



Handling Difficult Team Conversations: Scripts & Frameworks

Most managers avoid hard conversations — not because they don't care, but because they don't know what to say. This worksheet gives you ready-to-use scripts, reflection prompts, and practical frameworks so you can walk into any tough conversation with clarity and confidence. Whether you're addressing underperformance, resolving conflict, or delivering feedback that stings, this resource is your go-to guide for handling it professionally and effectively.



Why Difficult Conversations Get Avoided

Understanding what holds us back is the first step to moving forward. Most professionals cite a handful of recurring reasons for avoiding hard conversations. Recognising these patterns in yourself helps you develop the self-awareness to override them. Often, it's not the conversation itself that is daunting, but the fear of potential outcomes—conflict, rejection, or damaging relationships.

Some hesitate because they lack confidence in their communication skills, while others worry about being misunderstood or judged. At times, avoidance stems from perfectionism, where people wait for the “right moment” that never arrives. In other cases, cultural conditioning or workplace dynamics reinforce silence, making it feel safer to stay quiet than to risk vulnerability.

. By identifying these barriers—whether emotional, psychological, or situational—you gain the power to challenge them, reframe your perspective, and approach difficult discussions with clarity and courage.



Fear of Emotional Reaction

Worry that the other person will get defensive, upset, or angry — and that you won't know how to handle it. This triggers avoidance even when action is clearly needed.



Not Knowing What to Say

No script, no structure. Managers often stall because they can't find the right words, so they wait — and the problem compounds over time.



Fear of Damaging the Relationship

The mistaken belief that honesty breaks trust. In reality, avoiding necessary conversations erodes trust far more than having them with care and respect.



Hoping It Resolves Itself

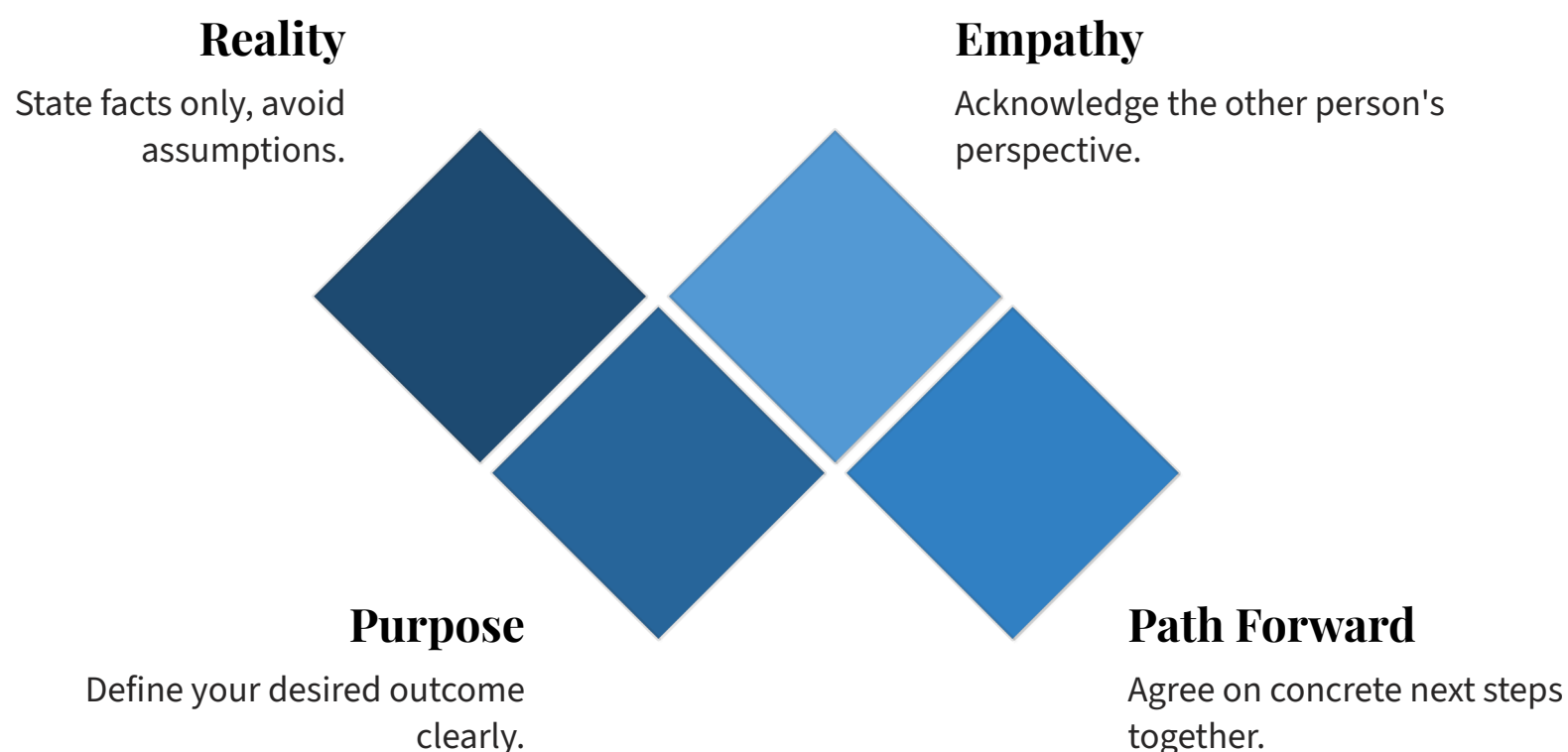
The classic "wait and see" approach. Rarely works. Most unaddressed issues fester, affect team morale, and become significantly harder to resolve later.



