

# How to convey bad news to clients?

## [closed]

Asked 16 years, 2 months ago    Modified 15 years, 11 months ago

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8



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## How to convey a bad news to the client?

project-management

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edited Jan 6, 2009 at 16:18



BIBD

15.4k ● 26 ● 87 ● 141

asked Oct 23, 2008 at 9:17



user11039

864 ● 2 ● 9 ● 17

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is this connected to your other question about how to get a career in a different discipline :-) – [Simon](#) Oct 23, 2008 at 9:45

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in which case, the answers can differ radically.. maybe do a live rendition of code monkey.mp3 – [Gishu](#) Oct 23, 2008 at 9:46

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This should be on programmers stack exchange. – [Sled](#) Jun 1, 2014 at 0:10

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## 11 Answers

Sorted by:

Highest score (default)



When something has gone wrong the client needs to know three things:

**12**



1. precisely what is wrong

2. what the impact is on them

3. what you are going to do about it



If you are not completely honest and transparent you will get found out later and will compound the trouble.

If your relationship with them is good then you probably will survive - presuming this is not completely catastrophic - but you will have to provide a decent remedy.

If your relationship is bad, then prepare yourself for them to start playing hard-ball with you on the terms of your contract.

HTH

Addendum: A good comment below about telling them as soon as possible, which I am happy to surface in this answer as requested. It reminds me of a saying "the sooner and in more detail the bad news is known, the better for everyone". As in life, so in project management.

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edited Oct 31, 2008 at 20:58

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answered Oct 23, 2008 at 9:43



Simon

80.6k ● 26 ● 92 ● 119

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Simon, you've got some terrific advise there, could you consider extending it by just one thing: - Convey the bad news as soon as possible but no sooner than you're reasonably sure your findings are correct. (to be cont.)

– [Vlad Gudim](#) Oct 24, 2008 at 15:54

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Nothing is much worse than customer getting bad news about project from other source rather than the project manager himself, apart from panicing and misiterpreting and communicating something as bad news, when actually it isn't.

– [Vlad Gudim](#) Oct 24, 2008 at 15:56

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With an emphasis on the solutions you propose to address the bad news.



We will not be able to have a moon controlling functionality in our system (due to ...) but we can and will deliver the weather changing module which is almost just as good for your world domination plans.

Be honest and try to offer effective and realistic solutions instead of things that'll end up being more bad news.

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answered Oct 23, 2008 at 9:22

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Vinko Vrsalovic

340k ● 55 ● 340 ● 373



Managing your clients/bosses expectations is a great way to avoid this.

5

In an engineering discipline, the old adage remains true:



Under promise. Over deliver.



If you've already got the bad news, well:

- be honest and upfront about it.
- give them options about how they want you to solve it; be detailed about cost estimates.
- don't make any further promises "to make up for it". If some of your proposed solutions offer advantages down the line, tell them; but don't say that you'll add a feature at the same time as fixing the problem.

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answered Oct 23, 2008 at 9:40

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jamesh

20.1k ● 14 ● 58 ● 96



"Give the bad news all at once, and the good news little by little. -- Machiavelli" :)

5



Seriously.. investigate damage control or remedial measures before hand. Set them up in place to make sure it doesn't happen again. Fall back to a contingency plan if needed and you have one .. Be objective, sincere, apologetic and don't play the blame game.



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answered Oct 23, 2008 at 9:44

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community wiki

Gishu



Be truthful, since nothing is more distracting than lies.

2

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answered Oct 23, 2008 at 11:00

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Daniel Schildt

101 ● 5





[post a tongue-in-cheek apology, preferably starting with Simpsons artwork](#)

2

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answered Oct 30, 2008 at 20:48



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Jimmy

91.3k ● 18 ● 121 ● 139



What type of bad news?

1

People in general like to break bad news by stating that the corrections / new timelines will be in place much earlier than we truly can accomplish. Be honest up front and don't give false hope. One instance of bad news is enough... no need to create new promises that you can't keep in the future.



Bottom Line: be honest to your client and yourself to control expectation management.

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answered Oct 23, 2008 at 9:22

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Inisheer

20.8k ● 9 ● 54 ● 83



Here's a link to a short Harvard Business Review podcast entitled: [Speaking Well in Tough Moments](#)

1



In the podcast, they broach different scenarios in which you have to have difficult conversations.



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answered Oct 30, 2008 at 20:46

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[braveterry](#)

3,744 ● 8 ● 50 ● 59



What I usually do is:

1

**Good news** *Bad news* **Good news**



And, for how you execute Bad news, the already mentioned answers can suffice. So, you should have 2 good news in-hand everytime OR you break one into two :)



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answered Nov 6, 2008 at 20:44

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[Salman Kasbati](#)

342 ● 1 ● 6



1

First, bad news should ideally be delivered as soon as possible, even more so if there might be some sort of financial impact. Also, when you deliver the bad news you should make sure you address all of the concerns as quickly as possible, namely:



- What went wrong.
- How they are being impacted.
- How long a fix will take.

- What is being done to make sure it doesn't happen again.

How you deliver the bad news is a big subjective, but the rule of thumb seems to be that you should deliver it in person (e.g. phone call). Also, even if you don't know what is going on yet, you should at least let people know that you are aware of an issue and that you are working on it.

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answered Jan 6, 2009 at 16:22

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rjzii

14.5k ● 12 ● 81 ● 122



0



In addition to being honest and straight-forward about it, equally important is how you convey the news. A simple statement of "you are doomed" may be honest but improper. It is important that the customer be told all the due diligence been done by you, what (if any) are the options or workarounds available to him and propose to get together with him to find a way forward. You are not misguiding the customer but you are trying to provide him some avenues to think and the realization that you are not just throwing it all in his plate.

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answered Oct 23, 2008 at 12:14

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Ather

1,600 ● 11 ● 17