

THE DIFFICULT CONVERSATION FRAMEWORK

A five-step method for the conversations you've been avoiding — with a planning workbook and scripts you can adapt and use this week.

Most “difficult” conversations aren't hard because the content is hard. They're hard because we walk in unprepared. This guide fixes the preparation.

USE THIS IF

- There's a conversation you've been putting off for days — or weeks
- You tend to either over-soften the message or come in too hard
- You want a repeatable method, not just “be honest and kind”

INTRODUCTION

Why the Conversation You're Avoiding Matters Most

Every unspoken issue has a cost. It just doesn't show up on a line item — it shows up as missed deadlines you stopped mentioning, resentment that hardened, and a team that learned what you're willing to tolerate.

New managers avoid hard conversations for understandable reasons. You don't want to damage a relationship, look harsh, or get it wrong. So you wait for a better moment that never quite arrives. Meanwhile the problem compounds, and the conversation you eventually have is bigger and tenser than the one you could have had weeks ago.

The discomfort is real — but it's also temporary, and it's the price of leading. The good news: difficult conversations are a **skill**, not a personality trait. With a method to follow, the conversation you dread becomes the conversation that moves things forward.



"The conversations you avoid don't disappear. They reappear — as the issues you eventually have to manage at far greater cost."

— A principle drawn from the Harvard Negotiation Project

This guide gives you the same five-step method that experienced leaders use. Read it once to understand it. Then keep it open beside you the next time you have a conversation to prepare for.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CONFLICT

You're Never Having Just One Conversation

Most conversations feel difficult not because the facts are complicated, but because we're carrying three conversations at once. Naming them is half the work.

CONVERSATION ONE

What Happened

The disagreement about facts, blame, and who said what. We treat our version as the truth — and so do they.

CONVERSATION TWO

How We Feel

The emotions underneath — frustration, anxiety, hurt. Unspoken, they leak into tone and derail the content.

CONVERSATION THREE

What It Says About Us

The identity stakes. "Am I competent? Am I fair? Am I a good leader?" This is what makes it feel personal.

When a conversation spirals, it's usually because these three are tangled together. You think you're arguing about a missed deadline (what happened), but you're actually defending your competence (what it says about you) while managing your irritation (how you feel). The other person is doing exactly the same thing.

THE SHIFT THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING

Before any hard conversation, separate the three. Get clear on the facts, acknowledge your feelings privately, and notice the identity story you're telling yourself. Untangled, the conversation gets dramatically easier to lead.

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in paid hours is lost annually to workplace conflict in the U.S. alone — most of it avoidable with earlier, cleaner conversations.

CPP GLOBAL HUMAN CAPITAL REPORT

THE METHOD

The Five-Step Framework

One topic, five steps, in order. The first two happen before the conversation — in your own head and on paper. The last three happen in the room. Skip the preparation and you'll improvise; improvise and you'll default to either avoidance or attack.

1**Get Clear on the Actual Purpose**

Decide what you want — for you, for them, for the relationship — before you say a word.

2**Separate Observation from Story**

Sort what you actually saw from the meaning you've made of it. Bring the facts; hold the story loosely.

3**Open Without Sugar-Coating or Attacking**

Name the topic, state your intent, and ask permission. The first ten seconds set the temperature.

4**State the Issue Cleanly, Then Stop Talking**

Lead with facts, name the impact in one sentence, ask how they see it — then be quiet.

5**Land the Conversation**

Summarize, agree one next step with a date, and acknowledge that the conversation happened.

THE ORDER MATTERS

Each step earns the next. Purpose keeps you from drifting. Facts keep you from accusing. A clean open keeps defenses down. A clean statement makes space for their view. And a real landing turns a hard talk into actual change.

STEP 1 OF 5

1 Get Clear on the Actual Purpose

Decide what you want before you open your mouth

Most difficult conversations go wrong before they start, because we haven't decided what we actually want from them. Without a purpose, a hard conversation drifts — into venting, point-scoring, or a vague airing of grievances that leaves everyone worse off.

Purpose is your anchor. When the conversation gets tense (and it will), it's the thing you return to: not to win, but to get to a better place than where you started.

HOW TO DO IT

- 1 Ask what you want for **you**. — What outcome would actually resolve this for you?
- 2 Ask what you want for **them**. — A purpose that ignores their interests becomes an ambush.
- 3 Ask what you want for the **relationship**. — How do you want to be working together after this?
- 4 Picture the next 30 days. — If you get all three, what does the following month look like?

BORROW THIS LANGUAGE

SET YOUR INTENT IN ONE LINE

"My intent in this conversation is to ___, while keeping our working relationship intact."

WATCH OUT

If your honest answer to "what do I want?" is "to be right" or "to vent," pause. That's a reaction, not a purpose — and the other person will feel the difference immediately.

