

THE APPROACH USED IN DELIVERING NEGATIVE MESSAGES AT THE WORKPLACE

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Abstract. The study examines the choice of approach used in sending negative messages (i.e., disagreements, rejections, disapprovals) at the workplace which is either direct or indirect approach. The influence of gender and hierarchical position on the choice of approach, and the impacts of negative messages on the receivers were especially explored. To collect data, a questionnaire was developed guided by the rules in indirect approach proposed by Guffey and Loewy (2012); and Bovée and Thill (2007). The survey involved 40 employees of Putrajaya International Convention Centre. The data collected were analysed using descriptive analysis. Analyses of the data reveal that the most popular approach for sending negative messages among the respondents at the workplace was indirect approach regardless of the gender and hierarchical position. Apart from this, the study also reveals that the receivers were positively affected by the negative messages.

Keywords: Negative messages, approach, workplace, gender, hierarchical position

Introduction

The most important component in communication process is the message. Messages sent and received may be positive or negative. Negative messages, either in oral or written forms are any messages that cause unpleasant emotional reactions to listeners or readers (Western Michigan University, 2002). Sometimes they even find the messages threatening and disappointing. Most people believe all the 'no's are negative messages as they are denying requests, statements, and opinions. Nevertheless, not all the 'no's are negative messages. They will only become negative when the outcome of the communication involves the listener's or reader's ego. Guffey and Loewy (2012) perceive delivering negative messages at the workplace from three different dimensions. The first one is sending negative messages personally. For example, project failures should be personally informed by a manager to the general manager. The second dimension is refusing workplace requests. For instance, a senior manager disapproves his executive's application for leave. The last dimension is announcing bad news to employees. An example is when a manager tells the coordinators about their layoffs due to poor performance since past six months. Negative messages can give a great impact on workers in the workplace in terms of their mental and emotional stability. This may adversely affect their productivity. However, the messages can also be taken as challenges that motivate the receivers of the messages to succeed (Halvorson and Higgins, 2013). Therefore, it is undoubtedly important for the employers to find and apply the best approach for delivering negative messages.

Theoretical Framework

People may send negative messages directly or indirectly. Indirect approach is used when the negative messages are sent beginning with something positive to soften the bad news. Direct approach, on the other hand, does not require such a gentle opening, as there is no resistance to the messages (Illinois Valley Community College, n.d.).

The different approaches in delivering negative messages can be influenced by two important factors, which are gender, and hierarchical position (Holmes, 2008; Limaye, 2001). Women and men use different approaches to deliver the negative messages to their employees and employers. Holmes (2008) believes women tend to be more polite and emphatic while men are less concerned. Thus, women are more inclined to using indirect approach when sending negative messages than men. Hierarchical position defines someone's power, hence superiors and subordinates will definitely use different levels of language to portray status and respect. Some people with power do not feel the need to be good with other people especially those of lower rank or position than them in sending negative messages. In contrast,

the subordinates do not have the right to even deny the superiors without giving a strong explanation (Limaye, 2001). Therefore, superiors may use direct approach when sending negative messages to the subordinates as a way of showing their status and subordinates will use indirect approach to deliver negative messages to the superiors to show respect.

In the present study, the researcher will determine the approach used by participants using the rules in indirect approach proposed by Guffey and Loewy; and Bovée and Thill. Guffey and Loewy (2012) agree that indirect approach should be opened with buffers such as agreements and praises, followed by reasons and additional information. Clear statements of the message then follow before ending with positive notes such as suggesting alternatives. Bovée and Thill (2007) offer the guidelines to effectively send negative messages, which are delivering negative messages in private, matching the approach to situation, and planning the sequence of multiple announcements. To consider the approach used as indirect, all or most of the guidelines must be used during the delivery of the negative messages and if none of these rules exists, the senders are claimed to be using direct approach.

Fransen and Hoeven (2011) argue that negative messages create unpleasant emotions on the receivers and can affect their inner self either for long-term or short-term. As an example, when a superior tells his subordinate that the application for a loan has been rejected, it will cause the subordinate to feel down and disturbed. This will eventually affect his productivity for the rest of the day, week or even worse for months. However, to some receivers, they may find it as a motivation to do better in the future. For instance, when they are told that their loan proposal has been rejected, they may feel motivated to do another proposal with better contents. The positive or negative impacts experienced by the receivers are highly influenced by their self-focus (Fransen & Hoeven, 2011). People with a promotion focus will feel devastated and demotivated by negative messages, however people with a prevention focus accept negative messages as a nature of work.

