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**Breaking bad news at workplace**By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News  
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The duty of breaking bad news, in the workplace, may fall on any one of us at any time, often at short notice. However, it will usually be the responsibility of either HR or management, who should be professionally trained to deliver bad news in a sensitive, clear and direct manner.

The situation must be approached with clarity, purpose and awareness of the specific responsibility involved. In reality, there are often problems of avoidance. For example, you would expect a doctor to be even more highly trained in this speciality than an HR professional.

Yet recent research showed that 40 per cent of doctors admitted to a habit of "toning down" bad news to a patient in order to spare themselves the pressure of an emotionally-charged response.

The conclusion seems to be that we humans try to avoid discomfort, and so we shy away from telling people what they don't want to hear. Yet clarity is the chief imperative at a time when the individual is in serious need of some fixed points for guidance and someone to listen to them.

**Example**

In a major insurance company, I once had to counsel a manager who had just failed his big professional exam, the one that marked out potential high-flyers.

In breaking the bad news, his boss had made the mistake of trying to keep the atmosphere light and conversational. He started by saying "Well, you've ploughed it!" The manager had never heard this expression, but guessed it meant "You've passed!"

He was then baffled by the next part of the dialogue, which was all about the options for failed candidates. Naturally this did nothing to help him cope with the shock, and I found myself dealing with an individual who was confused and angry - not only at having failed the exam but at the way he was told.

The mindset of the deliverer of negative information is just as important as that of the listener. Breaking bad news is not a conversational exchange but a formal announcement of importance, and the manager needs to be trained and prepared.

- Get to the point immediately - don't avoid the issue

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- Fully expect a variety of responses ranging from anger through to silence or even tears

- You should be ready with a clear account of the situation, putting the news in perspective, and showing it, where applicable, as a necessary part of a larger picture. So however bad the news, you are at least also describing something positive

- However, it is important to remember that what is said is not necessarily heard and it may need to be repeated.

Remember that breaking bad news is a major test of HR and management skills, and an opportunity to develop a better relationship for the driving of future change in the organisation.

### Key points

Things to keep in mind

- What is said may not be actually heard and may need to be repeated

- Treat it as a formal announcement, not a conversation

- Everyone reacts differently on hearing bad news

*The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker with more than 20 years' experience as CEO of Carole Spiers' Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.*

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