

### 3.2.1: Delivering a Negative News Message

#### Learning Objectives

- List and discuss seven goals of a negative news message.
- Write an effective negative news message.

The negative news message delivers news that the audience does not want to hear, read, or receive. Delivering negative news is never easy. Whether you are informing someone they are being laid off or providing constructive criticism on their job performance, how you choose to deliver the message can influence its response (Bovee, C. and Thill, J., 2010). Some people prefer their bad news to be direct and concise. Others may prefer a less direct approach. Regardless whether you determine a direct or indirect approach is warranted, your job is to deliver news that you anticipate will be unwelcome, unwanted, and possibly dismissed.

In this section we will examine several scenarios that can be communicated internally (within the organization) and externally (outside the organization), but recognize that the lines can be blurred as communication flows outside and through an organization or business. Internal and external communication environments often have a degree of overlap. The rumor of anticipated layoffs may surface in the local media, and you may be called upon to address the concern within the organization. In a similar way, a product that has failed internal quality control tests will require several more tests and improvements before it is ready for market, but if that information leaves the organization, it can hurt the business reputation, prospects for future contracts, and the company's ability to secure financing.

Communication is constantly present, and our ability to manage, clarify, and guide understanding is key to addressing challenges while maintaining trust and integrity with employees, stakeholders, and the public.

There are seven goals to keep in mind when delivering negative news, in person or in written form:

1. Be clear and concise in order not to require additional clarification.
2. Help the receiver understand and accept the news.
3. Maintain trust and respect for the business or organization and for the receiver.
4. Avoid legal liability or erroneous admission of guilt or culpability.
5. Maintain the relationship, even if a formal association is being terminated.
6. Reduce the anxiety associated with the negative news to increase comprehension.
7. Achieve the designated business outcome.

Let's examine our first scenario:

You are a supervisor and have been given the task of discussing repeated tardiness with an employee, Chris. Chris has frequently been late for work, and the problem has grown worse over the last two weeks. The tardiness is impairing not only Chris's performance, but also that of the entire work team. Your manager has instructed you to put an end to it. The desired result is for Chris to stop his tardiness behavior and improve his performance.

You can

1. stop by Chris's cubicle and simply say, "Get to work on time or you are out";
2. invite Chris out to a nice lunch and let him have it;
3. write Chris a stern e-mail;
4. ask Chris to come to your office and discuss the behavior with him in private.

While there are many other ways you could choose to address the situation, let's examine each of these four alternatives in light of the goals to keep in mind when presenting negative news.

First, you could approach Chris in his work space and speak to him directly. Advantages include the ability to get right to the point right away. Disadvantages include the strain on the supervisor-employee relationship as a result of the public display of criticism, the possibility that Chris may not understand you, the lack of a formal discussion you can document, and the risk that your actions may not bring about the desired results.

The goals include the desire to be clear and concise in order not to require additional clarification. This possible response does not provide the opportunity for discussion, feedback, or confirmation that Chris has clearly understood your concern. It fails to address

the performance concern, and limits the correction to the tardiness. It fails to demonstrate respect for all parties. The lack of tact apparent in the approach may reflect negatively on you as the supervisor, not only with Chris but with your manager as well.

When you need to speak to an employee about a personnel concern, it is always best to do it in private. Give thought and concern to the conversation before it occurs, and make a list of points to cover with specific information, including grievances. Like any other speech, you may need to rehearse, particularly if this type of meeting is new to you. When it comes time to have the discussion, issue the warning, back it up in writing with documentation, and don't give the impression that you might change your decision. Whether the issue at hand is a simple caution about tardiness or a more serious conversation, you need to be fair and respectful, even if the other person has been less than professional. Let's examine the next alternative.

Let's say you invite Chris to lunch at a nice restaurant. There is linen on the table, silverware is present for more than the main course, and the water glasses have stems. The environment says "good job" in its uniqueness, presentation, and luxury. Your word will contradict this nonverbal message. The juxtaposition between the environment and the verbal message will cause tension and confusion, which will probably be an obstacle to the receiver's ability to listen. If Chris doesn't understand the message, and the message requires clarification, your approach has failed. The contrast between the restaurant setting and the negative message does not promote understanding and acceptance of the bad news or correction. Furthermore, it does not build trust in the relationship, as the restaurant invitation might be interpreted as a "trap" or a betrayal. Let's examine yet another approach.