Statement of the Problem

Knowing the appropriate approach of delivering negative messages is very crucial because it may affect the receivers. At the workplace especially, when someone's emotion is disturbed, his or her work productivity may eventually decrease. If people are less concerned about the approach used when sending negative messages, this can create issues within an organisation. As an example, when a superior uses a direct approach to tell his subordinate about his rejected loan proposal in front of other subordinates, it might be a disgrace to the subordinate. Hence, the relationship between the superior and the subordinate will be deteriorated and this will create a negative working environment. A study to determine the

choice of approach used for delivering negative messages may help in improving communication at the workplace.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to investigate the different approaches used in delivering negative messages in the workplace; direct or indirect. The specific objectives are to:

1. investigate which approach would be most popular in delivering negative messages at the workplace; direct or indirect
2. determine how the following factors affect the choice of approach used in delivering negative messages:
 - a) gender
 - b) hierarchical position
3. identify the impacts of negative messages on the receivers particularly on the level of motivation and productivity.

Significance of the Study

The study will be a significant endeavor in determining the popular approach for delivering negative messages at the workplace; either direct or indirect. Through this study, an understanding of how gender and hierarchical positions affect the approach chosen by the senders to send negative messages to the receivers can be generated. This is very crucial especially in large organisations to build a positive and harmonious working environment.

Besides, the study will also help identify the impacts of negative messages on the receivers. The most important concern about sending negative messages is to get the messages across while lessening the impact on the receivers. Senders must be very sensitive about the receivers' feelings and current conditions in order to boost employees' motivation and maximise organisation's productivity so that all of the organisational goals can be obtained within a given time-frame.

Methodology

A set of questionnaires eliciting the choice of approach in delivering negative messages by senders of different genders and hierarchical positions and the impacts on receivers was developed based on the guidelines by Guffey and Loewy (2012), and Bovée and Thill (2007). The questionnaires comprised three sections; Section A elicited background

information of the respondents while Section B (eight items) and C (six items), were multiple choice questions eliciting the approach used by respondents when sending negative messages and the impacts of the negative messages on the respondents in terms of motivation and productivity, respectively. For Section B in particular, half of the options of answers to the questions were constructed to be indicative of direct approach and the other half were indicative of indirect approach. Similarly, for Section C, half of the options of responses to the questions were constructed to be indicative of positive impacts of sending negative messages and the other half were indicative of the negative impacts (refer to the appendix for a sample). The questionnaires were distributed to 40 employees of Putrajaya International Convention Centre consisting 10 male superiors, 10 male subordinates, 10 female superiors, and 10 female subordinates.

The data gained from the questionnaires were analysed by using SPSS version 20. Through this software, descriptive analyses of the data were run to find the frequency, mean, and percentage of the results collected. The data were presented in tables.

The Results

The preferred approach in sending negative messages at the workplace

Table 1 displays the more popular approach used in sending negative messages at the workplace indicated by the respondents.

	Indirect Approach	Direct Approach
Q1	21	19
Q2	38	2
Q3	36	4
Q4	25	15
Q5	40	0
Q6	23	17
Q7	13	27
Q8	27	13
Total Score	223	97
Mean Score	27.9	14.4

Percentage (%)	69.7	30.3
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Table 1 Preference of Approach

- Q1 = How would you send negative messages to your superior(s)/subordinate(s)?
- Q2 = Would you provide any reason or additional information to the receiver(s)?
- Q3 = After you have successfully delivered the negative messages, what would you do/say to the receiver(s)?
- Q4 = How would you end the conversation when it involves negative messages?
- Q5 = Where is the most appropriate place to send negative messages to superior(s) /subordinate(s)?
- Q6 = When is the most appropriate time to send negative messages?
- Q7 = If your superior(s)/subordinate(s) is facing a serious problem and you are informed by a reliable source that he or she is getting another bad news, when would you deliver yours?
- Q8 = What is the main thing you would consider when delivering negative messages?

As seen in the Table 1 above, the approach chosen by the participants was indirect approach with a higher percentage of 69.7% than the direct approach, which only scored 30.3%. The participants preferred indirect approach for all questions in Section B except for Q7. This indicates that the indirect approach is more popular among the respondents.