Reflection Prompt: Think of a conversation you've been putting off. Which of the above reasons is driving the delay? Write it down before moving forward.

The PREP Framework: Your Conversation Blueprint

Before any difficult conversation, preparation is everything. The PREP framework gives you a four-step mental model to structure your thinking so you enter the conversation grounded, clear, and composed — not reactive or improvised.



Run through each element in your head — or on paper — before sitting down. The goal is to separate facts from feelings, clarify your own intent, and arrive ready to listen as much as you speak. Most failed conversations happen because the manager walked in with conclusions rather than curiosity.

Do This Before Every Conversation

- Write down the specific behaviour or situation (not personality)
- Identify the impact it has had on the team or work
- Clarify your desired outcome — what does success look like?
- Anticipate their likely response or perspective
- Choose a private, neutral setting and sufficient time

Common Mistakes at This Stage

- Going in without a clear goal — venting instead of resolving
- Mixing multiple issues into one conversation
- Scheduling in a rush or right before a meeting ends
- Relying on secondhand information or assumptions
- Entering with the conclusion already made

Script #1: Addressing Underperformance

This is one of the most common — and most avoided — conversations in management. The key is to focus on observable behaviour and measurable impact, not character or attitude. Lead with care, not accusation. The structure below works for both informal check-ins and formal performance discussions.

1

Open with Intent

"I wanted to connect with you today because I care about your success here and I've noticed some things I want to address together."

2

State the Specific Behaviour

"Over the past three weeks, I've noticed that [specific deliverable] has been submitted late, and the quality has been below our standard. For example, [specific instance]."

3

Share the Impact

"This has impacted the team because [specific consequence — e.g., another team member had to cover, a client deadline was missed]."

4

Invite Their Perspective

"I want to understand what's going on from your side. Is there something I'm not aware of that's making this difficult?"

5

Agree on a Path Forward

"Let's agree on what success looks like going forward and what support you need from me. I'd like to check in again in [two weeks] to see how things are going."



Worksheet Prompt: Fill in the blanks using your own situation. What specific behaviour will you name? What is the measurable impact? What outcome are you seeking from this conversation?

Script #2: Resolving Conflict Between Team Members

When two team members are in conflict, your job isn't to take sides—it's to restore working trust and establish a functional relationship that allows collaboration to move forward. This process usually unfolds in three deliberate phases: first, you hold individual conversations to understand each person's perspective without judgment, giving them space to express concerns openly.

Next, you bring both parties together in a joint facilitated discussion, where the focus shifts from grievances to shared goals and practical commitments. Finally, you close with a clear agreement and follow-up plan, ensuring accountability and reinforcing progress.

By moving through these stages with structure and empathy, you create a safe environment for dialogue, rebuild trust, and set the foundation for a healthier, more productive working relationship.

1

Phase 1 — Individual Conversations

"I've noticed there's some tension between you and [Name]. I'm not here to judge — I just want to understand your perspective. What's been going on from your side?"

