

# A Native-American Bad-News Message from 1805

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## **Abstract**

In 1805, Iroquois chiefs met to consider a request from a missionary to establish a church on a Seneca reservation. Sagoyewatha (Red Jacket), the principal Seneca orator, presented the Senecas' reply, diplomatically rejecting the request in an indirect bad-news message. He buffers the beginning, presents strong reasons for the refusal, and closes with an ending designed to maintain goodwill. This early speech, which students can read, analyze, and discuss in a class period, can be used by writing and speech faculty to illustrate the characteristics of an indirect bad-news message and to discuss methods of effective intercultural communication.

## **Introduction**

Business communication texts all address the indirect bad-news or negative message, discussing how to create such a message but also providing examples, which range from rejecting proposals to requesting favors or claims (Ober, 2006) to denying requests for donations (Guffey, 2006) to announcing changes in insurance coverage (Locker, 2000). Contemporary examples of bad-news messages are clearly important for students, as they mirror common business situations. However, instructors can also provide historical examples of negative messages to provide variety or to demonstrate that the rhetorical situations and principles involved in negative messages are not recent developments. One such historical text, a speech delivered in 1805 by Red Jacket, a chief of the Seneca tribe of the Iroquois Confederacy, can also serve as a valuable example of intercultural communication. Red Jacket's speech is short enough (1150 words) that students can read, analyze, and discuss it in less than a class period. Students can see how the characteristics of an indirect bad-news message were used to create an effective intercultural communication.

## **Analysis**

Red Jacket (ca. 1758-1830) was a minor chief but important orator of the Seneca Indians of western New York State, "a power among his people," according to a historian of the Seneca, Arthur Parker (1926, p. 137). Red Jacket's original name was Otetiani ("Always ready"), but in recognition of his skills he was given the name Sagoyewatha, which means "He keeps them awake," or, translated to represent his skill more accurately, according to Daniel Richter, "He Makes Them Look for It in Vain" (1996, p. 532).

At the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, Red Jacket at first "urged that this was a family quarrel among the white people . . . and that interference might be a mistake" (Wallace, 1970, p. 133), but when the Seneca and most of the other Iroquois were persuaded to fight for the British

by a Mohawk chief who called them cowards, he too joined the British, serving as a messenger rather than a combatant. For his service, the British presented him with a red jacket that he wore proudly even long after the Revolution.

In negotiations with the British and subsequently with representatives of the United States government and other organizations, Red Jacket presented the Senecas' (and Iroquois') position through interpreters. According to his biographer, William Stone, Red Jacket could speak "very little English, and could not write at all" (1841, p. v). The English translations of his speeches were printed in various newspapers, especially in nearby Buffalo.

After the Revolution, increasing contact with whites resulted in missionary efforts to convert the Seneca and other Iroquois to Christianity. Gradually, some Iroquois began to listen, drawn especially to temperance efforts that they saw as a possible solution to the ruinous effects of rum on their people. Pritzker notes that "beginning in 1799, the Seneca Handsome Lake . . . [propounded] a blend of traditional and Christian teachings . . . [that] had the effect of facilitating the cultural transition occurring at the time" (2000, p. 467). Red Jacket and other Seneca resisted acculturation, believing that it was essential to maintain their native religion and culture. "It was his belief," his biographer Stone noted, "and it is that of the Indians generally, that they form a race entirely distinct from the pale faces" (1841, p. 197).

In 1805, a representative of the Evangelical Missionary Society of Massachusetts, Reverend Cram, approached the Seneca with a request to establish a church on the Seneca reservation near Buffalo Grove. Cram's position, which he presented in his request, was clear: "'There is but one religion, and but one way to serve God, and if you do not embrace the right way you cannot be happy hereafter. You have never worshipped the Great Spirit in a manner acceptable to him; but have all your lives been in great error and darkness'" (Stone, 1841, p. 188). Cram invited the Seneca to speak their minds freely in response to his request. After the chiefs deliberated for two hours, Red Jacket addressed to the missionary the following speech, as quoted by Stedman (1892, pp. 36-38).

FRIEND AND BROTHER: It was the will of the Great Spirit that we should meet together this day. He orders all things, and has given us a fine day for our council. He has taken his garment from before the sun, and caused it to shine with brightness upon us. Our eyes are opened, that we see clearly; our ears are unstopped, that we have been able to hear distinctly the words you have spoken. For all these favors we thank the Great Spirit; and him only.

BROTHER: This council fire was kindled by you. It was at your request that we came together at this time. We have listened with attention to what you have said. You requested us to speak our minds freely. This gives us great joy; for we now consider that we stand upright before you, and can speak what we think. All have heard your voice, and all speak to you now as one man. Our minds are agreed.

