

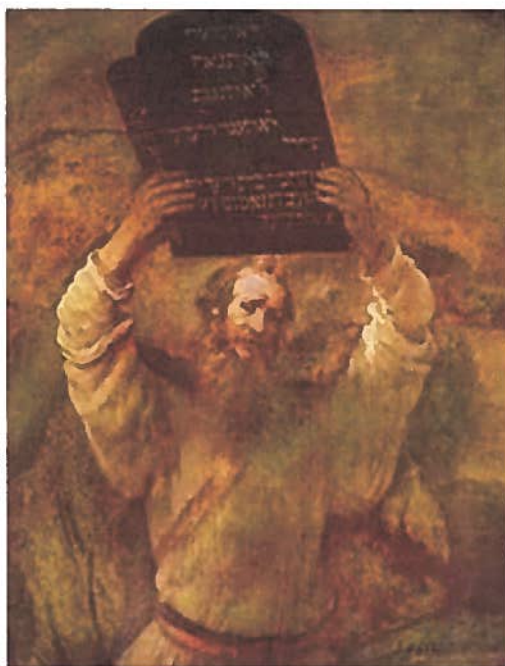
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The 10 Commandments for Delivering Bad News



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Moses with the tablets of the Ten Commandments, painting by Rembrandt (1659) (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

I have spent more than 20 years researching how managers deliver bad news, and a few rules and commandments have consistently emerged as best practices. Here are 10 of them. Like the more well-known set of 10 Commandments, these rules provide an ideal ethical guideline—but they also prove difficult to always follow.

The Tenth Commandment: Thou shalt never surprise. Bad news should never come as a surprise. Failure to warn senior leadership of impending bad news, such as poor sales or a loss of a major client, is a cardinal sin. So is failure to warn

subordinates about mistakes in their performance and provide an opportunity for them to make corrections and improve. If employees are surprised by bad news, managers are not fulfilling their responsibilities.

The Ninth Commandment: Thou shalt never delay. Delivering bad news with due speed, or without unreasonable delay, is critically important. Many

people sit on bad news, hoping that things will improve. Such delays are costly, as conditions can continue to worsen. Bad news delayed is bad news compounded.

The Eighth Commandment: Thou shalt never hide the facts. Sometimes people withhold information out of fear, or to save face. While this may be a natural reaction, withholding information can cause a wrong diagnosis of the actual problem or an underestimation of the extent of the cause of the bad news. When the hidden facts become public—and they always do—employees will look worse than if all the facts had initially been disclosed.

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The Seventh Commandment: Thou shalt always put it in writing. In most organizations, it has become mandatory to keep detailed records of any meetings and warnings associated with bad news. This is particularly true for employee performance problems, but it is also important for issues such as declines in product safety. Good records should cover evidence of and causes for the problems.

The Sixth Commandment: Thou shalt always justify. When delivering bad news, it is critical that you justify, justify, justify. Bosses and subordinates increasingly want, expect, and even demand to know why the bad news is being delivered, whether it be a negative performance review, a budget cutback, or job layoffs. Justification should include specific and concrete reasons for the bad news.

The Fifth Commandment: Thou shalt always look for the silver lining. Find positives associated with the bad news. Though this is often criticized as spin, emphasizing positive and temporary aspects of the news can increase morale and motivation, particularly during budget cuts, job layoffs, and corporate turnarounds. Focusing on positives will help leadership keep employees productive, upbeat, and future-oriented. Give employees hope or they may get lost. However, that hope must be grounded in reality.

The Fourth Commandment: Thou shalt always bring solutions. When delivering bad news, present solutions or an action plan to solve the problems that led to the bad news. For example, when announcing the loss of a major customer to a competitor, offer ways of acquiring new customers or maintaining existing clients. This will keep attention on future improvement and underscore that the situation, however bad, is being addressed in a problem-solving way. Bad news without solutions is truly bad news.

The Third Commandment: Thou shalt always remember your multiple audiences. It often gets overlooked in delivering bad news that there are usually multiple audiences involved. For example, in job layoffs there are the direct victims of the news, the survivors who remain, and external audiences such as customers and investors. Remember when delivering bad news that the news never reaches just one; it reaches many. Others will be listening and watching, and even more will be interested.

The Second Commandment: Thou shalt always follow up and follow through. After the bad news is delivered and solutions are identified, track any progress made in solving the problems that led to the bad news. Keep leadership updated on the situation and the speed of progress. Early and frequent feedback on progress is critical. Bad news involves cleaning up a mess. After cleaning, let everyone know. Now the news is no longer bad; it is good.

The First Commandment: Thou shalt always treat people with respect and dignity. This commandment, while almost always espoused by executives, is not always practiced by their organizations. Sometimes employees are fired via e-mail or find out they lost their jobs when their names are deleted from company directories. Such horrific actions send a clear message that people do not matter. On the other hand, positive interactions can increase workplace morale. A study has found that layoff victims who felt they were treated with dignity when hearing the news, with sincere explanation and caring conveyed in announcing it, actually worked harder than before they received the news. Moreover, survivors worked harder when they saw their co-workers treated with respect and dignity. Respect

and dignity not only make moral sense, they make business sense. We are not just communicating bad news; we are communicating it to human beings.

If you follow these commandments, the task of delivering bad news will become easier, though it will never be easy. These commandments may be difficult and challenging to live and work by, but they will provide an ideal moral and ethical compass for what leadership should strive to achieve and what appropriate actions it should pursue.

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