

Difficult Conversations Framework

A Step-by-Step Guide for Performance Issues, Conflicts, and Tough Feedback

Avoiding difficult conversations doesn't make them go away - it makes them worse. This framework gives you a clear roadmap for having tough talks with **confidence, clarity, and compassion**.

Step 0: Manage Your Own Emotions First

Before you can lead this conversation effectively, check yourself:

- Take 3 deep breaths. Calm body = calm mind.
- Remind yourself: **This conversation helps them grow**
- Separate the person from the behavior (you care about them, not attacking them)
- If you're too angry: Wait 24 hours. Never have this conversation in anger.
- If you're anxious: Remember you're doing your job as a leader

Step 1: Preparation

- Define the **specific issue** (facts, not assumptions)
- Identify the **impact** (on team, work, or results)
- Determine your **desired outcome**
- Anticipate their reaction and prepare your responses
- Choose a private location and schedule sufficient time (30-45 min)
- Gather documentation or examples

The 5-Step Conversation

Step 2: Open with Care (2 minutes)

Start with empathy. Acknowledge discomfort. Set a **collaborative tone**.

Script: "I want to talk about something important. I'm bringing this up because I care about your success. Can we work through this together?"

Step 3: State the Facts (3-5 minutes)

Be **specific and objective**. No "always" or "never."

✓ "You've been late to three team meetings: the 5th, 15th, and today."

✗ "You're always late and don't respect anyone's time."

Step 4: Explain the Impact (2-3 minutes)

Connect behavior to consequences: "**When [behavior], the impact is [consequence].**"

"When you arrive late, we have to repeat information, which takes time from everyone."

Step 5: Listen & Explore (5-10 minutes)

Most important step. Stop talking. Ask open-ended questions.

- "What's your perspective on this?"
- "Help me understand what's been happening from your side."
- "What challenges are you facing that I might not know about?"
- "What support do you need from me?"

Listening Tips:

- **Pause after asking** - Give them space to think and respond
- **Don't interrupt** or defend yourself
- **Acknowledge feelings**: "I can see this is frustrating for you"
- **Ask clarifying questions**: "Tell me more about that"
- **Take notes** to show you're taking this seriously

Step 6: Agree on Next Steps (5 minutes)

Create **specific commitments with timelines**. Clarify consequences.

Script: "So to summarize: You'll [action] by [date]. I'll [my commitment]. We'll check in on [date]. Sound right?"

In the Moment: Handling Their Reactions

If They...	You Say...
Start Crying	"Take your time. I know this is hard. Would you like a moment?" (Hand them tissue, pause, stay calm)
Get Defensive/Angry	"I can see you're upset. I'm not attacking you—I want to work through this together. Can we take a breath?"
Deny Everything	"I understand you see it differently. Let me share what I've observed..." (Stick to facts, don't argue)
Shut Down/Go Silent	"I notice you've gone quiet. What's going through your mind right now?" (Give space, wait)
Make Excuses	"I hear what you're saying. And... the impact is still [consequence]. How do we move forward?"
Blame Others	"Let's focus on what you can control. What can you do differently going forward?"

Staying Calm When They Don't:

- **Breathe** - Take slow breaths to stay grounded
- **Pause** - It's okay to have silence. Don't rush to fill it.
- **Lower your voice** - If they get loud, you get quieter
- **Acknowledge feelings** - "I can see this is hard" (validate without agreeing)
- **Reschedule if needed** - "Let's take a break and reconvene tomorrow"

Helpful Phrases to Keep in Your Pocket

Situation	What to Say
Need to redirect	"Let's bring this back to [topic]. We can discuss that another time."

They're rambling	"I want to make sure I understand. Can you summarize the main point?"
They ask what others said	"I'm not discussing what others said. This is about your performance."
Need a moment	"Let me think about that for a second..." (It's okay to pause!)
They disagree with facts	"I understand you see it differently. Here's what I observed..."
Ending the conversation	"I think we've covered a lot. Let's meet again on [date] to check progress."

After the Conversation: Follow-Through

- Send summary email within 24 hours (what was discussed, what was agreed upon)
- Document the conversation in their file
- Schedule the follow-up meeting immediately
- Monitor progress and **acknowledge improvements**
- Be prepared to escalate if commitments aren't met

Quick Reference: Glance at This During the Conversation

THE 5-STEP CONVERSATION (Quick Version)

1. OPEN WITH CARE (2 min)

→ "I want to talk about something important. I care about your success."

2. STATE THE FACTS (3-5 min)

→ Be specific. No "always" or "never." What did you observe?

3. EXPLAIN THE IMPACT (2-3 min)

→ "When [behavior], the impact is [consequence]."

4. LISTEN & EXPLORE (5-10 min) ← **MOST IMPORTANT**

→ "What's your perspective?"

→ "Help me understand what's happening from your side."

→ Stop talking. Genuinely listen.

5. AGREE ON NEXT STEPS (5 min)

→ Specific actions + timelines + consequences

→ "You'll [action] by [date]. We'll check in on [date]. Sound right?"

Common Scenarios & Key Phrases

Scenario	Key Phrase
Performance Issue	"I need to see improvement in [area] by [date]. Success looks like..."
Conflict Between Team Members	"You both need to find a way to work together. What solutions do you propose?"
Attitude Problem	"Your expertise is valuable, but how you communicate affects team morale. Let's shift that."
Missed Deadlines	"Deadlines aren't suggestions. The team depends on you. What needs to change?"

Policy Violation

"This violates policy and it's serious. I need your commitment it won't happen again."

What NOT to Do:

- ✗ Don't start with small talk—creates confusion
- ✗ Don't use a feedback sandwich—dilutes the message
- ✗ Don't apologize for having the conversation
- ✗ Don't make it personal—focus on behavior
- ✗ Don't leave without clear next steps