

## Delivering Bad News

### Executive Summary

Bad news can have drastically differing repercussions and reactions, depending on the details of its delivery. This report provides an evaluation of current understanding of the complexities of delivering bad news in a professional environment, including when, how and to whom bad news should be delivered, as well as potential negative outcomes from handling bad news poorly.

Due to a lack of definitive solutions for such a complex interpersonal problem, data was compiled from a variety of trusted online sources, and analysed for its reliability and relevance.

Research revealed that while there is no golden rule for delivering bad news, there are a number of tried and tested strategies for delivering and dealing with bad news, such that the best possible outcome is achieved. It was found that bad news should always be tailored to the recipient, as people in different positions will likely experience different outcomes from bad news. It is also important to deliver bad news in an appropriate timeframe, as bad news which is not delivered can sometimes escalate and lead to a worse response later, whereas poorly, but immediately, delivered bad news can sometimes do more harm than not delivering the news at all.

The report finds that bad news is an unavoidable fixture in professional environments, but that if delivered in an effective and empathetic manner to the right people, at the right time, the negative repercussions of bad news can be significantly lessened.

- Some recommendations were highlighted in the report, including: Choose the right delivery method (Slideshow, narrative story, concise dot points).
- Deliver bad news at the right time to all affected people.
- Always follow up with a plan to combatting any negative repercussions, and follow through.

## Introduction

Bad news occurs in software projects when things do not go as planned. Depending on the parties involved and what they have at stake, what is considered bad news can differ from person to person. For project stakeholders, for example, bad news may occur when they experience a loss on their investment in a project. Project managers, on the other hand, may consider bad news to be the failure to deliver a working product. Though bad news can change in this way depending on who it is being conveyed to and what they value the most, the underlying characteristic of bad news is that it is the worst thing that the receiver can hear. This quality of bad news has significant implications on how it should be delivered as it suggests that to be effective, bad news must be tailored appropriately for the receiving party so as not to undermine their biggest concerns (Forbes, 2014).

There is a tendency in software projects in particular, however, for individuals to refrain from reporting bad news at all. Known as the 'mum effect', those that are aware of bad news prevent its release so as not to cause conflict. Instead, they withhold the bad news in hopes that the problems occurring will eventually fix themselves (Smith and Keil, 2003). Though there may be valid reasons why an individual is hesitant to release bad news, doing so in the setting of a software project may actually do more harm than good. Unaware of the impending risks, stakeholders may continue to invest resources into failing projects and workers may continue to expend effort resulting in a waste of time (Tan et al., 2003). Furthermore, when the bad news does eventually become known, not only is it too late to attempt to fix the issues but it can also trigger worse reactions in those that were not made aware of the news earlier. To prevent this from happening, the bearer of bad news must take responsibility and ensure that the first signs of trouble are reported as soon as possible (Andersen, 2013).

That is not to say, however, that bad news should immediately be released to all parties as soon as it becomes known. How well bad news is received relies immensely on the way that it is delivered and often times bad news that is delivered abruptly and without care can have a worse impact than bad news that is not communicated

in time. The bearer of bad news must be tactful and empathetic when breaking bad news. More importantly, the bearer must ensure that together with the bad news, they present the receiver with a means to move forward as well (Forbes, 2014). Taking the time to do so will not only lessen the blow on the receiver but it will also allow them to shift their focus away from the negative towards the future (Bies, 2012).

## Discussion

Bad news can be delivered in various ways and forms, depending of the context of the issue. Such forms include a bullet-list approach, a power-point style or a narrative story. This method of delivery is key in tailoring the reception to the message. For example, if a clear understanding of the news is a priority then bullet-list may be used, whereas if limiting the negative behaviour impact is more important, a narrative story may be more useful (Carriger, 2013). There are, however, many strategies that can be used within the delivery of bad news, regardless of the form or method.

Firstly, it is important to pick when to deliver the news; check whether the issue can be solved and give the news in an appropriate time frame depending on its impact and the commitments of the parties involved (Forbes, 2014). It is also important to identify who should be delivered the news, often being those who have large stakes involved and those who can contribute to a successful outcome (Smith and Keil ,2003). Secondly, bad news should be given in a tone that complements the message at hand. For example, if the issue has not yet been solved it may be delivered in a more apologetic form, whereas news may be more concise and given with more confidence if the issue was already dealt with; the tone of the message plays a large part in guiding how it will be received. Thirdly, it is key to identify the next steps, softening the impact of the message. In cases where the next steps cannot be identified it is important to instead recognize the available support that will increase the likelihood of a successful outcome (Forbes, 2014).

The responsibility and stakes of those involved in delivering bad news is also a key factor. Those in higher positions often have to be more careful when delivering bad

news as they are very influential to those receiving it. For example, the previous guidelines are key in any delivery but in cases where it may be a manager responding to a customer or a CEO responding to their employees, there are additional tactics that can be deployed. In these situations, it is important to take action, take responsibility, listen, be concise and follow through. These strategies allow more control over the situation as they focus on the receiver and their understanding, decreasing the likelihood of a negative reception (Andersen, 2013). This is evident in a study by Carriger (2013) where participants were given news of an impending layoff through several different forms. News given in a more concise and confident form (bullet-list) was found to increase the subject's understanding and belief of integrity of the deliverer as opposed to drawn-out narrative explanations (narrative story). These strategies should, however, not be blindly used in every delivery as the reception greatly depends on the parties involved and thus it is important to understand their expectations and stakes, tailoring the delivery appropriately.

## Conclusion

Bad news differs between individuals, but the fact remains that it is sometimes unavoidable. When facing the aspect of needing to deliver bad news, it is of great importance that it is dealt with appropriately and in the correct timeline. In software projects, bad news is often avoided and under-reported (Smith and Keil, 2003); although this may be for valid reasons, this behaviour can be damaging to the project. Appropriately timed news can provide the parties interested in the project with an accurate representation of the state of the project and avoid potential conflict caused by such news. Alternately, giving bad news too early without properly tailoring it can be equally as harmful as not presenting it; the true severity of the news could be under or over emphasised and as such can reflect poorly on the project. The severity of bad news varies for each party involved and, depending on the involvement of the receiving parties, should be presented to them appropriately (Forbes, 2014). This applies especially to those in leadership positions, as their influence can have a greater impact on those receiving the news (Andersen, 2013). In presenting such news, the tone of presentation is important and can colour the message being conveyed. As well as this, bad news should always be accompanied with a counterpoint; a potential solution or strategy to ensure the news is dealt with appropriately (Forbes, 2014). Of all the strategies that exist for managing and conveying bad news, all are effective for different situations; there is no definitive rule and as such bad news must be tailored to suit the circumstance at hand.

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