You've written Chris a stern e-mail. You've included a list of all the recent dates when he was late and made several statements about the quality of his work. You've indicated he needs to improve, and stop being late, or else. But was your e-mail harassment? Could it be considered beyond the scope of supervision and interpreted as mean or cruel? And do you even know if Chris has received it? If there was no reply, do you know whether it achieved its desired business outcome? A written message may certainly be part of the desired approach, but how it is presented and delivered is as important as what it says. Let's examine our fourth approach to this scenario.

You ask Chris to join you in a private conversation. You start the conversation with an expression of concern and an open-ended question: "Chris, I've been concerned about your work lately. Is everything all right?" As Chris answers, you may demonstrate that you are listening by nodding your head, and possibly taking notes. You may learn that Chris has been having problems sleeping, or that his living situation has changed. Or Chris may decline to share any issues, deny that anything is wrong, and ask why you are concerned. You may then state that you've observed the chronic tardiness, and name one or more specific mistakes you have found in Chris's work, ending with a reiteration that you are concerned. This statement of concern may elicit more responses and open the conversation up into a dialogue where you come to understand the situation, Chris sees your concern, and the relationship is preserved. Alternatively, in case the conversation does not go well, you will still keep a positive attitude even as you document the meeting and give Chris a verbal warning.

Regardless of how well or poorly the conversation goes, if Chris tells other employees about it, they will take note of how you handled the situation, and it will contribute to their perception of you. It guides their expectations of how you operate and how to communicate with you, as this interaction is not only about you and Chris. You represent the company and its reputation, and your professional display of concern as you try to learn more sends a positive message. While the private, respectful meeting may not be the perfect solution, it is preferable to the other approaches we have considered.



Figure 3.2.1.1: Performance evaluations usually involve constructive criticism. Matt Hintsa – [Constructive Criticism](#) – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

One additional point to consider as you document this interaction is the need to present the warning in writing. You may elect to prepare a memo that outlines the information concerning Chris's performance and tardiness and have it ready should you want to present it. If the session goes well, and you have the discretion to make a judgment call, you may elect to give him another week to resolve the issue. Even if it goes well, you may want to present the memo, as it documents the interaction and serves as evidence of due process should Chris's behavior fail to change, eventually resulting in the need for termination.

This combined approach of a verbal and written message is increasingly the norm in business communication. In the next two sections, we'll compare and contrast approaches, verbal and written, and outline several best practices in terms of approach. But first, we'll outline the four main parts of a negative news message:

1. Buffer or cushion
2. Explanation
3. Negative news
4. Redirect

The first part of a negative news message, verbal or written, involves neutral or positive information. This sets the tone and often serves as a buffer or cushion for the information to come. Next, an explanation discusses why there is an issue in the first place. This may be relatively simple, quite complex, or uncomfortable. In a journal article titled "Further Conceptualization of Explanations in Negative News Messages," (Limaye, Mohan R., 1997) Mohan Limaye makes the clear case that not only is an explanation a necessary part of any negative news message, it is an ethical and moral requirement. While an explanation is important, never admit or imply responsibility without written authorization from your company cleared by legal counsel. The third part of the negative news message involves the bad news itself, and the emphasis here is on clarity and accuracy. Finally, the redirect may refocus attention on a solution strategy, an alternative, or the subsequent actions that will take place. Table 3.2.1.1 provides an example that might apply in an external communication situation.

Table 3.2.1.1: Negative News Message Sample Script

Parts of the Negative News Message	Example
Buffer or Cushion	Thank you for your order. We appreciate your interest in our product.
Explanation	We are writing to let you know that this product has been unexpectedly popular, with over 10,000 requests on the day you placed your order.
Negative News	This unexpected increase in demand has resulted in a temporary out-of-stock/backorder situation. We will fulfill your order, received at 11:59 p.m. on 09/09/2009, in the order it was received.
Redirect	We anticipate that your product will ship next Monday. While you wait, we encourage you to consider using the enclosed \$5 off coupon toward the purchase of any product in our catalog. We appreciate your business and want you to know that our highest priority is your satisfaction.