Listen fully. Do not share what the other person said. Acknowledge their experience without agreeing or disagreeing.

2

Phase 2 — Setting Up the Joint Conversation

"I've spoken with both of you individually. I'd like us to sit down together — not to relitigate the past, but to agree on how we work together going forward. Are you open to that?"

Frame it as forward-looking. Make clear the goal is resolution, not blame assignment.

3

Phase 3 — Facilitating the Joint Discussion

"I'm going to ask each of you to share one thing that's been frustrating, and one thing you need from the other person to work well together. I'll hold the space. This stays in this room."

End by agreeing on 2–3 specific, behavioural commitments each person will make. Document them briefly.



Best Practice: Never hold the joint conversation before both individuals feel heard individually. Jumping straight to mediation without preparation almost always makes things worse.

Script #3: Delivering Difficult Feedback

Feedback becomes difficult when it touches on something personal, habitual, or sensitive — such as communication style, attitude, or behaviour that others have complained about. The SBI (Situation–Behaviour–Impact) model keeps the conversation grounded in facts and prevents it from becoming a character assessment.

The SBI Model

Situation: When and where did this happen?

Behaviour: What specifically did the person do or say?

Impact: What was the effect on others, the team, or the work?

This model removes ambiguity and stops the conversation from drifting into generalisations like "you always" or "you never."

Script in Practice

"During yesterday's client call (Situation), you interrupted the client three times while they were mid-sentence (Behaviour). The client appeared frustrated and disengaged for the rest of the call, and it affected our positioning going into the follow-up (Impact)."

"I want to bring this up because you're clearly capable, and I think a small adjustment here will make a significant difference. What's your take on how that call went?"

Pause. Let them respond. Don't rush to solutions — allow reflection first.

Say This	Instead Of This
"During the meeting, you spoke over two colleagues."	"You're always so dominating in meetings."
"The report was submitted two days past deadline."	"You're always disorganised."
"I noticed you seemed disengaged during the briefing."	"You don't seem to care about this project."
"Your tone came across as dismissive to the team."	"You have an attitude problem."

Script #4: Setting Boundaries with a Senior Colleague

One of the trickiest scenarios is addressing behaviour from someone at the same level or above you — a peer who oversteps, a senior who undermines you, or a colleague whose actions are affecting your team's work. This requires precision, composure, and a clear frame. You're not confronting, you're clarifying.

1

Opening Without Accusation

"I wanted to speak with you directly about something rather than let it build. I think there may be a misalignment between us on [topic/decision/process], and I'd like to clear it up."

2

Stating the Specific Issue

"When [specific thing happened], it created confusion for my team because they received conflicting directions. I want to make sure we're aligned going forward so that doesn't keep happening."

3

Proposing a Clear Boundary or Agreement

"Going forward, I'd like us to agree that decisions about [X] go through me before my team is informed. Would that work for you?"

4

Closing on a Collaborative Note

"I want us to be able to work well together — I think we're actually quite aligned on the big picture. I just wanted to make sure we're clear on how we operate at this level."



Reflection Prompt: Is there a peer or senior colleague whose behaviour has been affecting your team? Draft the first sentence you would say to open that conversation using the script above as a guide.

Script #5: Navigating an Emotional Response

Even the best-prepared conversations can take an emotional turn. Someone may cry, shut down, become defensive, or raise their voice. Your ability to stay regulated and respond with empathy — without losing the thread of the conversation — is the difference between resolution and rupture. Below are practical scripts for common emotional moments.

1

When Someone Gets Tearful

"Take your time — there's no rush here. I can see this is bringing up a lot. Do you want a moment before we continue?"

Pause. Offer water. Do not continue until they signal they're ready.

2

When Someone Gets Defensive

"I hear that this feels unfair. I'm not here to attack you — I want to understand your side too. Can you help me see what I might be missing?"

Reframe from judgement to curiosity. It disarms faster than pushing harder.

3

When Someone Goes Silent

"I can see you're processing this. Take your time. I'm going to stay quiet for a moment — let me know when you're ready."

Silence is not failure. It often means the message landed. Don't fill it nervously.

4

When the Conversation Escalates

"I think we both want to get this right. Let's pause for today and reconvene when we've both had time to think. Does tomorrow afternoon work?"

Calling a pause is not retreat — it's leadership. Return with structure.

