



LEADERSHIP TOOL 001

DIFFICULT CONVERSATION PLANNER

A practical planner to prepare and structure difficult conversations with clarity, empathy and accountability.



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INTRODUCTION

Difficult conversations are rarely difficult because leaders do not know that something needs to be said. They are difficult because emotion, uncertainty and competing perspectives can quickly distract from the issue that needs to be addressed. Without a clear structure, leaders can enter these conversations with good intentions but leave without achieving clarity, agreement or meaningful change.

Avoiding the conversation rarely removes the problem. Equally, approaching it without sufficient preparation can create defensiveness, confusion and disagreement about what actually happened. Effective preparation helps a leader distinguish evidence from interpretation, connect concerns to clear expectations and explain why the issue matters.

The Difficult Conversation Planner uses the FRISK framework to provide a clear structure for preparing and conducting these conversations. FRISK focuses attention on the facts of the situation, the rules or expectations involved, the impact of what has happened, the steps required next and the other person's right to respond.

The purpose of the framework is not to turn a difficult conversation into a rigid script. It is to help leaders enter the meeting with clarity while remaining prepared to listen, question their own understanding and respond to information they may not previously have considered. Used well, FRISK creates structure without removing the judgement, curiosity and humanity that effective leadership conversations require.

HOW TO USE THIS TOOL

1

FACTS

Outline what has happened as objectively as possible. Record what you know, what you have observed and what can be evidenced. Avoid assumptions, interpretations and judgements.

2

RULES

Identify the expectations, agreements, policies, standards or responsibilities that are not being met. Be clear about what should have happened and why that expectation exists.

3

IMPACT

Consider the effect of the situation. Who has been affected, and how? This might include colleagues, clients, students, customers or the wider organisation. Explain why the issue matters and the consequences of leaving it unresolved.

4

STEPS

Clarify what needs to happen next. Identify the actions, changes or commitments required, who is responsible for them, when they should happen and how progress will be reviewed and followed up.

5

KNOW THEY HAVE A RIGHT TO REPLY

Give the other person genuine space to respond, explain their perspective and add information you may not have considered. A difficult conversation should allow for challenge and clarification, not become a predetermined verdict.



A QUIET LEADER PRACTICE

Consider asking the person attending the meeting to write the meeting summary and agreed actions. Explain this expectation at the beginning. It encourages careful listening and gives you evidence of whether all the elements discussed have genuinely been understood.

1. FACTS

Begin with what you know. Record what has happened, what you have observed and what can be evidenced. Avoid assumptions, interpretations and judgements.

WHAT HAPPENED?

Describe the situation as objectively as possible. What occurred? When and where did it happen? Who was involved?

WHAT HAVE I OBSERVED OR BEEN TOLD?

Record specific behaviours, actions, words, events or information that can be clearly identified. Include relevant examples and distinguish between what you observed directly and what was reported to you.

WHAT EVIDENCE DO I HAVE?

List any records, documents, messages, previous conversations, examples or other evidence relevant to the situation.

Before moving on: Have I recorded facts, or have I started adding assumptions and interpretations?

2. RULES

Identify the expectations, agreements, policies, standards or responsibilities not being met. Be clear about what should have happened and why the expectation exists.

WHAT SHOULD HAVE HAPPENED?

Describe the expected behaviour, action, outcome or standard. Be specific about what was required.

WHAT EXPECTATION, RULE OR STANDARD APPLIES?

Identify the relevant policy, procedure, agreement, professional standard, instruction or established expectation.

WAS THE EXPECTATION CLEAR?

Consider how and when the expectation was communicated. Was it understood, previously discussed or reasonably known?

Before moving on: Am I addressing a clear expectation or standard, or am I expecting something that was never properly communicated?

3. IMPACT

Consider the effect of the situation. Who has been affected, and how? Explain why the issue matters and the consequences of leaving it unresolved.

WHO HAS BEEN AFFECTED?

Identify the people, teams or groups affected by the situation. Consider both those directly involved and others who may be experiencing the consequences.

WHAT HAS THE IMPACT BEEN?

Describe the effect on people, relationships, performance, wellbeing, trust, workload, service or outcomes. Be specific about what has changed or been affected.

WHAT HAPPENS IF NOTHING CHANGES?

Consider the likely consequences if the situation continues. What risks, difficulties or further impact could develop over time?

Before moving on: Have I clearly explained why this issue matters, without exaggerating the impact or making assumptions about consequences?

4. STEPS

Clarify what needs to happen next. Identify the actions, changes or commitments required, who is responsible for them and how progress will be reviewed and followed up.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE OR HAPPEN NEXT?

Describe the actions, changes or commitments required. Be specific about what needs to be different as a result of the conversation.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE, AND BY WHEN?

Identify who will take responsibility for each action and agree clear timescales. Make sure expectations are realistic and understood.

HOW WILL PROGRESS BE REVIEWED?

Decide how and when progress will be checked. Identify any follow up conversations, support required or evidence that will show the agreed actions have been completed.

Before moving on: Are the next steps clear, realistic and measurable, and does everyone understand who is responsible for what happens next?

5. RIGHT TO REPLY

Give the other person space to respond and explain their perspective. Listen for information you may have missed, and allow for clarification before reaching conclusions.

WHAT IS THEIR PERSPECTIVE?

Listen carefully and record the key points they raise. What explanation, context or additional information have they provided?

WHAT HAVE I LEARNT OR NEED TO RECONSIDER?

Identify anything that changes your understanding of the situation. Are there facts, expectations or impacts that need to be reviewed?

WHAT STILL NEEDS TO BE CLARIFIED OR RESOLVED?

Record any disagreements, unanswered questions or issues that require further discussion, evidence or follow up.

Before moving on: Have I genuinely listened and remained open to new information, or was I simply waiting for the opportunity to restate my position?

MEETING RECORD

Capture the key outcomes of the conversation. Record what was discussed, what was agreed and who is responsible for what happens next.

DATE:

LOCATION / FORMAT:

ATTENDEES:

MEETING PURPOSE:

KEY POINTS DISCUSSED:

Summarise the main points raised during the conversation.

AGREED ACTIONS:

ACTION / COMMITMENT	WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?	BY WHEN?

HOW PROGRESS WILL BE REVIEWED:

NEXT REVIEW / FOLLOW UP DATE:

WRITER / CIRCULATOR OF SUMMARY:

DATE OF SUMMARY CIRCULATION:

Before moving on: Does this record accurately capture what was discussed and agreed, and does everyone understand what they are responsible for?