The choice of approach used by different gender to send negative messages

The approach to deliver negative messages preferred by the respondents according to their gender is as shown in the following figure.

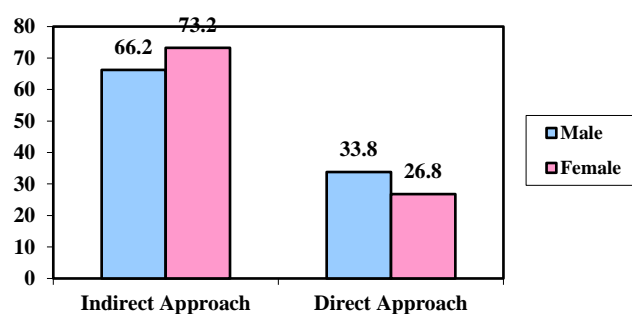


Figure 1. Preferred approach by gender

As seen in Figure 1, both male’s and female’s most preferred approach when sending negative messages at the workplace was indirect approach with percentages of 66.2 and 73.2% respectively compared to the scores for direct approach which were 33.8% for

male and only 26.8% for female. The result suggests that the choice of approach was not affected by the gender of the respondents.

The choice of approach used by different hierarchical positions to send negative messages

The approach more frequently used by superior(s)/subordinate(s) to send negative messages is as indicated in Figure 2.

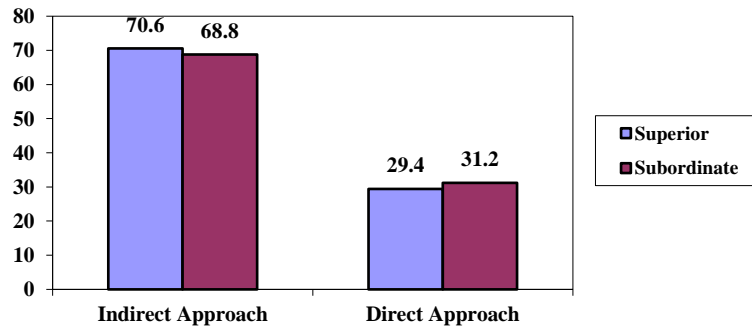


Figure 2. The percentage of approach preferred by hierarchical position

Based on Figure 2 above, both the superiors and the subordinates preferred indirect approach to the direct approach to deliver negative messages (70.6% and 68.8% vs. 29.4% and 31.2%, respectively). This shows that hierarchical positions do not affect the choice of approach.

The impacts of negative messages on the receivers

The analysis on the impacts of receiving negative messages yielded the results below.

	Positive Impact	Negative Impact
Q1	37	3
Q2	37	3
Q3	38	2
Q4	26	14
Q5	28	12
Q6	38	2
Total Score	204	36

Percentage (%)	85.0	15.0
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Table 2 *The Impacts of Negative Messages Sent on the Receivers*

Q1 = How do you feel after receiving negative messages from superior(s)/ subordinate(s) in front of your colleagues?

Q2 = After you receive the negative messages, how would that affect your relationship with the sender(s)?

Q3 = When you are informed about a negative message, how would you probably react to it?

Q4 = Are you more optimistic when the sender(s) uses a neutral tone and portrays an emphatic facial expression when sending the negative messages?

Q5 = Are you more upset about the negative messages received when the sender(s) uses a firm tone and portrays a stern facial expression when sending the negative messages?

Q6 = How do you perceive negative messages despite the language or approach used by the sender(s)?

As indicated in Table 2, most of the participants claimed experiencing positive impacts after they received negative messages at the workplace (85% for positive impacts compared to 15% for negative impacts). This signifies that despite getting negative messages, the respondents did not perceive them negatively.

Discussion

Results of the study indicate that the choice of approach used by the respondents to send negative messages at the workplace was the same irrespective of gender and hierarchical position. Indirect approach was the preferred approach by both male and female, and superiors and subordinates. This does not support the claims made earlier by Holmes (2008) and (Limaye, 2001) that state women tend to choose indirect approach more than men and the superiors are more inclined to use direct approach than the subordinates when delivering negative messages. The present study is indirectly suggesting that to maintain good relationship at workplace, negative messages should be delivered using indirect approach by all, irrespective of their gender and hierarchical position. The study also reveals that the receivers of negative messages responded favourably to the messages. This shows that the respondents were not easily distressed by the negative messages they received. Halvorson and Higgins (2013) state that such receivers were prevention-focus people who take negative messages as a challenge and motivation unlike those with promotion focus who take such

messages as a failure which will be detrimental not only to an individual's motivation but also his quality of work.