Phrases to Use — and Phrases to Avoid

Language is the most precise tool you have in a difficult conversation. The right phrase can open someone up; the wrong one can shut them down instantly. These tables serve as a quick cheat sheet you can review before any high-stakes discussion.

Phrases That Build Trust

Phrase	Why It Works
"I wanted to come to you directly."	Shows respect and signals you're not going behind their back.
"Help me understand your perspective."	Demonstrates genuine curiosity; creates psychological safety.
"I could be wrong about this — tell me what I'm missing."	Reduces defensiveness by showing humility and openness.
"What would a good outcome look like for you?"	Shifts the conversation from problem to shared solution.
"This matters to me because I value our working relationship."	Anchors the conversation in care, not criticism.

Phrases That Derail Conversations

Phrase	Why It Backfires
"You always / you never..."	Triggers defensiveness immediately; inaccurate generalisations.
"With all due respect..."	A warning signal that what follows will not be respectful.
"I'm just being honest."	Often used to justify bluntness without care for impact.
"Everyone on the team feels this way."	Weaponises unnamed third parties; feels like an ambush.
"Don't take this personally."	Pre-emptive dismissal of a legitimate emotional reaction.

Your Personal Preparation Worksheet

Use this section before any difficult conversation. Work through each prompt in writing — the act of writing forces clarity and helps you separate emotion from fact. You can return to this template repeatedly as a pre-conversation ritual.

1 What is the specific situation or behaviour I need to address?

Write it in one or two factual sentences. Avoid adjectives like "bad" or "unprofessional." Stick to observable actions.

My notes: _____

2 What is the impact this has had on the team, the work, or the culture?

Be specific. Vague impact = weak case. "It's affecting morale" is less effective than "Two team members have raised this with me separately."

My notes: _____

3 What outcome do I want from this conversation?

Not "I want them to feel bad" — what specific change in behaviour, agreement, or understanding are you seeking?

My notes: _____

4 What is their likely perspective or response?

What might they say in defence? What context might you be missing? This step builds empathy and prepares you for pushback.

My notes: _____

5 What is my opening sentence?

Write it word for word. The first 15 seconds set the tone for everything that follows. Rehearse it at least twice before the conversation.

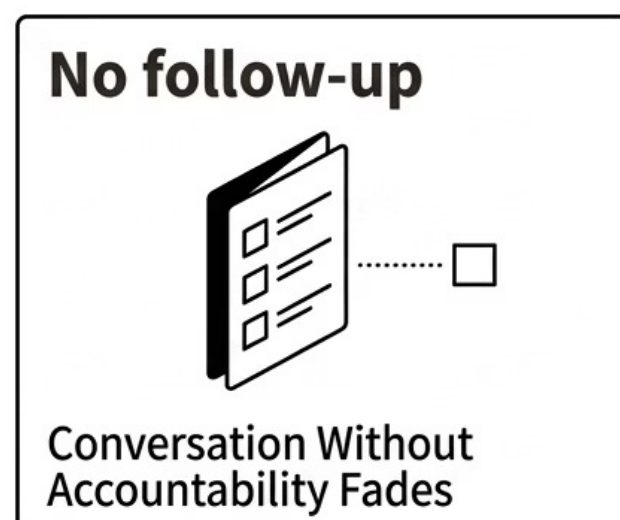
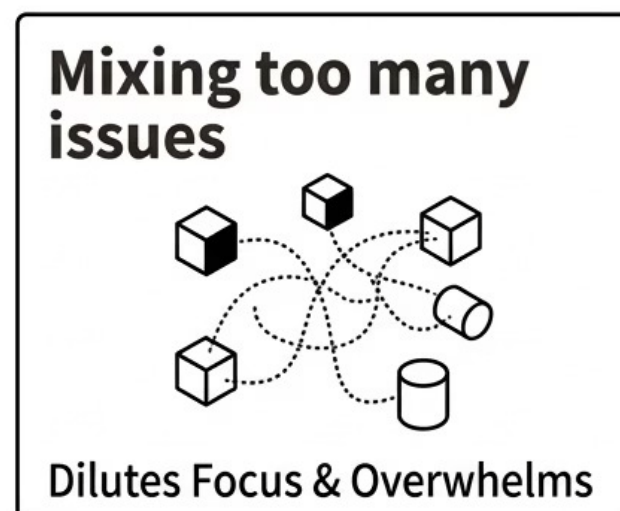
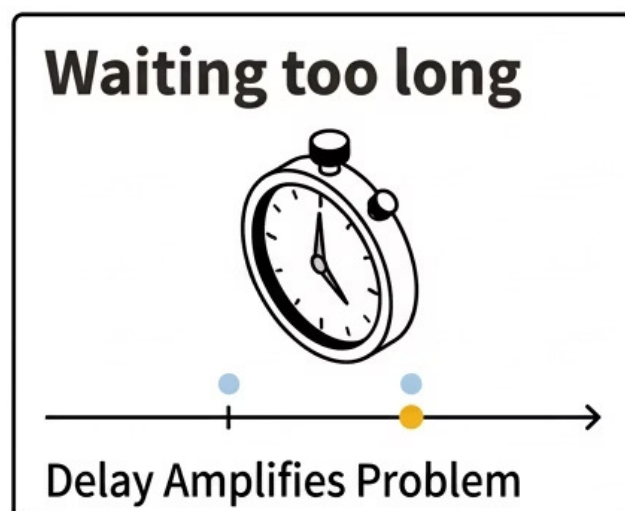
My opening: _____

