

EBOOK

How to empower clients to turn bad news into positive change



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Nobody wants to hear bad news.

As a consultant, you know that delivering bad news to your client is inevitable. After all, they approached you to help them solve a problem. Whether they're fully aware of the problem and need help solving it; know how to solve it but need validation; or know there's a problem, but can't pinpoint it exactly, your client likely already knows bad news is on its way.

But that doesn't make receiving bad news any less uncomfortable or difficult—especially when clients know there's change on the horizon.

It's even worse when they discover they needed more help than they thought.

What your client may think is the root cause of their organizational problems may turn out to be a symptom of a larger business issue.

While the thought of needing to address bad news head-on and take action can be overwhelming, your client isn't alone in their struggle. In fact, a [2019 survey of 156 CEOs](#) showed 69% of CEOs needed some help or extensive help with business strategy or execution.

To what extent have you needed help with your...





Nobody wants to deliver bad news either.

While it's difficult to be on the receiving end of bad news, being the messenger is no enviable position, either. There's a [real psychological phenomenon](#) where those who are given bad news walk away with negative impressions of those delivering it. And as a consultant, you don't want to jeopardize your relationship with your client, nor do you want a negative reputation that could damage your chance of winning new business.

But good consultants recognize their clients are in a vulnerable position. Clients know their businesses inside and out. So when they're faced with real business challenges, they find it difficult to admit they need help.

One of the most difficult aspects of delivering bad news is the assumption that people operate with good intent. Your client is doing the best they can with what they know—and, as the saying goes, a business (or organization or system) is designed perfectly for the results it achieves—good or bad.

Now you're likely wondering, "How do I deliver bad news effectively and in a way that will motivate my client to take action?"

In this guide, you'll learn some best practices for navigating those difficult discussions, as well as tips on how to empower your client to turn that bad news into positive change. With a little time, consideration, and follow through on action items, your client will be more receptive to your bad news, and also better equipped to mobilize their people to put your consultant recommendations into action.

This functional guide will help you navigate the most critical aspects of your client's change management journey:

- 1. Preparing your delivery to the client**
- 2. Delivering the bad news**
- 3. Preparing the client for the changes ahead**
- 4. Giving the client the tools they need to make successful change**
- 5. Empowering the client to mobilize their people to deliver results**

1. Prepare your delivery.

When it comes time to giving bad news to your client, there are some basic dos and don'ts in how you prepare your delivery:

- **Don't waste time.** Coming to the table and hiding behind other topics or small talk to avoid delivering bad news does neither you nor your client any favors. At best, it delays the inevitable. At worst, it makes your client more anxious and uncomfortable.
- **Do pay attention to your facial expressions and body language.** When you're uncomfortable, it's easy to grimace, frown, or use body language that's standoffish. Do your best to remain relaxed from head to toe, and help put your client at ease.
- **Do come to the conversation prepared** for the client's reaction, and also any questions or concerns they may have. Not only will you put your client at ease; you'll also start building trust, which is critical when it comes to the client accepting and adopting your consultant recommendations.
- **Do use data to your advantage.** Bad news is difficult to take, but data is difficult to refute. Use data to back up your diagnosis of your client's organizational issues. Data also helps lay the foundation for prescriptive action.
- **Do consider your audience's communication styles and values.** When you're sitting down with leadership, be cognizant of their individual needs. Some people are more likely to be open to feedback; others may feel personally attacked by bad news. When it comes to how they receive bad news, some may be fine talking through an issue in real time as it's revealed, while others may prefer to mull over a report or brief first. Using behavioral or personality data will help you figure out the best communication plan.



2. Deliver the bad news.

Whether your client anticipates some bad news ahead or they're completely in the dark, it's important to remember to choose your battles.

