



SAY THE HARD THING

A Practical Approach to Difficult Leadership Conversations

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Start with One Conversation

What conversation are you not having?

Keep one real situation in mind.

You do not need to share it.

Maybe it is performance. Attendance. Behavior. Expectations.
Or something you keep hoping will resolve itself.

The hard part usually is not knowing. It is getting clear, then saying it.

The Gap Between Knowing and Naming

We Usually Know

- Something is off
- An expectation is not being met
- A pattern is developing
- Other people are feeling the impact

What Gets Harder

- Naming it clearly
- Staying direct without becoming harsh
- Listening without losing the point
- Staying in it when it gets uncomfortable

Quick Poll

What makes a difficult conversation hardest for you?

A

Knowing what to say

B

Concern about the other person's reaction

C

Not wanting to damage the relationship

D

Uncertainty about whether the issue is significant enough

E

Something else

Choose the one that most often gets in the way.

Recognize the Moment

A hard conversation often announces itself before we schedule it.

Unaddressed Thoughts

You keep thinking about it, but have not addressed it.

Behavioral Work-Arounds

You have started adjusting around someone's behavior.

Silent Frustration

You are frustrated that they "should know."

Indirect Mentions

You have hinted more than once, hoping it fixes itself.

Waiting is Not Neutral

When we avoid the conversation, we are still communicating.

THE EMPLOYEE HEARS:

“This must be okay.”

Because you haven't corrected it, they assume their performance, attendance, or behavior is perfectly acceptable.

THE TEAM HEARS:

“No one is going to address this.”

High performers lose motivation, and trust in leadership begins to decay when standards aren't upheld.

THE LEADER FEELS:

More frustrated every time it happens.

Avoidance breeds resentment. A small issue grows into a major frustration because it wasn't addressed early.

The Conversation Before the Conversation

Before you worry about the perfect words, get clear on four things:

1

What is actually happening?
Facts, patterns, and observable behavior.

2

What needs to change?
The specific behavior, expectation, or outcome.

3

What have I assumed?
What do I know, and what story have I built around it?

4

What am I avoiding?
The part I may soften, skip, or hope they infer.

Being Nice is Not the Same as Being Clear

Softening the message can feel considerate to us and confusing to the other person.

SOFTENED

“I just wanted to check in because there have been a few attendance things lately, and I know you have had a lot going on...”

Result: The employee hears empathy but misses the urgency and the standard expected of them.

CLEAR

“I want to talk about your attendance. You have been late four times in the past three weeks, and it is affecting our ability to start the shift fully staffed.”

Result: The employee knows exactly what the issue is, the objective impact, and that a shift is required.

Four Things to Get Clear On

Not a script. Four questions to help you avoid leaving the important part unsaid.

What I'm seeing
What is observable and specific?

Why it matters
What is the impact?

What I need
What needs to be different?

What do you see?
What information may I be missing?

Clarity first. Then conversation.

Listen Without Losing the Point

The conversation may change once the other person starts talking. The issue still matters.

01

Acknowledge

“I hear that the schedule change has been difficult.”
Show you heard them without giving up the standard.

02

Clarify

“Help me understand what has been getting in the way.”
Make room for information you may not have.

03

Return

“That context is helpful. We still need to address the attendance expectation going forward.”
Bring the conversation back to the issue and next step.

Listening is not the same as backing away from what needs to be addressed.

Scenario: The Behavior Everyone is Working Around

THE PATTERN:

A technically strong employee interrupts colleagues, dismisses ideas, and has become difficult for others to work with. No single incident feels "big enough," but the pattern is affecting the team.

Key Reflection Questions:

- What needs to be said?
- What would you be tempted to soften?
- What do you need to hear from them?

Possible Opening Statement:

"I want to talk about a pattern I've noticed in team discussions. Several times, colleagues have been interrupted or their ideas dismissed. Your expertise is valuable, and the way it is showing up is making it harder for others to contribute."

Not Every Hard Conversation is Corrective

THE SITUATION:

A previously strong employee has become quieter, slower to respond, and less reliable over the past month.

You could begin with a conclusion...

“Your performance has really slipped lately.”

Reaction: The employee gets defensive because you've judged them without seeking to understand.

...or begin with what you actually know:

“I’ve noticed a change over the past few weeks. You’ve missed two deadlines and have been much quieter in our team meetings. That’s different from what I’m used to seeing from you. What’s going on?”

Clear does not always mean corrective. Sometimes clarity creates room for curiosity.

Before You Schedule the Conversation

Take 60 seconds with the conversation you chose at the beginning:

The 60-Second Preparation:

- ✓ What is actually happening?
- ✓ What needs to change?
- ✓ What have I assumed?
- ✓ What am I avoiding?
- ✓ What is the first sentence you need to say?

One Last Question:

What conversation are you not having?

You do not need the perfect words.

You do need enough clarity to begin.

Thank you.

LET'S STAY CONNECTED

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