BROTHER: You say you want an answer to your talk before you leave this place. It is right you should have one, as you are a great distance from home, and we do

not wish to detain you. But we will first look back a little, and tell you what our fathers have told us, and what we have heard from the white people.

BROTHER: Listen to what we say. There was a time when our forefathers owned this great island. Their seats extended from the rising to the setting sun. The Great Spirit had made it for the use of Indians. He had created the buffalo, the deer, and other animals for food. He had made the bear and the beaver. Their skins served us for clothing. He had scattered them over the country, and taught us how to take them. He had caused the earth to produce corn for bread. All this He had done for his red children, because He loved them. If we had some disputes about our hunting ground, they were generally settled without the shedding of much blood. But an evil day came upon us. Your forefathers crossed the great water, and landed on this island. Their numbers were small. They found friends and not enemies. They told us they had fled from their own country for fear of wicked men, and had come here to enjoy their religion. They asked for a small seat. We took pity on them; granted their request; and they sat down amongst us. We gave them corn and meat; they gave us poison in return. The white people, brother, had now found our country. Tidings were carried back, and more came amongst us. Yet we did not fear them. We took them to be friends. They called us brothers. We believed them, and gave them a larger seat. At length their numbers had greatly increased. They wanted more land; they wanted our country. Our eyes were opened, and our minds became uneasy. Wars took place. Indians were hired to fight against Indians, and many of our people were destroyed. They also brought strong liquor amongst us. It was strong and powerful, and has slain thousands.

BROTHER: Our seats were once large, and yours were small. You have now become a great people, and we have scarcely a place left to spread our blankets. You have got our country, but are not satisfied; you want to force your religion upon us.

BROTHER: Continue to listen. You say that you are sent to instruct us how to worship the Great Spirit agreeably to his mind; and, if we do not take hold of the religion which you white people teach, we shall be unhappy hereafter. You say that you are right, and we are lost. How do we know this to be true? We understand that your religion is written in a book. If it was intended for us as well as you, why has not the Great Spirit given to us, and not only to us, but why did He not give to our forefathers, the knowledge of that book, with the means of understanding it rightly? We only know what you tell us about it. How shall we know when to believe, being so often deceived by the white people?

BROTHER: You say there is but one way to worship and serve the Great Spirit. If there is but one religion, why do you white people differ so much about it? Why not all agreed, as you can all read the book?

BROTHER: We do not understand these things. We are told that your religion was given to your forefathers, and has been handed down from father to son. We also have a religion, which was given to our forefathers, and has been handed down to us, their children. We worship in that way. It teaches us to be thankful for all the favors we receive; to love each other, and to be united. We never quarrel about religion.

BROTHER: The Great Spirit has made us all, but He has made a great difference between his white and red children. He has given us different complexions and different customs. To you He has given the arts. To these He has not opened our eyes. We know these things to be true. Since He has made so great a difference between us in other things, why may we not conclude that He has given us a different religion according to our understanding? The Great Spirit does right. He knows what is best for his children; we are satisfied.

BROTHER: We do not wish to destroy your religion, or take it from you. We only want to enjoy our own.

BROTHER: You say you have not come to get our land or our money, but to enlighten our minds. I will now tell you that I have been at your meetings, and saw you collect money from the meeting. I cannot tell what this money was intended for, but suppose that it was for your minister, and if we should conform to your way of thinking, perhaps you may want some from us.

BROTHER: We are told that you have been preaching to the white people in this place. These people are our neighbors. We are acquainted with them. We will wait a little while, and see what effect your preaching has upon them. If we find it does them good, makes them honest, and less disposed to cheat Indians, we will then consider again of what you have said.

BROTHER: You have now heard our answer to your talk, and this is all we have to say at present. As we are going to part, we will come and take you by the hand, and hope the Great Spirit will protect you on your journey, and return you safe to your friends.

In a business communication course, writing or speech students might be invited to read this speech in class or as an out-of-class assignment, to examine the characteristics of an indirect bad-news message in it, including the buffer, the logic and presentation of the reasons for the negative message, the implying of the refusal, and the goodwill ending.

At the beginning of the speech, Red Jacket refers to Cram's request, consistent with the suggestion by Bovée, Thill, & Schatzman to "base your buffer on statements made by the person you're responding to" (2003, p. 231). Red Jacket's statement that "the Great Spirit . . . orders all things" establishes common ground between the Senecas and the missionary in their shared belief in the Deity. This approach illustrates one of Guffey's suggestions for opening with a buffer, to "mention some mutual understanding" (2006, p. 348).

