

The Four Ds To Address When Bringing Leadership Bad News

Before The Bad News: A Pre-Briefing Guide

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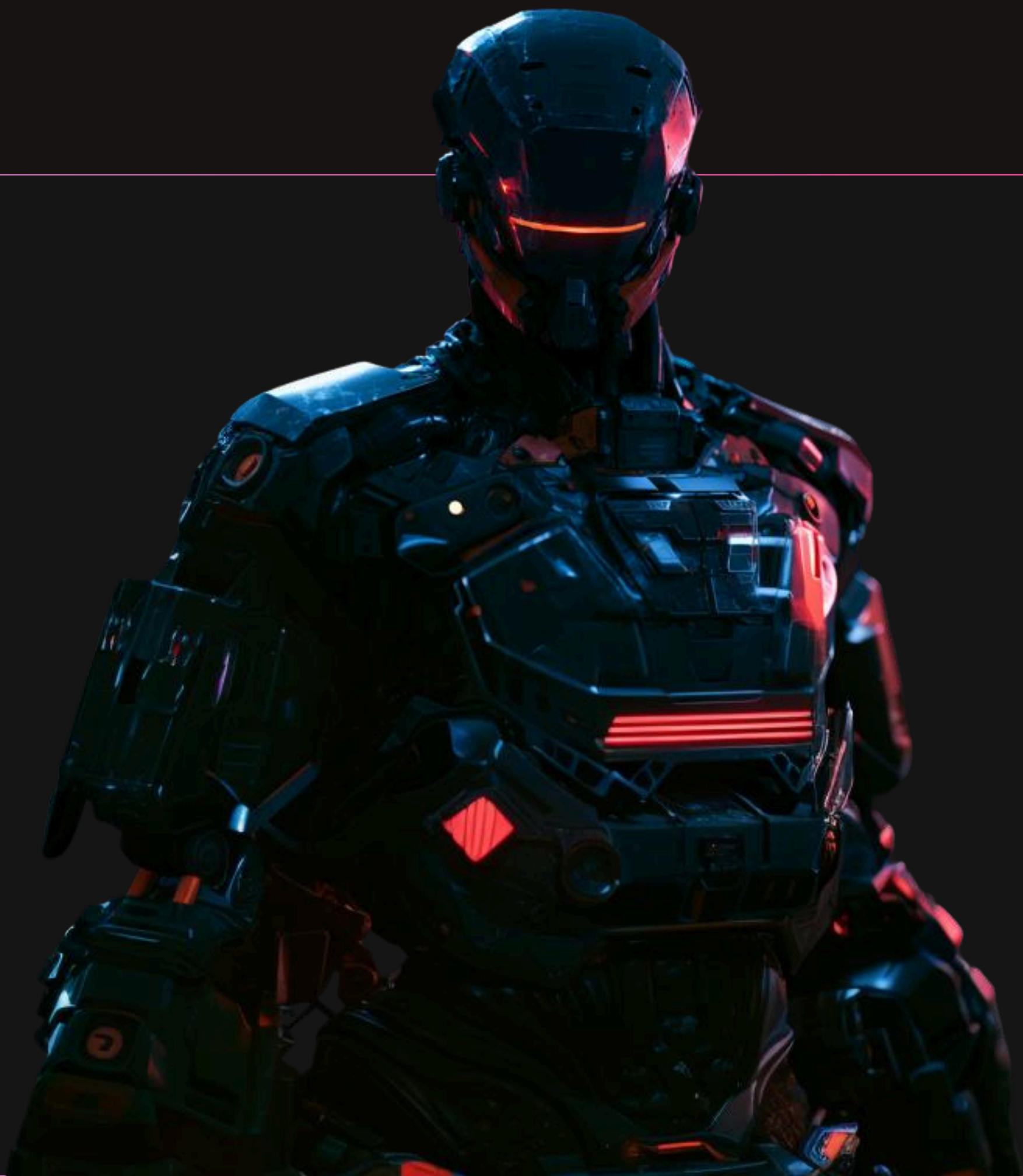
Ellen Hunt
VP, Global Ethics & Compliance, Cushman & Wakefield



Lisa Fine
Sr. Director, Global Ethics & Compliance, Pearson



Sarah Hadden
Publisher, Corporate Compliance Insights



The hardest part of escalation is rarely the facts. It's that you are asking people to believe something unwelcome about a colleague they respect, and the mind does not weigh unwelcome information the way it weighs welcome information. That asymmetry is well documented. It is also anticipatable, which means you can do most of the work months ahead of the meeting.

