

# DEATH OF DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

## Leadership Toolkit

*10 Practical Tools for Critical Thinking, Accountability,  
and Hard Conversations*

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Companion resource to The Death of Difficult Conversations:  
Critical Thinking, Conflict Avoidance, and the Erosion of Accountability

## How to Use This Toolkit

These tools are designed for use before, during, and after the conversations leaders are most tempted to avoid.

The book argues that discomfort is not the enemy of effective leadership. Avoidance, artificial agreement, unchecked assumptions, passive communication, and delayed accountability are. These job aids turn those ideas into repeatable leadership practices.

- Use the tool that fits the leadership problem; do not complete forms for the sake of completing forms.
- Write facts and observable behavior before interpretations or labels.
- Use questions to improve thinking, not to trap the other person.
- Address issues while they are still small enough to solve.
- Separate the person from the idea, behavior, or performance issue.
- End difficult conversations with clear expectations, ownership, and follow-up.

## The 10 Tools

1. Discomfort & Avoidance Diagnostic
2. Facts, Feelings & Assumptions Worksheet
3. Respectful Dissent / Groupthink Check
4. Think Beyond the Checklist Decision Aid
5. Hard Conversation Planner
6. Accountability Conversation Planner
7. Direct Without Cruelty Communication Guide
8. Emotional Control Reset
9. Early Intervention & Follow-Up Tracker
10. Clear Thinking Decision Worksheet

# 1. Discomfort & Avoidance Diagnostic

Use when a problem is being discussed around, delayed, softened, or repeatedly deferred.

Issue or conversation being avoided:

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| Statement                                                             | 1<br>Strongly<br>Disagree | 2                        | 3                        | 4                        | 5<br>Strongly<br>Agree   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| I can state the real issue in one sentence without softening it.      | <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| We have discussed the issue directly with the person involved.        | <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| People can disagree openly without being punished or embarrassed.     | <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Silence in the room reflects genuine agreement rather than fear.      | <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| We are addressing the problem early rather than waiting for a crisis. | <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I am seeking the best answer rather than protecting my position.      | <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

What are we afraid might happen if we address this directly?

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What is already happening because we have not addressed it?

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The conversation that needs to happen is:

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Who needs to initiate it, and by when?

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## 2. Facts, Feelings & Assumptions Worksheet

Use before reacting to a difficult event, complaint, conflict, or emotionally charged decision.

| FACTS<br>What can be verified? | FEELINGS<br>What am I experiencing? | ASSUMPTIONS<br>What am I adding to the story? |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
|                                |                                     |                                               |
|                                |                                     |                                               |
|                                |                                     |                                               |
|                                |                                     |                                               |
|                                |                                     |                                               |

### Critical-thinking check

- What information is missing?
- What would change my conclusion?
- Am I treating emotional certainty as evidence?
- Have I heard the other perspective?
- What is the strongest reasonable alternative explanation?

What do I know now that I did not know at the start?

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What should I do next based on evidence rather than reaction?

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### 3. Respectful Dissent / Groupthink Check

Use in meetings when agreement is arriving too quickly or when one viewpoint is dominating the room.

Before making the decision, ask the room:

- What are we missing?
- Who sees this differently?
- What could make this fail?
- What assumption are we treating as fact?
- What would someone outside this room challenge?
- What are we reluctant to say because it may be unpopular?

| Statement                                                            | 1<br>Strongly<br>Disagree | 2                        | 3                        | 4                        | 5<br>Strongly<br>Agree   |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Quieter participants were invited into the discussion.               | <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| A minority viewpoint was heard without ridicule or pile-on behavior. | <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| People challenged ideas rather than the people presenting them.      | <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| The leader did not signal a preferred answer before discussion.      | <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| At least one meaningful risk or counterargument was examined.        | <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I am seeking the best answer rather than protecting my position.     | <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Best argument against the current direction

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What did dissent improve, expose, or change?