As business communication texts indicate, buffering a negative message at the beginning can be important. Ober stresses the importance of the strategy: “Putting the negative news in the first sentence might be too harsh and emphatic, and [the] decision might sound unreasonable until the reader has heard the rationale.” He recommends beginning “with a neutral and relevant statement – one that helps establish or strengthen the reader-writer relationship . . . to establish compatibility between reader and writer” (2006, pp. 310-311). Similarly, Bovée, Thill, & Schatzman recommend avoiding “a blunt ‘no’ [that] could well prevent people who prefer an explanation first from reading or listening to your reasons,” beginning instead with “a neutral, noncontroversial statement that is closely related to the point of the message” (2003, pp. 230-231). Red Jacket’s approach clearly coincides with these suggestions.

The neutral reference to the weather in “a fine day,” while at first apparently a cliché, may be a more strategic opener. Red Jacket strengthens the Senecas’ relationship with the listener in the buffer, but he is quick to remind Reverend Cram that the Seneca and white cultures are different despite their shared belief: the clouds are the Great Spirit’s garments that He can take from before the sun, allowing it to shine – they are not just clouds.

Red Jacket uses the buffer as part of his attempt to demonstrate diplomatically that the Senecas are not savages but instead are considerate and respectful. The buffer demonstrates his skill and helps him build a favorable image of the Senecas. Guffey (2006), Locker (2000), and Bovée, Thill, & Schatzman (2003) discuss the importance of the buffer in intercultural communication; this speech contains a good example.

By stating the reasons why the Seneca reject the missionary’s proposal before clearly implying the rejection, Red Jacket has used the approach recommended by most business communication texts. Red Jacket himself consistently opposed the Iroquois’ conversion to Christianity, arguing instead for the preservation of traditional customs, but he recognized that assimilation was inevitable. He saw white culture as alien but powerful and understood the need to remain on friendly terms with whites, so he naturally chose the indirect approach, explaining the reasons for the rejection before presenting the rejection. Business communication texts recommend such an approach; Bovée, Thill, & Schatzman advise writers “to explain *why* you have reached your decision before you explain *what* the decision is” (2003, p. 232).

To make his case that whites and Indians should not necessarily have the same religion, Red Jacket establishes parallels between the Senecas’ religion and Christianity: they are passed down from father to son, and they both teach people to “be thankful for all the favors we receive; to love each other, and to be united.”

To argue his case from another perspective, Red Jacket points out apparent differences between the Indians and the whites. The whites’ religion is written in a book that they all can read, but the Indians have no such book. The two groups have “different complexions and different customs.” The whites have the arts, but to them, Red Jacket says, the Great Spirit “has not opened our eyes.” Given these differences, he suggests, “may we not conclude that he has given us a different religion according to our understanding?” He obviates the objection of a false analogy with statements that Reverend Cram cannot refute: “The Great Spirit does right. He

knows what is best for his children.” As the two groups are clearly different, so perhaps the Great Spirit intends for them to have different religions, especially since the whites “differ so much” about their religion but the Indians “never quarrel about religion.” Red Jacket’s reasons embody the Senecas’ belief that instead of improving their situation by allowing the mission to be established or converting to Christianity, they might lose their unity and love for each other.

The discussion of similarities and differences establishes the reasons for the implied rejection of the proposal in the final two paragraphs. Ober states that it is important to “convince your reader that your decision is reasonable [so] the major part of your message should thus focus on the reasons rather than on the bad news itself” (2006, p. 312-313). Though implied, Red Jacket’s negative message is clear, as the textbooks indicate that an implied message must be (Guffey, 2006, p. 349). Although some texts such as Bovée, Thill, & Schatzman recommend “using third-person, impersonal, passive language to explain your audience’s mistakes in an inoffensive way” (2003, p. 229), Red Jacket is more forthright, as the rhetorical situation demands a direct address, but he is also apparently less concerned about the listener’s response than Locker suggests a writer should be, in her discussion of psychological reactance (2000, p. 200).

Red Jacket’s speech contains a fine example of a goodwill ending. He indicates that the Seneca will reconsider the Missionary Society’s request at a later date if missionaries’ preaching in the neighborhood makes whites less disposed to treat Indians unfairly, suggesting that the Seneca have not rejected completely the request but have only done so for now (“at present”). Bovée, Thill, & Schatzman recommend that writers “use a conditional (*if* or *when*) statement to imply that the audience could have received, or might someday receive, a favorable answer” (2003, p. 233). In the concluding sentence, the offer to shake hands and the request that “the Great Spirit will protect you on your journey, and return you safe to your friends” is cordial, polite, and civilized, fitting the image of the Seneca that Red Jacket’s speech is designed to support.