In Table 3.2.1.1, the neutral or positive news comes first and introduces the customer to the overall topic. The explanation provides an indication of the purpose of the communication, while the negative message directly addresses how it affects the customer. The redirect discusses specific actions to take place. In this case, it also includes a solution strategy enhanced with a soft sell message, a subtle, low-pressure method of selling, cross-selling, or advertising a product or service. Whether you are delivering negative news in person or in writing, the four main parts of a negative message can help you meet all seven goals.

Before we move to the verbal and written delivery of the negative news message, we need to offer a word of counsel. You want to avoid legal problems when communicating bad news. You cannot always predict how others are going to respond, but you can prepare for and deliver your response in ways that lower the risk of litigation in four ways:

1. Avoid abusive language or behavior.
2. Avoid contradictions and absolutes.
3. Avoid confusion or misinterpretation.
4. Maintain respect and privacy.

Sarcasm, profanity, shouting, or abusive or derogatory language is an obstacle to clear communication. Furthermore, such language can be interpreted as defamatory, or harming the reputation of the person, possibly having a negative impact on their future earnings. In written form, it is called libel. If you say it out loud, it is called slander. While slander may be harder to prove, no defamatory remarks should be part of your negative news message. Cell phones increasingly serve to record conversations, and you simply never know if your words will come back to you in short order. Represent yourself, the business, and the receiver of your message with professionalism and avoid abusive or defamatory language.

You also want to avoid contradictions, as they only serve to invite debate. Make sure your information is consistent and in agreement with the general information in the conversation. If one part of the information stands out as a contradiction, its importance will be magnified in the context and distract from your main message. Don't provide more information that is necessary. Polarizing, absolute terms like "always" and "never" are often part of sweeping generalizations that are open to debate. Instead of saying, "You are always late," choose to say, "You were late sixteen times in May." To avoid confusion or misinterpretation, be precise and specific.

Always maintain respect and privacy. Making a negative statement about an employee in front of a group of coworkers can be considered ridicule or harm, and in the coming cases may be actionable and involve legal ramifications. In addition to the legal responsibility, you have the overall goal of demonstrating professionalism as you represent yourself and your company in maintaining the relationship with the employee, even if the end goal is termination. Employees have retaliated against their organizations in many ways, from discouraging remarks to vandalism and computer viruses. Your goal is to avoid such behavior, not out of fear, but out of professionalism and respect for yourself and your organization. Open lines of communication present in a relationship can help reduce the risk of relational deterioration or animosity. The sidebar below provides a checklist for delivering a negative message.

### Negative Message Checklist

1. Clear goal in mind
2. Clear instructions from supervisor (legal counsel)
3. Clear understanding of message
4. Clear understanding of audience/reader
5. Clear understanding of procedure and protocol
6. Clear, neutral opening
7. Clear explanation without admission of guilt or culpability
8. Clear statement of impact or negative news
9. Clear redirect with no reminders of negative news
10. Clear results with acceptance or action on negative news

### Presenting Negative News in Person

Most of us dislike conflict. It may be tempting to avoid face-to-face interaction for fear of confrontation, but delivering negative news in person can be quite effective, even necessary, in many business situations. When considering a one-on-one meeting or a large, formal meeting, consider the preparation and implementation of the discussion.

The first step involves a clear goal. Stephen Covey (1989) recommends beginning with the end in mind (Covey, S., 1989). Do you want your negative news to inform, or to bring about change, and if so what kind of change and to what degree? A clear conceptualization of the goal allows you to anticipate the possible responses, to plan ahead, and to get your emotional “house” in order.

Your emotional response to the news and the audience, whether it is one person or the whole company, will set the tone for the entire interaction. You may feel frustrated, angry, or hurt, but the display of these emotions is often more likely to make the problem worse than to help solve it. Emotions can be contagious, and people will respond to the emotional tone of the speaker.

If your response involves only one other person, a private, personal meeting is the best option, but it may not be available. Increasingly people work and contribute to projects from a distance, via the Internet, and may only know each other via e-mail, phone, or videophone/videoconferencing services. A personal meeting may be impractical or impossible. How then does one deliver negative news in person? By the best option available to both parties. Written feedback may be an option via e-mail, but it takes time to prepare, send, receive, process, and respond—and the written word has its disadvantages. Miscommunication and misinterpretation can easily occur, with little opportunity for constructive feedback to check meanings and clarify perceptions.