Conclusion

It is crucial to determine and understand the preferred approach to send negative messages because it helps to build and sustain good relationships among the members of an organisation. The sender of the message must determine the best approach that suits the receivers before delivering the message so that the receivers will feel less intimidated by the negativity of the message. The false approach used can lead to ineffectiveness, demotivation, and unproductivity.

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Appendix

**TITLE: THE APPROACH USED IN DELIVERING NEGATIVE MESSAGES AT THE
WORKPLACE**

This research focuses on the study of the approach used in delivering negative messages at the workplace. Negative messages can be defined as all messages that create unpleasant emotional reactions to the receivers at the workplace or also known as bad news for example, layoffs, disagreements, and rejections. The study will be a significant endeavor in determining the best approach for delivering negative messages at the workplace; either direct or indirect. The most important concern about sending negative messages is to get the message across while minimizing the possible negative impact on the receivers. This study will help develop an understanding of the importance of maintaining good communication at workplace particularly through the proper approach of sending negative messages.

SECTION A: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Instruction: Please put a tick (/) in **ONE** of the boxes next to the answer of your choice for each of the questions below.

Gender:

Male Female

Position in the Company:

Senior Executive Senior Manager Coordinator
 Executive Manager Personal Assistant
 Others (Please state: _____)

SECTION B

Instruction: Please put a tick (/) in **ONE** of the boxes next to your choice of answer for each of the questions below.

1. How would you send negative messages to your superior(s)/subordinate(s)?
 - Use positive openings like an agreement and praise
 - Use buffers to show appreciation and understanding on their behalf
 - Directly tell the news and provide them reasons

- Send the messages without buffer to avoid confusion
- 2. Would you provide any reason or additional information to the receiver(s)?
 - Yes
 - Depending on the issue
 - No
- 3. After you have successfully delivered the negative messages, what would you do/say to the receiver(s)?
 - Offer help
 - Give advice and comforting words
 - Keep silent
 - Quickly end the conversation
- 4. How would you end the conversation when it involves negative messages?
 - Suggest alternatives to the receiver(s)
 - Provide supportive words
 - Show a neutral expression
 - End with a firm tone
- 5. Where is the most appropriate place to send negative messages to superior(s)/subordinate(s)?
 - In private
 - In public
- 6. When is the most appropriate time to send negative messages?
 - After office hours
 - During lunch break
 - During office hours
 - During the weekly/monthly meeting
- 7. If your superior(s)/subordinate(s) is facing a serious problem and you are informed by a reliable source that he or she is getting another bad news, when would you deliver yours?
 - After the other problem is solved
 - After one week
 - After they have heard about it from other people/sources
 - As soon as possible
- 8. What is the main thing you would consider when delivering negative messages?
 - Maintaining the relationship with the receiver(s)
 - Maintaining the receiver(s)' public self-image
 - Getting the most accurate message across
 - Fulfilling my responsibility

SECTION C

Instruction: Please put a tick (/) in **ONE** of the boxes next to your choice of answer for each of the questions below.

1. How do you feel after receiving negative messages from superior(s)/subordinate(s) in front of your colleagues?
 - Feel upset and make a promise to perform better
 - Take it as an inspiration instead of seeing it as a failure
 - Feel insulted and ashamed
 - Feel useless and demotivated to work
2. After you receive the negative messages, how would it affect your relationship with the sender(s)?
 - Accept the negative messages as a nature of work
 - Act professionally and take the negative messages as a challenge for myself
 - Avoid the sender(s)
 - Resign or apply for another department in the same company
3. When you are informed about a negative message, how would you probably react to it?
 - Become motivated to be more effective and efficient
 - Feel the pressure to improve my performance
 - Stop contributing ideas to the company and only do what I am told to do
 - Resign and find another job
4. Are you more optimistic when the sender(s) uses a neutral tone and portrays an emphatic facial expression when sending the negative messages?
 - Yes
 - No
5. Are you more upset about the negative messages received when the sender(s) uses a firm tone and portrays a stern facial expression when sending the negative messages?
 - Yes
 - No
6. How do you perceive negative messages despite the language or approach used by the sender(s)?
 - Challenge
 - Opportunity
 - Threat

Failure