your own feelings tends to reduce the emotion in the client, unless it is used aggressively – such as 'And now you are making me very angry.' Here we are blaming the client for our feelings. Equally, remote coldness on the part of the coach may fuel anger or cause the client to become overwhelmed by their own emotions. It is useful to develop an awareness of how received anger affects your body and the way you feel.

Clarify and diagnose the way the client perceives the bad news. Seek feelings: 'How do you feel about the situation?' Seek proposals: 'What would you like to happen now?'

You are moving the client from anger to bargaining.