STEP 2 OF 5

2 Separate Observation from Story

Sort the facts from the meaning you've made of them

We rarely argue about facts. We argue about the stories we've built on top of them. "They missed the deadline" is a fact. "They don't respect my time" is a story — and it's the story, not the fact, that makes the conversation feel like a fight.

This step happens on paper, before the conversation. Write two columns. Then bring the facts into the room and hold the story loosely — offered as your interpretation, open to being wrong.

OBSERVATION · FACTS

"The report was due Monday. It arrived Thursday."

"This is the third deadline this month."

STORY · INTERPRETATION

"They don't take my deadlines seriously."

"They're not committed to the team."

HOW TO DO IT

- 1 Write what you saw or heard. — Specific, observable, time-stamped. No adjectives.
- 2 Write the story you're telling. — The meaning, motive, or judgment you've attached to it.
- 3 Bring the facts; hold the story. — Lead with the column that's verifiable.
- 4 Offer your story as a question. — "The story I started telling myself was... is that fair?"

BORROW THIS LANGUAGE

SEPARATE THEM OUT LOUD

"Here's what I noticed [facts]. The story I started telling myself was [interpretation] — and I wanted to check that with you."

LISTEN FOR THESE WORDS

"Always," "never," "again," "deliberately." These are almost always story, not fact. Strike them before you speak — they put the other person on the defensive instantly.

STEP 3 OF 5

3 Open Without Sugar-Coating or Attacking

The first ten seconds set the temperature

How you open determines how the rest goes. Sugar-coating buries the point so deep the other person never finds it — or feels blindsided when they finally do. Attacking, even subtly, raises defenses that no amount of good content can lower.

A clean open does three quiet things at once: it names the topic, states your positive intent, and asks permission. That last part matters more than it sounds — it turns being talked at into a conversation.

HOW TO DO IT

- 1 Name the topic plainly. — No preamble, no burying it in small talk.
- 2 State your positive intent. — Tell them where you're trying to get to, together.
- 3 Ask whether now is a good time. — Consent lowers the temperature before you've said anything hard.

BORROW THIS LANGUAGE

A CLEAN OPEN

"I want to talk about something that's been on my mind. My intent is for us to come out of this in a better place, not a worse one. Is now a good time?"

WATCH OUT

Never open with "I don't know how to say this..." or "This is really awkward, but..." You've just made it harder for both of you and signaled that the news is worse than it is.

STEP 4 OF 5

4 State the Issue Cleanly, Then Stop Talking

Say it once. Name the impact. Then be quiet.

When we're nervous, we over-explain. We pad the message, soften it, restate it, and circle back — until the actual point is buried under qualifications. Then, worst of all, we fill the silence that should belong to the other person.

The discipline here is restraint. Lead with the facts, name the impact in a single sentence, ask how they see it — and then stop. The silence after a hard statement is not empty. It's where the other person decides to be honest with you.

HOW TO DO IT

- 1 Lead with the facts, not the conclusion. — Start where you both can agree: what happened.
- 2 Name the impact in one sentence. — Why it matters — briefly, without a lecture.
- 3 Ask: "How do you see it?" — Hand the conversation over genuinely.
- 4 Be quiet for at least 10 seconds. — Count them if you have to. The pause belongs to them.

BORROW THIS LANGUAGE**STATE AND STOP**

"Over the last month I've noticed [specific examples]. The impact is [one sentence]. How do you see it?"

THE HARDEST PART

Silence is the most powerful tool you have and the one new managers misuse most. Resist the urge to rescue it, soften it, or answer your own question. Ten seconds. Let them fill it.

STEP 5 OF 5

5 Land the Conversation

A conversation without a landing is just tension with a timestamp

The last two minutes decide whether the conversation was worth having. Too many hard conversations end in a vague truce — “let’s see how it goes” — which guarantees you’ll be having the same conversation again in a month.

Landing it means converting understanding into a concrete, shared next step — and acknowledging, out loud, that the two of you just did something hard together. That acknowledgment is what rebuilds the relationship the conversation tested.

HOW TO DO IT

- 1 Summarize what you both heard. — Check you actually align before you move on.
- 2 Agree one specific next step, with a date. — Specific and dated, or it won’t happen.
- 3 Decide who follows up and when. — Name it so it doesn’t quietly evaporate.
- 4 Acknowledge that it happened. — “Thanks for staying in this with me.”

BORROW THIS LANGUAGE

LAND IT

“So here’s what I’m hearing... Let’s try [next step] by [date], and check in on [day]. Thanks for staying in this with me — I know it wasn’t easy.”

THE MOST COMMON FAILURE

Ending without a concrete next step. “We’ll see how it goes” is not a next step — it’s a way of avoiding one more small, slightly awkward sentence. Say it anyway.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

A Worked Example

Here's the whole framework applied to one of the most common new-manager conversations: **a capable team member who has missed three deadlines this month**. Watch how preparation does most of the work.

