



## RYP Quarterly

# Difficult Conversations: How Credible Leaders Handle Them

By David Stewart



# RYP QUARTERLY

*Difficult conversations are the crucible of leadership. From performance issues to personal struggles, these moments test your clarity, courage, and care. Avoiding them breeds confusion and mistrust. This article unpacks the five toughest conversations leaders face, and how to handle them with honesty, empathy, and psychological safety.*

## INTRODUCTION:

If you lead a team, you know this truth: your success hinges not on how well you avoid hard conversations, but how effectively you handle them. Whether it's performance, behaviour, conflict, or mental health, these are the moments that test your leadership. And yet, avoiding them is common. Why? Because they're uncomfortable, emotionally loaded, and there's no script.

But difficult conversations don't have to destroy relationships or morale. Done well, they build trust, create clarity, and drive performance. This article outlines the most challenging conversations front-line leaders face, how to navigate them, and why psychological safety is the foundation for getting them right.

## THE 5 MOST DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS FRONT-LINE LEADERS FACE:

1. Addressing Underperformance
2. Tackling Behaviour That Affects Team Culture
3. Giving Feedback That Could Hurt
4. Discussing Mental Health or Personal Struggles
5. Communicating Redundancies or Contract Endings

Let's break them down:

### 1. Underperformance

- **Why it's hard:** You don't want to knock someone's confidence or spark conflict.
- **Why it matters:** When underperformance goes unaddressed, standards slide and morale dips.
- **How to handle it:** Be specific: focus on facts, not feelings. Be timely: don't let it fester. Start by asking what's going on, and what the person is seeing or feeling. Establish whether it is a commitment, confidence, or competence issue. Once this is established you can work on a plan together.

### 2. Unhelpful behaviour

- **Why it's hard:** Behaviour can feel personal. But ignoring poor behaviour silently endorses it.
- **Why it matters:** Culture is shaped by what leaders allow.
- **How to handle it:** Stay calm. Start by asking how a person is, as there maybe something in the background that is going on. Describe what you've observed. If this is a repeated behaviour, talk about impact on others or the team. Name the behaviour you want to see. Agree an action. Call out and applaud the right behaviours when you see it.

### **3. Giving feedback that might sting**

- **Why it's hard:** You don't want to hurt someone or get a defensive response.
- **Why it matters:** Honest feedback helps people grow. Without it, they get stuck or blindsided later.
- **How to handle it:** Start by framing the conversation on the topic. Ask permission to discuss the matter and provide them with some feedback. Be direct, but kind. Ask how they would self-assess their performance. Explore options to address the issue. End with encouragement.

### **4. Mental health or personal struggles**

- **Why it's hard:** You may not feel qualified. You're not a counsellor.
- **Why it matters:** If someone's struggling, the right support can make all the difference and builds lasting trust.
- **How to handle it:** Check in without prying. Listen more than you speak. Refer them to appropriate support if needed (familiarise yourself with what is available locally) and of course maintain privacy.

### **5. Ending Employment**

- **Why it's hard:** It impacts someone's life. There may be emotion, shock, even anger.
- **Why it matters:** People deserve clarity and dignity, even when the news is tough.
- **How to handle it:** Prepare and be honest. Speak directly, but with compassion. Explain the "why" if you can. Offer support and space for them to process. Offer professional "outplacement" services. If possible, avoid doing on a Friday, give a person the courtesy of processing their bad news during the week, then being able to share the news with their family, and say goodbye to colleagues.

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY: THE BEDROCK OF HARD CONVERSATIONS**

If people fear being judged, embarrassed or punished, they'll shut down or shut you out. That's why psychological safety is essential. Psychological safety is about creating an environment where people feel safe to speak up, admit to making mistakes, ask for help, and receive feedback without fear of humiliation or punishment. Without a sense of psychological safety, difficult conversations feel like attacks.

### **You Build Psychological Safety By:**

- **Being consistent.** Say what you mean and follow through.
- **Admitting mistakes.** Model humility.
- **Welcoming feedback.** Show you can take what you dish out.
- **Creating space.** Don't rush hard conversations. Allow emotion.
- **Being respectful.** Treat all people respectfully. Respect works two-ways.

**When people feel safe, they're more likely to receive tough feedback in the spirit it's intended, for growth and improvement, not punishment.**

## HERE'S THE TRUTH ON WHAT MOST LEADERS MISS:

They think avoiding hard conversations is being "nice." But avoiding hard conversations makes you unclear. An unclear leader lacks clarity not kindness. It breeds confusion, resentment, and a climate of mediocrity. Credible leaders have an ability to be clear and direct without losing empathy. The best leaders combine **directness with care**. They say what needs to be said, early and clearly, but always from a place of respect and belief in the person's value.

***When your team knows you'll be honest with them, and that you'll do it with their dignity in mind, you earn something crucial.... trust.***

## A FIVE STEPPED APPROACH TO A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION:

1. ASK 3 Questions
2. Check Yourself
3. Plan & Approach with a Neutral Mindset
4. Explore Their Story & Yours
5. Problem Solve to Move Forward

