

HOW TO deliver bad news WITH YOUR BOSS



Feeling anxious about delivering difficult news to your boss? Turn a tough conversation into a productive one with these tips and keep your relationship intact.

There are many instances where you might have to share unpleasant news with a superior, often this is due to external factors – such as poor results from an employee engagement survey – or issues pertaining to the leader themselves, such as tough feedback about their management style. For the purposes of this guide, let's assume the bad news you have to share is regarding a mistake you have made. Where should you start?

STEP 1 START BY USING THE FRAMING TECHNIQUE

You never want to catch your boss off guard with bad news, so always start by framing up the conversation in advance.



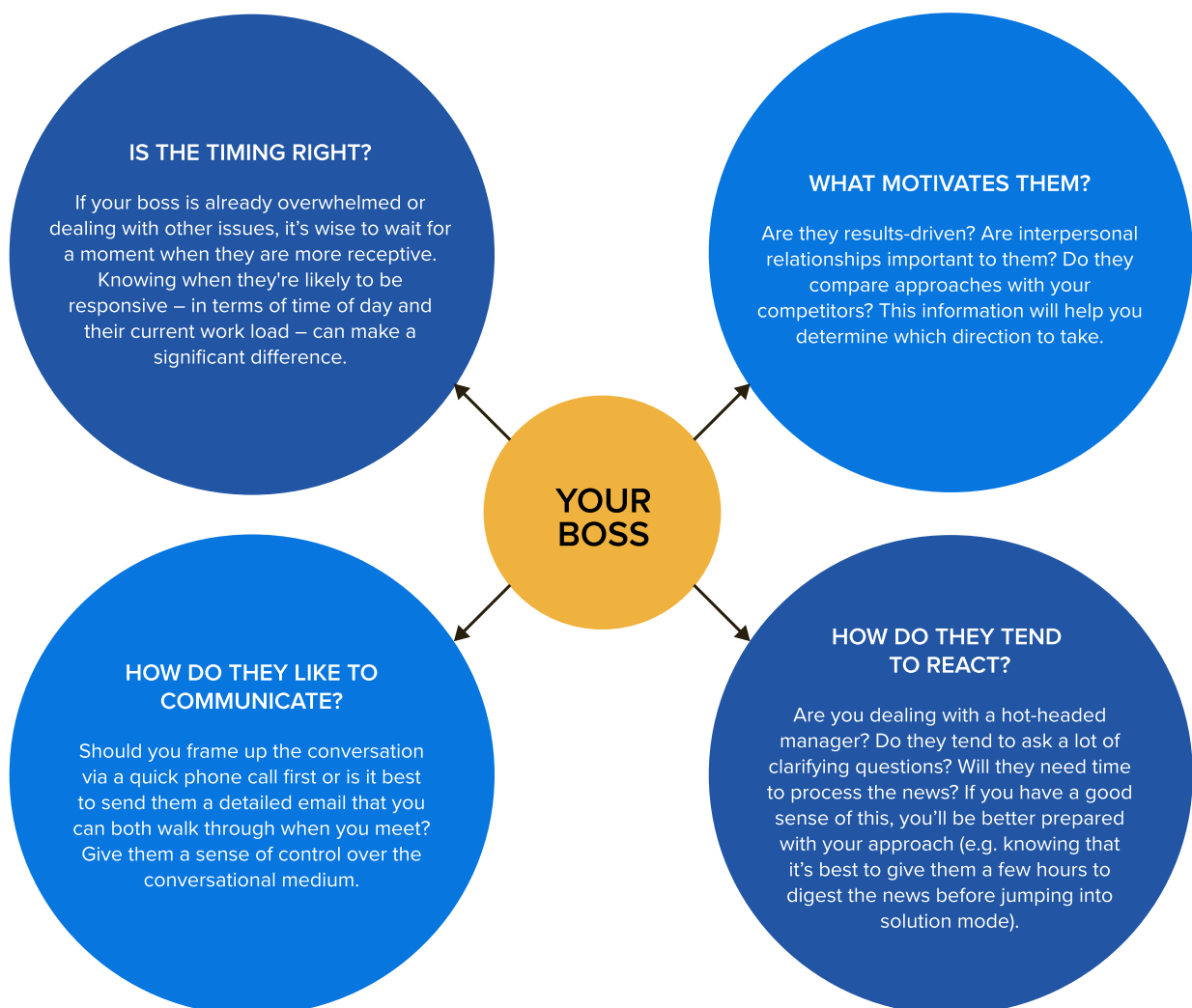
“Plant the seed that there might be something that might frustrate or upset them. Essentially, you’re seeking permission to enter into a difficult conversation with them and giving them a heads up on what they can expect,” says Shelley Johnson, founder of Boldside HR.

Example phrasing: “I have made an oversight that has impacted our project timelines. I wanted to give you a heads up about some of the potential repercussions of this and bounce some potential solutions off you. When is a good time to chat?”

STEP 2 TAILOR YOUR APPROACH

Every boss will have different motivators, emotional response styles and communication preferences. Deeply understanding these through active listening and observation, is important, says Johnson.