The telephone call allows both parties to hear each other’s voices, including the words, the inflection, the disfluencies, and the emotional elements of conversation. It is immediate in that the possibility of overlap is present, meaning not only is proximity in terms of voice as close as possible, but both parties may experience overlaps as they take turns and communicate. Telephone calls allow for quick feedback and clarification questions, and allow both parties an opportunity to recycle and revisit topics for elaboration or a better understanding. They also can cover long distances with reasonable clarity. Voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) allows you to do the same with relatively little cost.

While there are distinct advantages, the telephone lacks part of the nonverbal spectrum available to speakers in a live setting. On the telephone, proximity is a function of response time rather than physical space and the degree to which one person is near another. Time is also synchronous, though the telephone crosses time zones and changes the context as one party may have just arrived at work while the other party is leaving for lunch. Body language gets lost in the exchange as well, although many of us continue to make hand gestures on the phone, even when our conversational partners cannot see us. Paralanguage, or the sounds we hear that are not verbal, including pitch, tone, rate, rhythm, pace, articulation, and pronunciation are all available to the listener. As we can see, the telephone call allows for a richer communication experience than written communication, but cannot convey as much information as would be available in person. Just as a telephone interview may be used for screening purposes while a live interview is reserved for the final candidates, the live setting is often considered the best option for delivering negative news.

Live and in person may be the best option for direct communication with immediate feedback. In a live setting time is constant. The participants may schedule a breakfast meeting, for example, mirroring schedules and rhythms. Live, face-to-face communication comes in many forms. The casual exchange in the hallway, the conversation over coffee, and the formal performance review meeting all have interpersonal communication in common.



If you need to share the message with a larger audience, you may need to speak to a group, or you might even have to make a public presentation or speech. If it needs a feedback loop, we often call it a press conference, as the speech is followed by a question and answer session. From meeting in the hallway to live, onstage, under camera lights and ready for questions, the personal delivery of negative news can be a challenging task.

## Presenting Negative News in Writing

Writing can be intrapersonal, between two people, group communication, public communication, or even mass communication. One distinct advantage of presenting negative news in writing is the planning and preparation that goes into the message, making the initial communication more predictable. When a message is delivered orally in an interpersonal setting, we may interrupt each other, we sometimes hear what we want to, and it often takes negotiation and listening skills to grasp meaning. While a written message, like all messages, is open to interpretation, the range of possibilities is narrowed and presented within the frame and format designed by the source or author.

The written message involves verbal factors like language and word choice, but it can also involve nonverbal factors like timing and presentation. Do you communicate the message on letterhead, do you choose the channel of e-mail over a hard copy letter, or do you compose your written message in your best penmanship? Each choice communicates meaning, and the choice of how you present your written message influences its reception, interpretation, and the degree to which it is understood. In this section we consider the written message that delivers negative news.

Let's consider several scenarios:

1. A community disaster such as illness (e.g., a swine flu epidemic), earthquake, wildfire, plane crash, or a terrorism incident
2. An on-the-job accident with injuries or even death
3. A product defect resulting in injuries, illness, or even death to consumers
4. An unsuccessful product test (e.g., a new software system that isn't going to be ready for launch as planned)
5. A company merger that may result in reductions in force or layoffs

In business communication we often categorize our communication as internal or external. Internal communication is the sharing and understanding of meaning between individuals, departments, or representatives of the same business. External communication is the sharing and understanding of meaning between individuals, departments, or representatives of the business and parties outside the organization. Across the five scenarios we'll consider each of these categories in turn.

The confirmation of swine flu (H1N1) may first occur with a laboratory report (itself a written document), but it is normally preceded by conversations between health care professionals concerned over the symptoms exhibited by patients, including a high fever, a cough, sore throat, and a headache. According to Sally Redman, a registered nurse at Student Health Services at Washington State University–Pullman, over two thousand students (of nineteen thousand total student population) presented symptoms on or around August 21, 2009 (Yardley, W., 2009).

Communication will predictably occur among students, health care professionals, and the community, but parents at a distance will want to know not only the status of their child, but also of the university. A written message that necessarily contains negative news may be written in the form of a press release, for example, noting important information like the number of students affected, the capacity of the health care system to respond, the experience to date, and whom to contact for further details and updates. This message will be read over and over as parents, reporters, and people across the country want to learn more about the situation. Like all business communication, it needs to be clear and concise.