That is the argument of this guide: the reaction is predictable, so the leverage is in advance. Fighting the pattern in the meeting means fighting it while you are the one causing the discomfort. Setting expectations months earlier, with nothing on the table, costs you an hour and changes what the room is able to do later. Use the four stages in the next section to recognize what you are seeing, the pre-briefing conversation after it to get ahead of it, and the standards on page four when you need the ask to come from somewhere other than you.

SECTION 01

Three research findings explain most of what you have seen in these meetings. None of them is about a difficult executive. All three are about how people in general handle unwelcome information, which is why the pattern repeats across companies, industries, and leadership teams.

Finding 1: Uneven Scrutiny

People apply a stricter standard of proof to information they don't want to be true. Unwelcome findings get their methods questioned, their gaps probed, and their conclusions held at arm's length. Welcome findings get accepted as given. Same evidence, different bar. The person applying the different bar is rarely aware of doing it.

- **What this explains:** "There's no way he'd do that" is usually not a lie or a cover-up. It is a genuine belief produced by an evidentiary bar the leader does not know they have raised.
- **What it means for how you present:** Arguing harder makes it worse, because every additional assertion meets the same elevated scrutiny. The move is to reduce what you are asking the room to accept — not "believe this about him," but "let us determine whether this is true."
- **In practice:** Bring a proposed next step rather than a conclusion. A request to look is much harder to resist than a claim about a colleague's character.

Finding 2: Bad news travels upward badly.

People are reluctant to pass along information they expect will be unwelcome, and that reluctance grows as the stakes rise. It operates at every level of an organization, including the levels above you.

- **What this explains:** By the time something reaches you, it has usually already passed several people who considered raising it and chose not to. What arrives on your desk is a filtered sample, weighted toward the reports someone felt safe enough to make.
- **What it means for how you present:** Volume is a poor measure of exposure. A quiet reporting channel can indicate a healthy organization or a silent one, and the two look identical in a dashboard.
- **In practice:** Assume the same reluctance operates on the people you report to. An executive who resists hearing something from you will also resist carrying it to the board, which is why the reporting expectations in section four matter more than they appear to.

Finding 3: Messenger risk is the norm, not the exception

Being penalized for raising a concern (sidelined, second-guessed, quietly reassigned, or shown the door) is a common enough experience in this profession that most practitioners either have a story or know someone who does. It is an occupational feature, not an aberration confined to badly run companies.

- **What this explains:** The dismissal stage in the next section is not a rare failure mode. It is close to a default, which is why preparing for it is reasonable rather than pessimistic.
- **What it means for how you present:** Treat the possibility the way you would treat any other high-likelihood risk you have identified: name it in advance, decide what you would do, and do not wait for it to materialize before thinking about it.
- **In practice:** Raise it in the pre-briefing conversation as a known professional hazard rather than a personal worry. Framed that way, it is a legitimate governance topic and much easier for a leadership team to engage with.

SECTION 02

The Four Ds

Each stage has a recognizable script, an underlying driver, and a move available to you.

If you have delivered this kind of news more than once, the next four pages will read as familiar. Compliance expert Ellen Hunt names the sequence as four stages, each with its own script: disbelief first, then attention to whoever raised it, then reasons that person can't be trusted, then a quiet closing of the file. Naming the stages is what makes them workable. For each one below you get the phrasing to listen for,

DENY

- **What it sounds like:** "There's no way. Not him. He's been here twelve years."
- **What's happening:** The claim is being tested against character rather than evidence. The more the leader likes the subject, the higher the bar the evidence has to clear.
- **Your move:** Do not argue about the person. Move the conversation to process: what the allegation is, what would confirm or disconfirm it, and who is qualified to look. "I'm not asking you to believe it. I'm asking you to let us find out."

IDENTIFY THE SOURCE

- **What it sounds like:** "Who told you this? Why would they say that?"
- **What's happening:** Attention shifts from the conduct to the reporter. Sometimes this is genuine curiosity. Often it is the first step toward evaluating the claim by evaluating the claimant.
- **Your move:** Decline cleanly and without drama. Name the standard rather than the reason: reporter identity is not part of the assessment, and protecting it is what keeps the next report coming. If the reporter is anonymous, say plainly that unmasking is not on the table.

