

SAY THE HARD THING

A Practical Checklist for Difficult Leadership Conversations

BEING NICE IS NOT THE SAME AS BEING CLEAR

"Being nice is not the same as being clear. Softening the message can feel considerate to us and confusing to the other person. You do not need the perfect words. You do need enough clarity to begin."

1. Recognize the Moment

A hard conversation often announces itself long before we schedule it. Use this checklist to notice when a conversation may already be overdue. Check all that apply:

- ☐ You keep thinking about the issue, but have not addressed it.
- ☐ You have started working around someone's behavior.
- ☐ You are frustrated that they "should know" what you expect.
- ☐ You have mentioned the issue indirectly more than once.
- ☐ Other people are beginning to feel the impact.
- ☐ You are hoping it will fix itself.

WAITING IS NOT NEUTRAL

When we avoid the conversation, we are still communicating. The employee hears: "This must be okay." The team hears: "No one is going to address this." The leader feels: more frustrated every time it happens.

2. The Conversation Before the Conversation

Before you worry about the perfect words, get clear on what is actually happening and what needs to be addressed. Use this space to prepare before you schedule or begin the conversation.

WHAT IS ACTUALLY HAPPENING?

Write down specific facts, patterns, and observable behavior. Keep assumptions and stories separate from what you actually know.

[Write your preparation notes here...]

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

What specific behavior, expectation, or outcome needs to be different?

[Write your preparation notes here...]

WHAT HAVE I ASSUMED?

Separate what you actually know from the story or motive you may have built around it.

[Write your preparation notes here...]

WHAT AM I AVOIDING?

Identify the part you are tempted to soften, skip, or hope they will infer.

[Write your preparation notes here...]

3. Four Things to Get Clear On

This is not a script. These four questions can help you avoid leaving the important part unsaid.

Question	What to consider	Your notes
What I'm Seeing	What is observable and specific?	<i>e.g., "You've been late four times in three weeks..."</i>
Why It Matters	What is the impact?	<i>e.g., "...and it is affecting our ability to start the shift staffed."</i>
What I Need	What needs to be different?	<i>e.g., "I need you to be at your station, ready to work, by 8:00 AM."</i>
What Do You See?	Make room for information you may not have.	<i>e.g., "Help me understand what's getting in the way."</i>

4. Being Nice is Not the Same as Being Clear

Compare the difference between softened and clear language. Notice how softening can make the issue or impact less clear.

Situation	Softened	Clear
Attendance	<i>"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..."</i>	"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."
Team Behavior	<i>"Everyone has some quirks, but we've had some friction in meetings lately so let's make sure we're keeping things constructive for the group..."</i>	"I want to talk about a pattern in team discussions. There have been several times when colleagues were interrupted or dismissed. It is making it harder for others to contribute."

5. Listen Without Losing the Point

Once the other person starts talking, the conversation may change. You can listen without backing away from what still needs to be addressed.

Step	What to do	Possible language
Acknowledge	Show that you heard them without immediately giving up the standard or expectation.	<i>"I hear that the schedule change has been difficult."</i>
Clarify	Ask a question that makes room for information you may not have.	<i>"Help me understand what has been getting in the way."</i>
Return	Return to the issue, expectation, or next step that still needs to be addressed.	<i>"That context is helpful. We still need to address the attendance expectation going forward."</i>

BEFORE YOU SCHEDULE THE CONVERSATION

Take 60 seconds with the conversation you have in mind:

- ☐ What is the single most objective fact I need to communicate?
- ☐ What specific change will represent success?
- ☐ Am I attributing any unverified motive or story to them?
- ☐ What is the very first sentence I need to say?