

THE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS ROADMAP



5 Steps to Mastering High-Stakes Leadership Conversations

By TLC Leadership Group

Why Difficult Conversations Matter for Leaders

As a leader, your influence is shaped not just by the decisions you make, but by the conversations you have — especially the challenging ones.

Avoiding a difficult conversation may feel easier in the short term, but over time it erodes trust, damages team culture, and undermines your leadership credibility.

Small issues grow into costly problems: productivity drops, morale suffers, and your best people may choose to leave.

The reality is simple: if you want to lead a high-performing, resilient team, you must address issues directly and constructively.

The Difficult Conversations Roadmap is a proven tool that will help you prepare for, initiate, and successfully navigate the conversations you'd rather avoid — without damaging relationships or losing authority.

THE 5 STEPS TO PREPARE FOR A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

1. S = Soul Searching

Before you speak, get clear on your own perspective:

- What are my concerns?
- What is most important to me in this situation?
- What outcome do I need?
- What's the strategic importance of resolving this?
- What could trigger an emotional reaction from me?

Then flip the lens:

- What might be the other person's concerns and needs?
- What matters most to them?
- What might trigger them?

Leaders who anticipate both perspectives are more likely to build trust and achieve resolution.



THE 5 STEPS MODEL:

How to prepare for the conversation



2. T = Topics

Identify the core message you need to communicate.

- What are the three most important points you must make?
- Which behaviours or outcomes need to change?
- How does this connect to our values, priorities, or organisational goals?

Focus on the behaviour you want to see, not just what you don't want.

THE 5 STEPS MODEL:

How to prepare for the conversation



3. E = Envision

High-performing athletes mentally rehearse before a big event. You can do the same:

- Picture the setting, the person, and their potential responses.
- Visualise yourself staying calm, listening actively, and responding with authority.
- Consider the best-case outcome for both the individual and the organisation.

THE 5 STEPS MODEL:

How to prepare for the conversation



4. P = Proceed

Set the conversation up for success:

- Approach the person privately.
- State that you'd like to discuss an important matter and agree on a time to talk.
- For high-stakes situations, share a brief agenda in advance.
- Allow enough time for a thoughtful discussion.

THE 5 STEPS MODEL:

How to prepare for the conversation



5. S = Sensitive

When the conversation begins:

- Start with an open-ended question.
- Listen without interrupting.
- Separate behaviour from personality.
- Acknowledge their perspective before sharing your own.

The DRAMA Model for Leading the Conversation

The **DRAMA model** guides you step-by-step through the discussion:

1. Describe the facts in a neutral, non-judgmental way.
2. Report the impact — on you, the team, or organisational outcomes.
3. Acknowledge the other person's needs or perspective.
4. Make your own needs clear.
5. Ask for specific action and agree on next steps.



Example:

“John, last week you interrupted me three times in our team meeting.

It made it difficult for me to share important stakeholder feedback, which is critical for the project's success.

I understand you're deeply invested in this project and want it to succeed.

I need to be able to share this feedback without interruption so we can make informed decisions.

Next time, please let me finish before responding.”



When the Conversation Gets Stuck

If emotions escalate and progress stalls, it's powerful to pause:

"We're both too emotional to resolve this right now. Let's take a break and revisit within 24 hours."

Follow up promptly to ensure the issue is addressed.

Sample Conversation Starters for Leaders

- "I'd like to align on our approach to [issue] so we can move forward with clarity."
- "This is an important matter affecting team performance. Can we set a time to address it constructively?"
- "I value our working relationship, and I think it's important we discuss this openly so we can find a solution."



Your Next Step as a Leader

Mastering difficult conversations isn't just about resolving conflict — it's about strengthening trust, building accountability, and driving performance.

At TLC Leadership Group, we give leaders practical, high-impact tools like this roadmap to help you influence with confidence, lead with clarity, and create resilient, high-performing teams.

If you're ready to take your leadership further, explore the TLC Leadership Portal — your on-demand hub for advanced leadership skills and strategies.

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- Pinpoint your biggest leadership challenge
- Discover practical strategies to overcome it
- Set clear, actionable goals to boost your influence and results

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