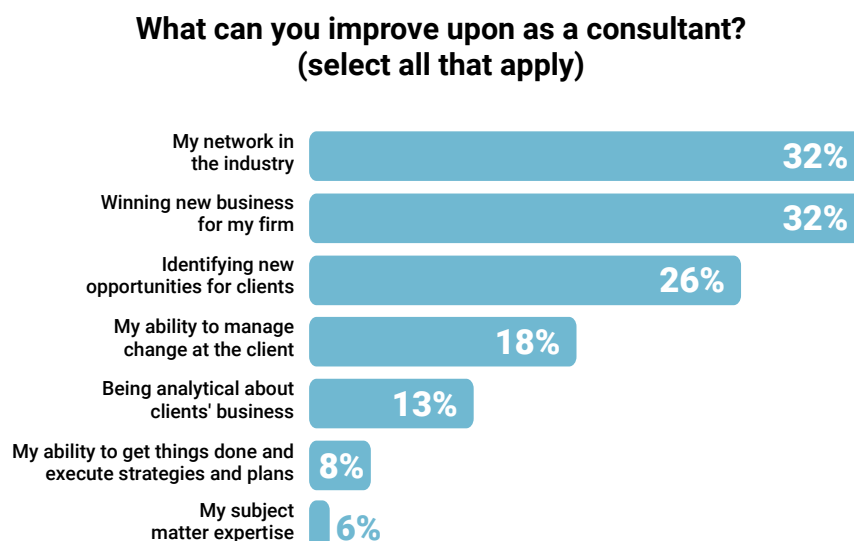
As a consultant, you may very well uncover numerous issues that neither you nor your client expected. While in a perfect world, you'd solve every single issue your client has in one fell swoop, sometimes you need to choose a few key issues that will have the most positive impact.

Remember, when it comes to delivering bad news, focus on the issues you can easily have productive conversations about. And the best way to have a productive conversation is to come prepared with data. Data will not only highlight the issue for you, but will also help you develop a solution.

Remaining solutions-oriented is essential to delivering bad news. Telling a client they have a problem is one thing. Helping the client understand why they have a problem and how you plan to help them solve it is another.


3. Prepare your client for the changes ahead.

Another survey conducted in 2019 by The Predictive Index ® found that of [152 consultants surveyed](#), only 6% thought they could stand to improve their subject matter expertise. And only 8% responded that they could improve on their ability to get things done.



In short: You know what needs to get done and how to do it. But your client, while trusting enough to have hired you in the first place, may still be wary of your abilities—especially being in the vulnerable position of having just been told bad news. **Now is not the time to take the trust between you and for client for granted.** Instead, it's important to continue building trust so your client will be more likely to adopt your consultant recommendations.

Make sure you understand the full context of your relationship with your client. Reflect on how you won their business. Was it through a referral? Was it cold outreach? Did they come to you based on your reputation? How you started out your relationship will help guide how to continue it. For example, a referral may be more trusting, because they found you through someone in their network they already trusted. If it's someone you found through cold outreach, you may need to continue to refer back to your past successes to reassure your client.



Behavioral or personality data will also help you determine how best to build trust. For instance, some people are more likely to be trusting based on how they're wired. They hired you for a reason and their trust is yours to lose. They may also not require as many progress updates or data, because they already trust you're doing what needs to be done. For others, trust may not come so easily. Remain diligent in your follow up with clients who are less trusting, and be open to answering questions to quell their anxieties.

Once that trust is established and reinforced, it's time to be clear with your client on what needs to get done. **When it comes to preparing for change and prioritizing tasks, it's essential that your client understands the difference between what's their responsibility to fulfill and what's simply beneficial.** As overwhelming as change may be, it can be easy to spiral into wanting to change everything.

If you're working with a client who hasn't yet aligned their talent strategy with their business strategy—and as a result, employee engagement is low and targets aren't being met—you might suggest redesigning the organizational structure.

Your client might agree, but might also want to tackle the engagement problem by redesigning the office. While a new office might be beneficial to creating a more welcoming work environment, it's simply a nice to have in the context of the larger issue. The client's responsibility in this case is to set employees up for success through the right organizational structure so that they can deliver on those business goals.

