

A KICK-IN-THE-PANTS GUIDE TO:

DELIVERING TOUGH MESSAGES

When you have something hard to say, it can be overwhelming. Yet hard things need to be said—often—and they can help move relationships, partnerships, and projects forward in healthy ways when done well.

1

Identify why you are telling them.

Sharing your “why” with someone else establishes candor in the relationship. It sets boundaries for the conversation, creating both safety and focus. It clarifies intent. And it removes from the other person the burden of having to read between the lines, interpret what you’re thinking, or guess at further context.

2

Ask for their help.

framing your position and message in a way that asks them to participate gives them agency. Asking for help also makes tough messages feel less isolating: it casts you as one of the key players, and it casts you and the recipient as a team, which feels better for everyone than an isolated island.

3

Provide a thoughtful rationale.

This goes back to the value of context. The other person’s thoughts, mindset, and emotions will be different than yours in that moment when the conversation starts. The rationale will not only provide the context that will help explain your message but also give them time to process. Going into it, let them know you are going to provide the context, almost like a roadmap.

**You can’t make people understand you, but you can
make it as easy as possible for them to do so.**

Competence breeds confidence.

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A KICK-IN-THE-PANTS GUIDE TO:

RECEIVING TOUGH MESSAGES

One of the best gifts we can give another person is to be a good listener. Being gracious, open, and receptive to hearing what someone has to say, even when it's hard—or maybe especially when it's hard—can make all the difference in working well with others.

1

Focus on the intention.

Going into conversations assuming good intent is not only more helpful, it is often also correct. You might have to imagine their intention if they haven't done a great job of setting it up, but that process can help reorient your immediate reaction to something helpful.

2

Look beyond the bull's-eye.

The center of the target is the news. It's the thing that you don't want to hear. Because of that, it's easy to dwell on it. Your emotions are triggered, and then you want to perseverate. Avoid that, at least for the moment. It's not going to be helpful

3

Remember the shared goal.

Bad news, changes, and new information arrive at work all the time. You can let them derail your attention and energy, or you can redirect that attention and energy to adapting to the news and folding it into your perspective. Ask yourself, "What are we trying to do, and how can I use this new information to still get there?"

4

Share concern in thoughtful ways.

If you are having a difficult time receiving the message or making sense of it, say that. If you need time to get your thoughts together, say that too. Acknowledge what you heard and ask if you can take a little time to respond.

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