STEP 1 · PURPOSE**What I actually want**

For me: reliable delivery I can plan around. For them: to understand what's getting in the way — this is unlike them. For the relationship: to fix this without them feeling attacked. *In 30 days, I want deadlines we both trust again.*

STEP 2 · OBSERVATION VS. STORY**Facts, separated from my story**

Facts: three deadlines slipped this month; each was flagged late. **Story I'm telling:** "they've checked out." I hold that loosely — I don't actually know why.

STEP 3 · OPEN**How I start**

"I'd like to talk about deadlines. My intent is to understand what's happening, not to pile on. Is now a good time?"

STEP 4 · STATE & STOP**The core, in two sentences**

"Over the last month, three deadlines slipped — the X report, the Y review, and the Z deck. The impact is that I've had to re-plan around them. How do you see it?"

... then I stop talking and let the silence do its work.

STEP 5 · LAND**Where we leave it**

"So we'll try flagging risks 48 hours early, and I'll clear the blocker you mentioned. Let's check in Friday. Thanks for being straight with me."

LANGUAGE YOU CAN ADAPT

Scripts to Borrow

Starting is the hardest part. Adapt these openers to your own voice — the exact words matter less than getting the topic, intent, and permission into the first two sentences.

RAISING A CONCERN WITH A PEER

"Can I share something that's been on my mind? It's not a big deal — but if I don't say it now, it'll become one."

TELLING YOUR BOSS THEY GOT SOMETHING WRONG

"I want to flag something from yesterday's meeting that I think landed differently than you intended. Open to hearing it?"

ADDRESSING REPEATED LATENESS OR MISSED COMMITMENTS

"I want to talk about deadlines. Over the last month I've noticed [specific examples]. I'm not interested in piling on — I want to understand what's happening so we can fix it."

ENDING A PROJECT, ROLE, OR RELATIONSHIP

"I've made a decision and I want to tell you directly rather than have you hear it secondhand. [The decision.] Here's the thinking. I know this isn't the answer you were hoping for."

THINGS TO AVOID

- × Opening with "I don't know how to say this..." — you've just made it worse for both of you.
- × Using "we" when you actually mean "I." Own your message.
- × Asking a question when you're really making a statement. ("Don't you think you should...?")
- × Stacking multiple issues into one conversation. One topic per conversation.
- × Ending without a concrete next step.

PREPARE BEFORE YOU SPEAK

The Planning Workbook

Fill this out before the conversation — don't wing it. Ten minutes of writing here is worth an hour of recovery later. Print it, or copy the prompts into your notes.

The headline *If I had to summarize this in one sentence, it would be...*

The facts *Specifically, what I observed was...*

The story I'm telling *The meaning I've made of this is...*

Their likely view *If they described this to a friend, they'd probably say...*

What I contributed *My part in how we got here is...*

What I want *A good outcome looks like... (for me, for them, for the relationship)*

If it goes sideways *If the conversation escalates, I will...*

BEFORE & AFTER

Reflection & Quick Reference

Three questions to sit with before you walk in — and a checklist to run through the morning of.

REFLECT FIRST

- What am I making this conversation mean about me? (That's usually what I'm really afraid of.)
- What's the cost of not having it — to the work, the team, and the relationship?
- Where might I be wrong about what happened, or why?

THE 7-POINT READINESS CHECK

- I've named my purpose — for me, them, and the relationship
- I've separated the facts from my story, on paper
- I have a clean, three-part open ready (topic, intent, permission)
- I can state the issue in two sentences or fewer
- I'm prepared to ask "how do you see it?" — and stay silent
- I know the one next step I'll propose, with a date
- I'm having one conversation about one topic

IF YOU CAN'T CHECK ALL SEVEN

Don't cancel — prepare. The gap between a conversation that helps and one that backfires is almost always the ten minutes of preparation before it.

WHERE TO NEXT

Some Conversations Are Worth Rehearsing.

Reading a framework is one thing. Walking into a high-stakes conversation prepared — having said the hard sentences out loud to someone first — is another.

Practice the conversation before it happens.

Grange Hill Group works with new managers, emerging leaders, and PhDs moving into industry to prepare for the conversations that matter most — before the stakes are real.

- ✦ A confidential thinking partner to pressure-test your approach
- ✦ Role-play the hard moments so the real one goes better
- ✦ Practical, research-backed frameworks you can use the same week

Book a free 30-minute Clarity Call
grangehillgroup.com

BEFORE YOUR CALL

Bring the one conversation you've been avoiding. We'll work through it together using the framework in this guide — and you'll leave with words you can actually use.

REFERENCES

Sources & Further Reading

This framework draws on decades of research from the Harvard Negotiation Project and the wider field of conflict and communication. The works below are where to go deeper.

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