**BREAKING BAD NEWS TO THE BOSS**

*Prepare long before the untoward event. Approach it as an exercise in problem solving. But be ready for a blowup anyway.*

In a perfect world the manager bringing bad news to his or her boss would be showered with appreciation. Imagine the scene: Her Executive Eminence, glad to have the truth even if moved to quiet sobs by its ill import, grasps the messenger, patting him gently on the back out of gratitude. Colleagues press forward to lay a silent hand on his shoulder or to murmur "Thank you, thank you." A little girl emerges from the crowd, curtsies charmingly, and presents him a bouquet.

We live in a very imperfect world. The boss flies into a rage, the messenger is killed, and his gleeful co-workers bayonet the corpse as the stretcher-bearers come to carry off the body. In the corporate sphere these things actually happen, though perhaps less often than terrified messengers fear. Robert Pearson, president of the Lamaile Associates executive search firm, cites the example of a computer company president who had to tell his chairman – a substantial shareholder – and the assembled directors that results wouldn't be up to plan. The exec went about it the right way, providing a full explanation and detailed plans for getting back on track. The chairman fired him on the spot anyway.

In the quick-shifting business universe of today, what that chairman did isn't homicide. It's suicide. The experts – business school professors, consultants – pretty much agree on what happens when organizations routinely stifle what the jargonauts call negative upward communication: Hidden from the sunlight of managerial attention, problems fester and eventually ulcerate into big, ugly, expensive crises. Maybe in the good old stable days, when there wasn't as much competition out there in the marketplace, companies could afford this brand of obtuseness. Not anymore. If the organization is to adapt to changing circumstances, and to learn, word – even a discouraging word – has to pass on up the line.

Your boss may not appreciate the fact that she truly needs to hear the bad news. It falls you on then, Mr. or Ms. Responsible Manager, to figure out how to get the message through to executive Olympus.

A decent regard for self-preservation dictates that you begin by understanding the career danger you run when you bear ill tidings. It isn't so much that on this one occasion Zeus may strike you down with a lightening bolt. It is, rather, that hereafter, if there are other episodes, the bossly gods may begin to view you in a different light – as someone who overreacts, perhaps, for a negative sort or, worse yet, a troublemaker.

Jane Halpert, a psychology professor at DePaul University, notes the obvious consequence: "If every time you see a person he's bringing you bad news, you tend to avoid him. It's natural."

The antidote: Work on your relationship with The Big Guy or Gal long before the dismal necessity ever arises. "Delivering bad news isn't just communicating the information," observes Kellogg School professor Robert Bies, perhaps the foremost academic authority on the subject. "It's a multiple-act process." In a sense, it begins the very first time the two of you sit down to talk.

Besides agreeing on stuff like shared goals, you should try to work out as concretely as possible how you will stay in touch. Bilateral open doors? Regular meetings? Memos? Never before the day's second cup of coffee? Once you have the pipeline laid down, endeavor to keep it full. Routinely pass along the good and the middling news, the interesting tidbit, the fun gossip. If you catch her in all her bossly puissance doing something meritorious, compliment her all the same. You might even attempt to rehearse a few what-if scenarios, as in "What if this or that disaster struck, what would we do then?"

In the course of all this back-and-forth, you can study your boss to see how she reacts to less than encouraging dispatches from the front. Elaine Berke, a Westport, Massachusetts, consultant, elaborates on some of the possibilities: "If your boss is very task oriented, very direct and take-charge, she would probably want to hear it right away, succinctly. If she's more analytical, then you may want to give some background information first, especially the important facts that led up to the bad news. If the boss is a more amiable kind of person, who looks on this as high-risk stuff, you'll want to come at it in a more amiable way – preparing her for it, being reassuring, maybe even apologetic.

Okay, you know her style. Then, one day, on darkling wings, comes trouble: You're not going to hit your weekly numbers, or the stalwart you brought aboard last month as head financial type; well, he's been out of the office for a few days, but he did just send a funny postcard ... from Brazil. (The experts rank budgetary shortfalls and personnel problems as perhaps the most common varieties of organizational bad tidings.)

Gather all the facts, questioning people close to the unhappy developments in your best non-prosecutorial manner and take notes on what they say. As you do, think about where the news fits in a who's-responsible taxonomy proposed by Hendire Weisinger, author of *The Critical Edge*, a book on delivering criticism in organizations: If the problem is your fault, you're going to want to be up front about that melancholy fact. If it's her fault, tread carefully indeed: "Depersonalize the news," says Weisinger, along the lines of "Let me describe the current situation. The plan was as follows ... Certain events have intervened." If neither you nor she is responsible, concentrate on what to recommend by way of cutting your losses. Particularly if the boss is the problem – everybody else agrees that her latest cockamamie scheme will prove disastrous – take time to do what professor Bies calls coalition-building: Solicit the opinions of your colleagues and knit together a consensus on how to approach "the current situation." When the time comes, you will feel a lot more comfortable if you can say, "Manufacturing doesn't think it will work. Neither does Marketing or Finance. I share their view."

Must you confront Herself face to face? Could you not, this one miserable cowardly time; maybe send a memo instead? If the mess requires loads of numbers to explain, you almost certainly will want to have something in writing. Marty Nord, a professor of communications at Vanderbilt's Owen School of Management, observes that there's even a textbook formula for bad news memos: Begin with a neutral statement to buffer the blow ("We have word from one of our tankers off Alaska ..."); set out the facts; offer your opinion; then look forward ("Given normal tidal action, we can expect that within ten to 20 years ...").

The form has its limitations. Too often, Nord says, the neutral lead-in goes on so long and cheerily that the boss skips the rest and misses the bullet entirely. "As a general guideline, oral is better," she advises. "If you deliver the message in person, you can straighten out misperceptions and reinforce the move on to the next step." The last consideration before you march into the boss's office, and the one most frequently raised by real live managers; the delicate question of timing. Just after she has received an upbeat report? Maybe just before she gets still worse tidings? Forget such subtleties. The only important rule on timing is the sooner the better. "We have a saying around Bank of America," says Ron Bhody, its director of corporate communications: "Kill the messenger only if he's late with the news." In you go on the double. Put the bad news up front, most of the experts advise. The last thing you want is for the boss to feel she has been set up. Lay out the facts, lay out the alternative courses of action, and tell which one you recommend and why. Avoid being preemptive, as in "Here's the solution and the steps I'm taking to implement it." The best managers, Bies finds, view delivering bad news as an exercise in problem solving, and they endeavor to draw the boss into the process. You want her to say, "Have you thought about this or that possibility?"

Don't be defensive; don't be arrogant. If it's your fault, never blame others. But if you really are just the messenger, take a tip form Kevin Daley, head of the Communispond consulting firm: Give the boss plenty of verbatim quotes from your sources, clearly indicated as such. It will clue her to the quality of your information, and not incidentally point up that you are merely serving as a conduit.

Even if you've observed the punctilio, be prepared for uncivil behavior. Caught on an off day, she rants and raves. Don't try to talk her out of it: "Gee, boss, you always said you wanted me to come to you with this kind of stuff. This isn't in our psychological contract." No, let her vent her feelings. Take it like the occasionally thick-skinned manager you're paid to be.