Before you have a conversation, consider:



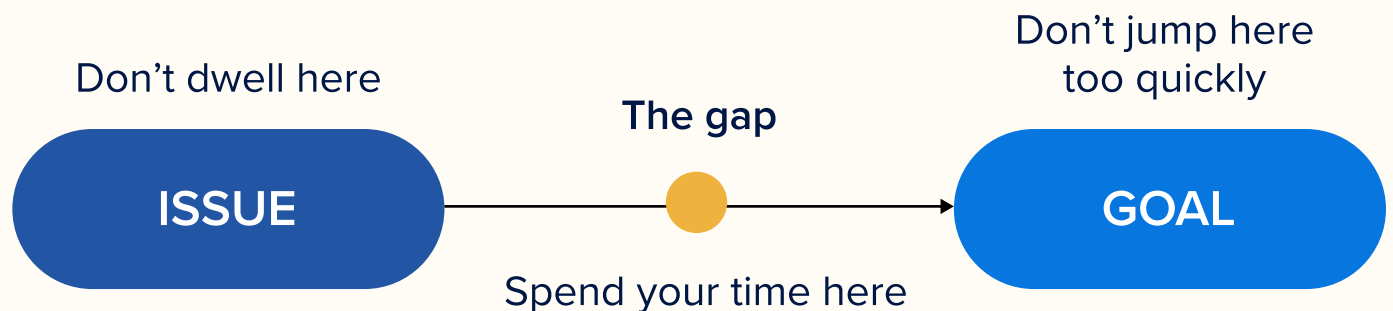
“If you want to have difficult conversations, first you have to be an amazing listener. You might have multiple stakeholders that you need to have difficult conversations with, and the best way to do that is to understand them deeply as an individual, so you can influence them effectively.”

STEP 3 IDENTIFY THE ‘GOAL AND THE GAP’

It’s important to be solutions-focused when you have these conversations with your boss and, where appropriate, co-design the solution with them.



“Open the conversation with your shared purpose – the thing you know they care about. Then jump into a conversation about how to address the gap between the issue and their end goal.”



TIP: Reframe your role

Remember this mantra: “I am not my mistake.” Avoid treating your mistake as a reflection on you personally. There are many contextual reasons for mistakes occurring. Rather than thinking of yourself as the person who made a mistake, see yourself as an expert problem-solver.

STEP 4 POSITION YOUR BOSS AS THE EXPERT

Most people like being asked for their advice, says Johnson. In the context of owning up to a mistake that you've made, rather than spiralling into self-flagellation, frame your mistake up as an opportunity to learn from your boss.

Example phrasing: "You could say, 'Look, this issue has happened and I'm feeling really bad about it. I want to work on fixing things as quickly as possible, so I'd really value your perspective and advice on where I could start.' That can lower people's defenses."

Example phrasing: "I know you have a lot of expertise around dealing with high-stakes negotiations and would have some great insights into managing a potential misstep. Can I take you out for lunch and pick your brain about some of the ways you might tackle this challenge?"

STEP 5 KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

In order to leave a good impression with your boss, avoid treating these conversations as one-and-done, says Johnson.



"We often can't get full resolution in one conversation – that puts too much pressure on you and your boss. Discuss some potential solutions and then catch up over the next few weeks for a check in, or do a post-mortem when there's enough distance between the issue and the opportunities for learning."

1. FRAMING CONVERSATION



When? As soon as is reasonable, keeping your boss's existing workload/stress level in mind.

What? Treat this as a heads up and provide top-line detail so your boss knows what to expect.

2. INITIAL CONVERSATION



When? At a time that you and your boss have agreed upon, so they're more receptive/ not feeling like they need to rush through the conversation.

What? Briefly take full ownership of the situation, be transparent about the impacts of the mistake (both immediate and potential), reiterate your shared end-goal and then spend the majority of the time discussing potential solutions.

3. FOLLOW UP CONVERSATION



When? Right after your initial conversation – preferably on the same day while all the information is fresh.

What? This doesn't have to be a face-to-face conversation. Consider writing an email outlining what you discussed and the agreed-upon action items. This demonstrates proactiveness and ensures everyone is on the same page. Often, when emotions are high, things can be forgotten or easily misinterpreted.

4. PROGRESS CONVERSATION



When? This depends on the scale of the issue and the length of time it could take to implement your solutions, but checking in with your boss a week or so after your follow up message can restore trust and demonstrate that you are taking the matter seriously.

What? As well as sharing a general progress update, this is your opportunity to sense-check your approach with your boss and either maintain their buy-in or utilise their expertise to help you pivot.

5. POST-MORTEM CONVERSATION



When? This will depend on the scale of the issue and the impact it had on the business. Ensure enough time has passed for the solution to have been in full effect and the majority of the damage to have been cleaned up. That could be a few weeks or a few months.

What? Use this as an opportunity to reflect on the lessons learned and agree upon risk mitigation frameworks that could be put in place for next time.

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