

Delivering Difficult Messages

Fiona Charles

© Fiona Charles 2011

Originally published on the EuroSTAR Conference blog, July 29, 2011.

You're the test manager on a project where there are many unresolved critical bugs that could have major customer impacts. You have not yet been able to test key areas of the system, and the ship date is now only a week away. The official project status reports consistently declare the project to be "green" and the system on schedule to ship. You know that the system is in no fit state to release and that the bugs will not be fixed in time. In fact, "everyone" on the project knows this and is talking about it, but the project manager does not appear to be getting the message. Either that, or he/she is failing to report the true state of the system to management. You believe that your reports to the project manager have clearly described the issues.

You're not the gatekeeper. It's not up to you to decide whether or not to ship the product. But as the test manager, it is your job to provide accurate information about the true state of the system so that management can make an informed decision.

You feel obligated to speak out directly, but you know that your message about the true state of the system is not going to make anyone happy. Perhaps having to acknowledge it will cause a manager to lose ground with more senior managers. Perhaps it will jeopardize someone's bonus, or his or her next promotion.

It is in your interest—and also in the interests of the organisation—that you deliver the message well. You want your information to be heard. You want your message to be received as valuable information so that it can be considered appropriately. You don't want to damage your credibility or hurt your future in this company. You don't want the message recipient to react with anger or disbelief.

Welcome to delivering difficult messages! This is only one of the many situations where you, as a person in a responsible role on a software project, may have to deliver a message that is difficult primarily because the recipient doesn't want to hear it.

You can't control other people's reactions, but with careful planning and preparation you can craft your delivery of a difficult message to strengthen the likelihood of a constructive response.

Begin by thinking about the principal considerations for successful delivery of a difficult message:

- message recipient(s)
- time and place
- message content
- message delivery

Message Recipient(s)

First, there's the message recipient—who should you talk to? Given the scenario described above, should you talk first to the project manager? If he or she dismisses your concerns, you need to think about where you go next. Think also about what you know of the intended message recipient and what might motivate his or her potential reactions to the information. Do you believe this to be a person of integrity, or are there vested interests you need to be wary of? Should the meeting be one-to-one, or include more people? Do you have any potential allies in this situation who could help, either by paving the way for your conversation or by joining it?

Time and Place

Having decided who you're going to talk to, when and where should you meet? It would be a bad idea to buttonhole a senior manager in the cafeteria queue and blurt out your urgent concerns, or spring your message on an unsuspecting vice president at a project party—though testers have surely done these things, or worse. You need to pick an appropriate moment and a quiet place for a manager to hear your message. Try to schedule the meeting accordingly.

Message Content

What is the content of your message? What are you going to say? How sure are you that your information is accurate? What supporting material do you have? Be scrupulously careful not to go beyond facts you can prove. If you must state an opinion, be clear that it is your opinion.

Message Delivery

Finally, how are you going to deliver the message? Your delivery method and style will depend on your message, but also on your assessment of the person(s) you are going to talk to. Are you going to sit down and talk or stand at a whiteboard and illustrate your points with pictures? What else might you do?

A busy executive may be prepared to give you full attention for five minutes or less. You'd better be able to deliver your message to this person succinctly and in summary—with the details in your back pocket in case you're asked. Another manager may be detail oriented, not content until every last fibre of every last thread has been exhaustively explored. You will need all the details to hand when you meet with him or her.

Regardless of a recipient's personal style, it's essential that you stick to a factual narrative that you can readily support. But what if, in spite of all your preparations, the manager becomes angry and hostile? Can you manage your own reactions and help your message be heard? Can you remain calm and factual in the face of a manager's fury? Sometimes, you might need to say, "I'll have to get back to you on that," and excuse yourself. But then you need to go back and finish what you started.

Come to EuroSTAR!

"Delivering Difficult Messages" is a big topic and I've only touched on some of the important points in this blog post. In my tutorial at EuroSTAR 2011, we will explore some likely project scenarios in depth experientially, using role plays to practice the interactions between message giver and recipient(s), and sharing tips and techniques from our own experiences and observations. We'll talk about common pitfalls and how to

avoid them. We'll also discuss a model that can help our understanding of difficult interactions and help us prepare better when we have to deliver bad news.

Delivering unwelcome news is never fun, but we can have fun exploring and practicing how to do it. Come prepared to practice with real situations that have happened for real testers, including current problems brought by participants.