Preparing the client through building trust and providing guidance on how to prioritize solutions will get you on the right track. But, that preparation is nothing without the right tools to help them execute.

4. Give your client the tools they need to successfully manage change.

Knowing that change is coming isn't enough. As a consultant, you know it's your responsibility to provide your client with the right tools to successfully implement and adopt change. And with so many different tools available, it's essential that you work closely with your client to figure out what works best for them. There's no one-size-fits-all solution, but using a particular methodology or discipline can help.

Have your client measure the right data and analyze it.

Regardless of your client's primary business issue, data will play an integral role in its solution. But it can't just be about data collection. You'll need to advise your client on what kind of data to measure and how to analyze it. If your client is facing organizational issues, particularly surrounding employee engagement, there are numerous data points you can examine to help determine what needs to change. This can include:

- **Employees' behavioral and/or cognitive data**
- **Job performance (like a 30-day, 90-day, or 360 review)**
- **Engagement survey scores**

Measuring the above data points will help give you and your client a clearer picture of what's happening at their organization. Analyzing that data to find correlations between job performance and behavioral or cognitive fit for a role will help identify top performers. Understanding the correlation between performance and engagement will help you to identify evangelists within the organization who can get others excited about change. All of these components are essential to creating an action plan for the client.

Involve the client in prescribing the right action.

In that same scenario, once you've collected and analyzed the data, you'll be able to prescribe the right action. Involving the client at this stage is critical. **As the adage goes: Change doesn't happen to people; it happens with people.**

Work closely with your client to come up with a plan that will work best for them and their needs given the full business context. This will differ on a client-by-client basis. For some clients who are facing employee engagement issues, a major overhaul in organizational structure may be the right decision. For others, smaller, more incremental changes like rewriting job descriptions or bringing in another senior leader to help restructure a team may be the better solution. It all comes down to what the data shows and what's best for your client's individual needs.

Work with them to eliminate obstacles so they have the ability to change.

Even if your client is enthusiastic to change, there will no doubt be obstacles on their path. As a consultant, working with your client to understand the hurdles ahead will help to alleviate future frustrations and free up more energy for those inevitable curveballs. In preparing your client for change, remind them that obstacles happen, but they don't have to derail progress.

5. Empower them to mobilize their employees to deliver results.

When it comes to finally turning that initial bad news into positive change, your client will do best to involve their employees as much as possible.

Change comes with various emotional responses: Employees may be excited, apathetic, skeptical, uncomfortable, or even anxious. In understanding what motivates people and what they value, your client can tailor their change management plan to the needs of their employees instead of simply imposing change on them.

In order to mobilize their employees, your client needs to understand that organizational commitment is paramount. **When talking with your client, make it clear to them that every single employee at every level has a role to play in that change.** Encourage your client to invite employees to become a part of the change management process in the way that best suits their natural strengths abilities.

For example, using the behavioral data collected in preparing for change, you and your client can easily identify employees within the organization who can play essential roles in the change management process. There will always be employees who display more dominant behavior and want to maintain control. Leverage their dominance drive to have those employees lead projects or key initiatives. There will also always be employees who are more stabilizing and help keep said projects on track. Be sure to also leverage those who are skilled at executing, and reward them in kind.



It's also important your client understands action isn't enough. Effective communication is integral to successful change management. Communicating early and often, no matter how large or small the change, can mean the difference between success and failure in adopting change. Have your client again reference their people data to create the best messaging possible so that it resonates with everyone. The more the message resonates, the more likely the employees are to feel valued. When communication is clear, employees feel valued, and everyone feels they have a role to play, a smooth adoption of change is inevitable. Empowered and engaged employees will deliver results, putting your client at ease and on track to success.

The good news: Bad news can turn into positive change.

Bad news is an inevitable reality in consulting, but that doesn't mean it has to be debilitating for the client. While there's no one-size-fits-all solution for delivering bad news or the changes that need to come as a result, in following the best practices above, you can ease the blow of bad news for your client and empower them to be resilient and successfully implement positive change.

And your client may even forget there was bad news in the first place.