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The art of delivering bad news

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For those who like to eat challenges for breakfast, compliance doesn't disappoint. Risk management is not always welcomed with open arms, and our guardian role often requires us to be the bearer of difficult news to stakeholders. And while it may be a somewhat routine affair for professionals in a governance role, it's critical for all of us to understand the behavioral science that can affect our careers and reputations when we don't deliver bad news effectively.

A recent study demonstrated that bad news messengers are not only deemed unlikable and less competent, but also that others will perceive the messenger to have some level of ill intent toward them.^[1] In other words, bad news messengers are subconsciously viewed by others as *enjoying* when bad things happen. Further, since our professional roles often involve rules, obstacles, or reporting on negative events, recipients of the bad news may even view us as deserving of their negativity. A case of perception is reality.

I'll never forget one of my first executive roles, when I had recently joined the management team as the company's first compliance officer. My boss, the president of a \$90 billion business division, asked me if we could get rid of our internal auditor: "That guy who sits in my team meetings just taking up space."

This was a real wake-up call for me not to be "that guy." To be effective in my role and have my communications be taken seriously, it was clear that I needed to prioritize relationships and demonstrate the clear value I offered. I couldn't simply rely on my technical legal and regulatory risk expertise and knowledge of the business to speak for itself.

Strategies for overcoming bias

So what's a compliance and risk professional to do? These five strategies will help you overcome these natural hurdles and thrive in your role as a trusted adviser:

1. **When you have bad news, give a heads-up** to prepare your audience, such as a simple "I've got some bad news." This sets the stage, reducing potential distress and resistance that your stakeholders may feel when you share the information.
 2. **Empathize with your stakeholders.** Demonstrate a blend of confidence, humility, and gravitas. Write down your key talking points in advance, and if you have the luxury of time, practice saying them in front of a mirror. Watch your body language, tone, and facial expression until you are showing up as your best leader self. Practice has proven to help increase credibility with your audience as well as to reduce your potential stress level.
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3. **Make it personal.** Whenever possible, difficult conversations should take place in person. Face-to-face is best, video conference is second best, followed by telephone, as these mediums reduce potential misunderstandings or missed social cues. The least preferred method is written delivery, given the lack of socioemotional cues (e.g., tone of voice) and the lack of an opportunity to immediately clarify any potential confusion. As soon as possible after the initial communication, check in with key stakeholders to assess the health of your relationships and status in the organizational power system.^[2] You may find that some relationships need repair, especially if you or your team were partially to blame for causing the crisis.
4. **Share your good intentions.** Remember what I said earlier about the unfortunate human bias toward viewing bad news messengers as having malicious intent? Counteract this natural tendency by reinforcing your commitment to the organization and supporting affected stakeholders. Pledge that you will continue to do everything you can to mitigate negative impact from the event. Express empathy and confidence by communicating necessary next steps, such as how the problem has been rectified or remediation efforts that will alert leadership in advance to prevent recurrence. Sharing with stakeholders how your actions have helped your company will further underscore your benevolent intent and mitigate this irrational “messenger dislike” bias.^[3]
5. **Be direct and avoid excuses.** It’s important to state plainly and clearly the facts of what happened in a way that allows your stakeholders to understand the situation and support the next steps. When you do this well, your audience will view you as a trusted adviser and find your explanation fair and reasonable. This reduces the potential incrimination of you by your stakeholders, and increases their focus on the authenticity of the bad news and any decisions at hand.

One final consideration

It’s important to resist the urge to characterize bad news as a net positive. This can reduce the sense of urgency required to effectively respond to legal, regulatory, or ethical lapses and lead change.^[4]

I was recently coaching an executive client who experienced a horrific data breach as a result of a recent merger and acquisition. Despite the compliance officer and law department’s repeated requests, proper due diligence had not focused on data privacy practices prior to acquisition, so this was an inherited problem. The officer was tempted to blame the mergers and acquisitions and strategy teams for denying her request for a deeper data dive. Instead, we quickly mapped out talking points, a communication strategy, and a relationship strategy to ensure the best possible outcome for the organization as well as my client’s leadership effectiveness. After getting through a bit of a bruising in some conversations, she was ultimately thanked and recognized by the board as demonstrating leadership, instilling confidence, and handling a difficult situation with gravitas and aplomb.

Eliminate the blind spots

Stakeholder relationships are critical to being able to effectively do our jobs. Increasing our external awareness — that is, understanding how our actions are perceived by others — is a powerful way to eliminate blind spots and grow our leadership capability. If we are aware of and take into account the natural human bias to distrust and dislike bad news messengers, we can use effective relationship-building strategies to build strong stakeholder relationships and successfully navigate the obstacles that come with the territory of being a compliance professional.

About the author

Amii Barnard-Bahn has been recognized by *Forbes* as one of the top coaches for legal and compliance executives.

A former Fortune Global 50 executive, Amii is a contributor to *Harvard Business Review* and *Fast Company*, a Fellow at the Harvard Institute of Coaching, and guest lectures at Stanford and UC–Berkeley. She is also the creator of the Promotability Index[®].

Takeaways

- At times, our compliance roles require us to deliver bad news.
- Behavioral science has demonstrated that those who are receiving the bad news will feel some level of ill intent from the messenger toward them.
- Giving advance notice and empathizing with stakeholders are two ways to help dissolve the irrational negative bias assigned to bad news messengers.
- The five strategies discussed here can be leveraged by compliance professionals in times of need.
- Understanding the behavioral science aspects of governance roles and how to manage them effectively enables you to be a more effective leader and change agent.

1 Leslie K. John, Hayley Blunden, and Heidi Liu, “Shooting the Messenger,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 148, no. 4 (2019), 644–666, <https://bit.ly/3p3dqfW>.

2 Madeleine Homan, “Have You Mapped Your Key Relationships?” *Harvard Business Review*, February 28, 2008, <https://bit.ly/3vsqaz3>.

3 Leslie K. John, Hayley Blunden, and Heidi Liu, “Shooting the Messenger.”

4 John P. Kotter, “Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail,” *Harvard Business Review*, May–June 1995, <https://bit.ly/2RGp3gB>.

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