1	<b>Ask 3 Questions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Is the person's behaviour / attitude affecting team dynamics</li> <li>2. Is the person's performance affecting performance</li> <li>3. Is their attitude &amp; behaviour acceptable</li> </ul> <p>Be clear on what the issue to address is</p>
2	<b>Check Yourself</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decide if you will have the conversation or just ignore it</li> <li>• If either party angry defer and make for a future time</li> <li>• Seek feedback from trusted colleagues for their perspective</li> <li>• Be clear on their and your reality (lived experience)</li> </ul>
3	<b>Plan &amp; Approach</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a normal conversation – not a difficult conversation</li> <li>• Scenario plan – be flexible – not with a fixed outcome mindset</li> <li>• Treat a difficult conversation as an honest two-way discussion</li> <li>• Decide where and when to have the conversation</li> </ul>
4	<b>Explore Two Sides</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start conversation with a positive mindset and tone of voice</li> <li>• Frame the conversation then actively listen to understand</li> <li>• First, hear their story, thoughts and observations</li> <li>• Then, share your story with context</li> </ul>
5	<b>Problem Solve</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be Flexible &amp; look for options</li> <li>• What will they commit to doing</li> <li>• What will you commit to doing</li> <li>• Are they committed and on the same page going forward?</li> </ul>

## SOME GOLDEN RULES FOR LEADERS:

As a leader, it is important to ensure you are the “adult in the room” when having a difficult conversation with someone. The key is to:

1. Listen to understand – not listen to reply
2. Keep your emotions in check, and ask more questions

### Don't treat or flag a difficult conversation as a “Difficult Conversation”

Instead, treat it as a normal conversation. Be professional, safe, courteous, polite, considered, respectful, yet direct.

As the Leader you are responsible for:

1. Framing the conversation
2. Setting the right tone & context
3. Ensuring the discussion is two-way, and fair
4. The conversation is free of wild accusations
5. Sticking to facts and lived experiences
6. Keeping emotions in check
7. Seeking to understand everyone's perspective

## SOME DO'S AND DON'TS

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Act quickly (be a credible Leader)</li> <li>• Treat difficult conversations as normal</li> <li>• Keep even tempered &amp; respectful</li> <li>• Actively Listen to understand</li> <li>• Ask questions and encourage 2-way dialogue</li> <li>• Take care of yourself after conversation</li> <li>• Coach trusted colleagues to reaffirm key messages</li> <li>• Breathe during conversation - relax</li> <li>• Slow the conversation down</li> <li>• Plan for the conversation, but be flexible</li> <li>• Be compassionate &amp; constructive</li> <li>• Start conversation “neutral”</li> <li>• Create a neutral &amp; comfortable setting (not behind your desk)</li> <li>• Be firm and direct on what is acceptable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Put off, defer, ignore (it only gets worse)</li> <li>• Be scared to have – they are quite normal</li> <li>• Assume tough talk – just fuels emotions</li> <li>• Listen to Reply</li> <li>• Talk over person</li> <li>• Assume the person is OK</li> <li>• Gossip to others about the conversation</li> <li>• Be all steamed up – wanting to get things off your chest</li> <li>• Talk quickly – raise your voice – be short</li> <li>• Script conversation or have a fixed outcome</li> <li>• Play the victim “this is hard for me”</li> <li>• Start conversation as a “Difficult Conversation”</li> <li>• Sit behind desk, or assume a “my way or highway” superior attitude</li> <li>• Beat around the bush on direct speak</li> </ul>

If you're a leader, these moments *are* your job. They are uncomfortable, but they are also the gateway to high performance, a strong and respectful culture. Don't wait for perfect words or ideal timing. Start the conversation. Be real, be kind, be clear. The measure of your leadership isn't how well you avoid discomfort; it's how well you handle it when it shows up.

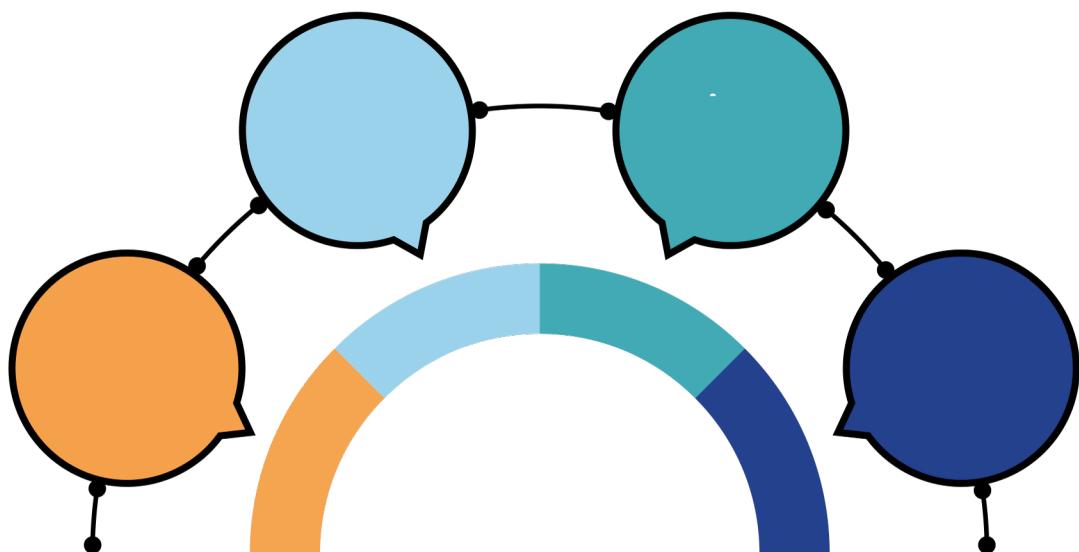
## **Leadership Lesson:**

***Failing to Act is a Failure to Lead***

***If you put off a difficult conversation – there is always a ripple effect***

*This will be at the cost of team chemistry, which creates team dysfunction, which always results in an impact on the mental health and motivation of others.*

## **Facta Non-Verba – Deeds Not Words**



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