

DELIVERING BAD NEWS

No one looks forward to delivering bad news. Whether you are the instigator of the difficult situation or merely the messenger, you'll have to be prepared not only for audience mistrust, but fear and anger as well. So there's not much room in such cases for rhetorical mistakes, especially when the press or affected interest groups are fanning the flames of public reaction.

Not surprisingly, the nature of the crisis helps determine the appropriate strategy. Yet there are a few guidelines that hold across the board. The first rule is to address your listeners' main concern early on in your talk. No one will be able to concentrate on your words if they are worried sick about how your bad news might change their lives. For example, if you're a manager announcing the imminent "downsizing" of your staff, it's almost always better to give a pretty clear indication of who's affected and how before you go into the details of your rationale or your well-meant plans to ease the pain. If you're a public health official reporting the results of a study about an environmental hazard, give your bottom line up top—who's at risk and how bad is the potential damage-- and **then** explain how it happened and what the Health Department is going to do about it. If you want your audience to trust you enough to listen to your explanations, then first you need to be up front with them and honor their most pressing concerns.

Here are some ways of minimizing the damage as you deliver bad news:

- *Revealing your own emotional response to the situation*
- *Making your audience feel that you've carefully considered all the options*
- *Being sure to find a silver lining, even in a crisis situation*
- *Reminding your constituency of the good times you're shared, the good work they've done together*
- *Revealing how you too, and others in authority, will be affected by the bad news (but only if this is truly the case, of course!)*
- *Referring to key audience members by name, to praise them or ask for their help*
- *Indicating the concrete steps you'll be taking to control the damage or make amends*
- *Reminding your audience of past crises you (or others) have weathered together*
- *Leaving open the hope that things will get better soon if certain key steps are taken*