Our next scenario offers a learning opportunity as well. An on-the-job accident affects employees and the company, and like our previous example, there will be considerable interest. There may be interpersonal communication between company representatives and the individual's family, but the company will want to communicate a clear record of the occurrence with an assurance, or statement that the contributing factors that gave rise to the situation has been corrected or were beyond the control of the company and its representatives.

In addition to a statement of record, and an assurance, the company will certainly want to avoid the implication or indication of guilt or culpability. In the case of a product defect resulting in injuries, illness, or even death to consumers, this will be a relevant point of consideration. Perhaps a voluntary recall will be ordered, proactively addressing the risk before an accident occurs. It may also be the case that the recall order is issued by a government agency. Again, a written statement delivering negative news, in this case the recall of a product that presents a risk, must be written with care and consultation of legal counsel.

If your company is publicly traded, the premature announcement of a software program full of bugs, or programming errors that result in less than perfect performance, can send the company's stock price plummeting. How you release this information within the organization will influence how it is received. If your written internal memo briefly states that the software program development process has been extended to incorporate additional improvements, the emphasis shifts from the negative to the positive. While the negative news, the delay of release, remains, the focus on the benefits of the additional time can influence employees' views, and can make a difference in how the message is received outside the organization.

The awareness of a merger, and the possibility of a reduction in force or layoffs, will be discussed along the grapevine at work, and will give rise to tension and anticipation of negative news. You could simply write a short memo "To All Employees," not include any contact information, and have an assistant walk around and place copies on everyone's chair or desk during the lunch hour. But let's look at the message this would send to employees. The written communication includes nonverbal aspects like timing and presentation as well as verbal aspects like language and word choice. The timing itself suggests avoidance of conflict, and a reluctance to address the issue with transparency. The presentation of a memo in hard copy form on your chair from an unidentified company representative will certainly cause confusion, may be mistaken for a prank, and could cause considerable stress. It will contribute to increased tensions rather than solidarity, and if trust is the foundation for all effective communication, it violates this principle.

Negative news may not be easy to deliver, but it is necessary at times and should be done with clarity and brevity. All parties should be clearly identified. The negative news itself should be clear and concise. The presentation should be direct, with authority and credibility. Communication occurs between people, and all humans experience concern, fear, and trepidation of the unknown. The negative news message, while it may be unwelcome, can bring light to an issue.

As we mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, some people prefer their bad news to be direct and concise, while others prefer a less direct approach. Let's weigh the pros and cons of each approach. Table 3.2.1.2 contrasts the elements of the two approaches.

Table 3.2.1.2 Direct and Indirect Delivery

Direct Delivery	Direct Example	Indirect Delivery	Indirect Example
		Positive introduction	Thank you for your request for leave.
Negative news message as introduction	Your request for leave has been denied.	Negative news message	We regret to inform you that your request has been denied.
Conclusion	Please contact your supervisor if you need more information.	Conclusion	Please contact your supervisor if you need more information.

The direct approach places the negative news at the beginning of the message, while the indirect approach packages the negative news between a positive introduction, sometimes called a "buffer" or cushion, and a conclusion. Your negative message may include the rationale or reasons for the decision.

The direct approach is often associated with a message where the audience values brevity and the message needs to be concise. A positive introduction often introduces the topic but not the outcome. An effective negative news statement clearly states the message while limiting the possibility of misinterpretation. An effective closing statement may provide reasons, reference a policy, or indicate a procedure to follow for more information.

## Key Takeaway

Delivering negative news involves a buffer or cushion statement, an explanation, the negative news itself, and a redirecting statement. Whether you choose a direct or an indirect approach, the message should be delivered clearly and concisely, with respect for the receiver and the organization.

## Exercises

1. When should you use an indirect approach in delivering a negative news message? Explain your answer to the class.
2. Ask five friends which they would prefer: negative news in a direct or indirect format? Why? Discuss your results with a classmate.
3. Sales have decreased for two consecutive quarters at your business. You have been instructed to inform your sales team that their hours, and base pay, will be reduced by 20 percent. While you may have a few members of your sales team that are

underperforming, you want to retain the entire team. Write a negative news message in a direct or indirect approach informing your sales team of the news.

4. You have observed and documented an employee being late and taking long breaks for the past two weeks. Write out a brief summary of the conversation you need to have. You may be assigned to another classmate for a role-playing exercise. Share and compare with your classmates.

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