Various textbooks stress the importance of maintaining goodwill, which is often interpreted as designed to keep the reader or listener as a customer (Bovée, Thill, & Schatzman, 2003, p. 235). Clearly, this is not Red Jacket’s intention; nor is it always the case in a business or agency environment. While it is important to be civil and preserve or enhance the organization’s image, situations may arise in which the organization is not concerned with maintaining or improving its relationship with the reader (or listener). A direct negative message might communicate that sense more clearly, but an indirect message can communicate that message as well, especially in different cultures, as various business communication texts point out (for example, Locker, 2000, p. 193; Guffey, 2006, p. 362; Bovée, Thill, & Schatzman, 2003, p. 235).

Red Jacket attempts to be conciliatory and friendly throughout, especially in his address to Reverend Cram as “Brother,” but the speech may seem confrontational in Red Jacket’s implication of the Christians’ motives in the statement “We do not wish to destroy your religion, or take it from you.” However, he follows this statement with the Senecas’ conclusion – “We only want to enjoy our own” – a conclusion prepared for by his arguments of the similarities and differences between the two groups and their religions, a conclusion to which a rational listener would be drawn.

That the implied refusal was clearly understood was evidenced by the listener's response. The missionary, Reverend Cram, was angry. According to Stone's biography of Red Jacket, published in 1841 eleven years after Red Jacket's death, "Mr. Cram rose hastily from his seat, and replied that he could not take them by the hand, 'there being,' he added, 'no fellowship between the religion of God and the devil.' These words were interpreted to the Indians, but they nevertheless smiled, and retired in a peaceable manner. Subsequently, on being advised of the indiscretion of his remark, Mr. Cram observed in explanation, that he supposed the ceremony of shaking hands would have been received by the Indians as a token that he assented to what had been said. Being more correctly informed, he expressed his regret at what had so unadvisedly fallen from his lips" (Stone, 1894, p. 194). Stone's comment on the behavior is significant for the period: "Still it cannot be denied that the Indians exhibited better breeding, and more knowledge of human nature, than the missionary" (1841, p. 194). More recent scholars have commented on the speech; for Snow, "Red Jacket brilliantly exposed the hubris, hypocrisy, and inconsistencies of Christian missionaries in the speech" (2000, ¶ 4).

In 1811, the Seneca rejected a similar request, this time by a missionary society from New York City. In his speech, Red Jacket presented many of the same arguments that he had presented in 1805 but expanded the earlier statement about differences in forms of worship: "We do not worship the Great Spirit as the white men do, but we believe that forms of worship are indifferent to the Great Spirit,--it is the offering of a sincere heart that pleases him, and we worship him in this manner" (Stone, 1841, p. 203).

Red Jacket's speech can serve as an interesting case study in an undergraduate or graduate business communication or speech class. It is more direct in its address to its audience than some authors of business communication texts recommend; Ober, for example, tells the writer "when using the indirect plan, phrase the bad news in impersonal language avoiding the use of *you* and *your*" (2006, p. 314). However, it has an "audience-centered tone" created, as Bovée, Thill, & Schatzman suggest, by using the "you" attitude, positive phrasing, and respectful language (2003). Red Jacket's continued address of his audience as "Brother" directs his speech to the listener, Reverend Cram. His use of positive and respectful diction helps soften the negative message, but he is not averse to using words conveying negativity such as "cannot," which are advised against in texts such as Guffey's (2006). In part, the negative terms carry the implied message, but usually they skillfully support the idea of differences between the cultures, differences which form an important base in the decision to reject the missionary's request.

Although some authors such as Ober (2006) suggest that the writer or speaker try to point out that the reasons for the negative message may have benefits to the reader or listener, there is no benefit to the missionary society in this case, since their request has been denied. Pointing out the absence of a listener benefit in Red Jacket's speech can help students recognize that at times there is no benefit to be recognized from the refusal, and it might seem disingenuous to attempt to suggest one.

## Conclusion

Red Jacket's 1805 speech embodies the characteristics of an indirect bad-news message but also provides an interesting example of intercultural communication. It embodies clear concern for

the attitudes of others toward the group represented by the document, a concern that can be seen in other historical documents designed at least in part as negative messages, including the Declaration of Independence. Using historical texts can supplement the discussion of negative messages in business communication texts, broaden students' sense of the importance of effective communication, and enrich their understanding of and appreciation for skillful speaking and writing.

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