Common Mistakes That Undermine Difficult Conversations

Even experienced managers with good intentions can unintentionally sabotage difficult conversations through predictable, avoidable errors. These missteps often stem from rushing into dialogue without preparation, framing the discussion around blame instead of solutions, or allowing emotions to override objectivity.

Others include failing to listen actively, overloading the conversation with too much information at once, or neglecting to set clear next steps. Knowing these pitfalls is half the defence against them, because awareness allows you to pause, recalibrate, and approach the conversation with greater clarity and composure.

Reviewing a checklist of common errors before any high-stakes discussion acts as a final self-check—helping you stay grounded, avoid reactive patterns, and ensure the conversation strengthens trust rather than erodes it.



☐ **Self-Check:** Before your next difficult conversation, run through this list. Which of these are you most prone to? Make a deliberate commitment to avoid just one of them — and notice the difference it makes.

Quick Reference Cheat Sheet

Use this summary card as a rapid refresher before any difficult conversation. Pin it, print it, or screenshot it — this is your pocket guide to navigating hard conversations with composure and clarity.

The PREP Framework

- **P** — Purpose: What do you want to achieve?
- **R** — Reality: Facts only, no assumptions
- **E** — Empathy: Acknowledge their view
- **P** — Path forward: Agree next steps

The SBI Feedback Model

- **S** — Situation: When/where did it happen?
- **B** — Behaviour: What exactly was done/said?
- **I** — Impact: What was the effect?

5 Conversation Types Covered

1. Underperformance — focus on behaviour + impact
2. Team conflict — individual first, joint second
3. Difficult feedback — use SBI, not generalisations
4. Senior colleague — clarify, don't confront
5. Emotional response — pause, empathise, re-engage

The Golden Rules

- Prepare in writing before you speak
- Open with intent, not accusation
- Listen more than you talk (aim for 40/60)
- Always follow up with documented next steps

Key Takeaways

Difficult conversations are a core leadership skill — not a personality trait. They can be learned, practised, and refined over time. The professionals who build the most respected, high-functioning teams are rarely those who avoid conflict. They're the ones who learned how to move through it with skill, speed, and care.



Preparation Is Everything

A well-prepared 20-minute conversation achieves more than three improvised ones. Write before you speak.



Behaviour, Not Character

The moment you attack who someone is rather than what they did, you lose the conversation. Always anchor in specific, observable actions.



Listening Is the Main Event

The goal is not to deliver a message — it's to reach shared understanding. You cannot do that without genuinely hearing the other person.



End with a Concrete Agreement

Every difficult conversation should close with a clear, specific, time-bound next step. Without accountability, even the best conversation fades.

The quality of your leadership is directly proportional to the quality of the conversations you're willing to have. Avoidance is never neutral—it always has a cost. When leaders sidestep tough discussions, they may temporarily preserve comfort, but they erode trust, weaken accountability, and allow unresolved issues to fester beneath the surface.

Over time, this avoidance creates disengagement, misalignment, and a culture where silence replaces candor. On the other hand, leaning into difficult conversations signals courage, respect, and a commitment to growth—for yourself, your team, and the organization.