DISCREDIT

- **What it sounds like:** "He's a constant complainer anyway. He's been unhappy since the reorg."
- **What's happening:** If the reporter can be characterized as unreliable, the report can be set aside without examining it.
- **Your move:** Separate credibility of the person from credibility of the claim, out loud. A disgruntled employee can report an accurate fact. Bring the conversation back to whether the underlying conduct is verifiable.

DISMISS

- **What it sounds like:** "Let's not blow this up." Or, more quietly, a decision that resolves the discomfort without resolving the issue.
- **What's happening:** This is where the concern gets closed out — and where, in some organizations, the person who raised it becomes the thing being managed.
- **Your move:** Ask for the decision to be recorded, with the reasoning. Not as a threat. Documented decisions get made more carefully than undocumented ones, and if the matter resurfaces, the record is what protects everyone in the room.

SECTION 03

The Pre-Briefing Conversation

Four moves to make before anything happens

The pattern is hard to interrupt in the moment, because in the moment you are the person delivering the bad news. It is much easier to interrupt in advance, when nothing is at stake and no one is defensive. Four moves, in a scheduled meeting with no active matter on the table.

Name what your role is, and what it isn't.

- Say it before anyone has reason to doubt it. "My job here is not to damage this company. It's to reduce its exposure. Sometimes that means I'll know something uncomfortable before you do."

Walk them through the pattern.

- Describe the four stages as a known phenomenon rather than an accusation. Leaders are generally willing to acknowledge a documented tendency in the abstract, and much less willing to acknowledge it while exhibiting it.

Run a scenario.

- Pick something plausible and impersonal. A senior leader's conduct becomes public — in one widely covered 2025 incident, a chief executive's behavior was captured on a stadium screen at a concert and the company faced it within days. Ask the group directly: how would we handle that here? Who gets told, in what order? What is the expectation of you in that meeting? What happens to whoever brings it forward?

Get an agreement you can point back to.

- This is the part that pays. When the real thing arrives, you are not introducing a new idea under pressure. You are referring to a conversation the room already had.

SECTION 04

What The Standards Expect Of Them

Three sources give the conversation external weight

The Justice Department's Evaluation of Corporate Compliance Programs, updated in September 2024, added a section on whistleblower protection and anti-retaliation. Prosecutors are directed to ask whether a company encourages reporting, whether it uses practices that could chill reporting, and how it treats people who report compared with people who commit misconduct.

The Federal Sentencing Guidelines require a reporting system that lets employees raise concerns "without fear of retaliation," and require the governing authority to be knowledgeable about the compliance program and to exercise reasonable oversight, with compliance staff reporting to it at least annually.

Delaware Oversight Law has moved in the same direction. Caremark established that boards must make a good-faith effort to maintain reasonable information and reporting systems. *Marchand v. Barnhill* held that oversight of mission-critical risk must be rigorously exercised. *In re Boeing* sustained an oversight claim where a board had no reporting system for a central safety risk and turned away from a red flag.

IN PRACTICE

Boards respond differently to "I need you to hear me out" than to "here is what prosecutors and the Delaware courts expect this body to be able to demonstrate."

OUTRO

Everything in this guide reduces to a single reallocation of effort. The hour you would spend arguing your way through a resistant meeting is worth more spent months earlier, in a meeting where nothing is at stake and no one has anything to defend. The pattern does not change. What changes is whether the room has already agreed on how to handle it.

So the practical instruction is small. Find a quiet month, put a single agenda item in front of your board or executive team, and use it to do three things: say plainly what your role is and is not, walk them through the four stages as a known professional phenomenon, and run one impersonal scenario to the point where someone answers the question of what happens to the person who brings it forward. Then write down what they said. That record is the whole return on the exercise: when the real matter arrives, you are not introducing an uncomfortable idea under pressure, you are referring back to a decision the room already made.

Two honest limits. Pre-briefing improves your odds; it does not make you safe, and nothing here should be read as protection. An agreement reached in January can be abandoned in September, and the pattern persists in organizations that have every policy in place. And some of what this exercise produces is diagnostic rather than useful: a leadership team that will not engage with a hypothetical at all has told you something real about the environment you are working in, which is worth learning early rather than late.