

How Not to Get Shot!

(Separating yourself as the messenger from the message)

By
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One of the most common situations we all find ourselves in is delivering news that is other than positive. The key is to convey the message in a way that separates the person and the relationship from the issue itself. Based on original work by Fisher and Ury outlined in their book *Getting to Yes*, Michael Grinder has developed a package of specific elements that helps one to achieve this.

1. Go visual

Having the volatile content of a meeting expressed in visual form, rather than delivered orally, will greatly increase your ability to separate yourself from the message. For instance: have a report, charts, a flip chart, even blank paper which you can write on and then give to the other person.

2. Get information off to the side

Once the information is visually displayed, it is beneficial to get it off to the side. If you hold the information in front of you, listeners are much more likely to look at you and associate you with the issue – whereas holding the information to one side will increase the separation between you and the bad news. In the case of giving good news, eye contact is highly recommended because the listener will associate the good news with you.

3. Listeners follow speaker's eyes

When you want to deliver the specific bad news message, look at and talk to your visual aid (report/flip chart etc) rather than the listener. Their eyes will naturally follow yours.

4. Use third person

Using first (“I”, “me”, “mine”) and second (“you”, “your”) person pronouns will tend to increase the parties’ possessiveness and defensiveness, in the case of bad news. Use of more neutral language (“the report”, “the figures”) will maintain a more objective tone and preserve the relationship.

5. Separate the problem from the solution

Having got the information off to the side and had the listener’s eyes follow yours while you talk through the problem, you can then resume eye contact when you start to talk about possible solutions.

6. Use voice patterns systematically

Our voice patterns range from *credible* to *approachable*.

Credible: flat voice that ends with an intonation that curls down (think of the voice of an airline pilot).

Approachable: rhythmic voice that ends with an intonation that curls up (think of the voice of an airline stewardess). To increase your effectiveness, use the approachable voice when you are establishing the relationship (seeking information) and have eye contact; use the credible voice when you are delivering the bad news (sending information) and looking at your visual information.

7. Use specific descriptions

Provide specific facts and evidence to back up your message (for instance, “the attendance report shows that you were late on 6 occasions in the last month”). This will reduce your chances of being perceived as making interpretations about the issue. Avoid generalisations (e.g. “You always...”, “You never...”) at all costs, and use questions to probe into any that they respond with.

8. Position body at 90°

If you sit across the table from the listener, it makes it almost impossible to get information off to the side. Sitting at right angles (for instance across the corner of a table), makes it much easier to set up a neutral point to place the visual information as a natural part of the conversation.