



## Tool: The dos and don'ts of breaking bad news

Engagement invites a person to open up and express their views and feelings, but what they want cannot always be accommodated. Even when you've been very clear about the scope for change on a particular issue, people can end up frustrated and angry. This is especially a risk when you have to deliver news they don't want to hear. It may be possible in the long run to bring about their wishes, perhaps through further engagement, but in the immediate term you have to try and deliver bad news well.

**x Don't** say 'It's not as bad as you think'

**x Don't** be evasive about details to cushion the blow

**x Don't** sugar coat too much

**x Don't** say 'I know how you feel'

**x Don't** tell them how they should feel (there's no 'should' when it comes to emotions).

**✓ Do** be prepared, with all the relevant facts to hand

**✓ Do** be clear and direct

**✓ Do** give them space to feel what they feel

**✓ Do** maintain professional boundaries: it isn't the real 'you' that the person is angry with, it's the role you play in your job

**✓ Do** actively listen to them.

Finally, as well as the above dos and don'ts, it's worth getting to grips with active listening. This is a technique which can help diffuse difficult situations and develop some common ground. Below are the key elements:

- listen carefully without coming across as time pressured
- acknowledge how the speaker feels
- summarise in your own words what the person has said
- check that they agree with your summary
- it's only at this point that it might be good to offer advice, opinions, or to share personal experiences.

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