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Decision and rationale

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## 4. Think Beyond the Checklist Decision Aid

Use when policy, procedure, or a form gives structure but doesn't fully answer what should happen  
Decision or situation

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|                                                         |  |
|---------------------------------------------------------|--|
| What does policy/process require?                       |  |
| What is the purpose behind that requirement?            |  |
| What outcome are we actually trying to achieve?         |  |
| What information does the process not capture?          |  |
| What changed after the first answer or new information? |  |
| Where is professional judgment required?                |  |

- I can explain the reasoning, not just the rule.
- I followed unexpected information rather than forcing it into the script.
- I considered outcomes, not just completion.
- I know where my authority ends and escalation is required.

Decision / next action and why

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## 5. Hard Conversation Planner

Use before a conversation you are tempted to postpone. The goal is clarity, dignity, and early resolution.

Person / issue

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Why does this conversation need to happen now?

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Observable facts or behavior — no labels, motives, or character judgments

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Impact on the work, team, client, outcome, or relationship

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What do I need to understand from the other person?

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### Questions I should ask

- How do you see the situation?
- What am I missing?
- What happened from your perspective?
- What obstacles or circumstances should I understand?
- What do you think needs to happen next?

### The clearest opening sentence I can use

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### What I need to say even if it creates discomfort

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### Desired outcome / agreement

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### Follow-up date

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## 6. Accountability Conversation Planner

Use for performance or behavior issues. Correct behavior, preserve dignity, clarify the standard, and give the person a real opportunity to improve.

Employee / date / issue

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|                                        |  |
|----------------------------------------|--|
| Observable behavior or performance gap |  |
| Expected standard                      |  |
| Impact of the gap                      |  |
| Prior coaching / support provided      |  |

Conversation sequence

- State the specific behavior or result.
- Explain the standard and why it matters.
- Ask for the employee's perspective.
- Separate questions from resistance; clarify misunderstandings.
- Identify support, training, resources, or barriers.
- Define what success looks like next time.
- Set a measurable follow-up date.
- Document the coaching accurately.

Employee perspective / information learned

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What will success look like next time?

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Support I will provide

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Commitment, measure, and follow-up date

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## 7. Direct Without Cruelty Communication Guide

Use to prepare direct messages during conflict, crisis, correction, or uncertainty.

### Build the message in five parts:

|                                                                      |  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| 1. WHAT I KNOW<br>Verified facts only.                               |  |
| 2. WHAT I DO NOT KNOW<br>State uncertainty instead of filling gaps.  |  |
| 3. WHAT IT MEANS<br>Explain impact and context without exaggeration. |  |
| 4. WHAT HAPPENS NEXT<br>Action, owner, timing, or next update.       |  |
| 5. WHAT I NEED FROM YOU<br>Clear expectation or request.             |  |

### Tone check

- Direct, not vague
- Specific, not personal
- Calm, not performative
- Accurate, not speculative
- Respectful, not softened into meaninglessness
- Clear about uncertainty where uncertainty exists

### Final message / talking points

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## 8. Emotional Control Reset

Use before sending the email, making the decision, confronting the person, or responding while emotionally activated.

What happened?

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What emotion am I experiencing, and how intense is it (1–10)?

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### RESET

|                                                                                          |  |
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| <b>R — Recognize</b><br>Name the emotion without denying it.                             |  |
| <b>E — Evidence</b><br>What facts are actually established?                              |  |
| <b>S — Separate</b><br>What assumptions, motives, or predictions am I adding?            |  |
| <b>E — Evaluate</b><br>What are the consequences if my first conclusion is wrong?        |  |
| <b>T — Take deliberate action</b><br>What response best serves the principle or outcome? |  |

- This decision can wait until the emotional spike passes.
- I can disagree without escalating.
- I can feel strongly and still think slowly.
- I am anchored to principle rather than impulse.

My deliberate response

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## 9. Early Intervention & Follow-Up Tracker

Use to prevent small performance, communication, or behavior problems from becoming formal crises.

| Issue / Date | Expected Standard | Conversation Held | Employee Commitment | Leader Support | Follow-Up / Result |
|--------------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------|----------------|--------------------|
|              |                   |                   |                     |                |                    |
|              |                   |                   |                     |                |                    |
|              |                   |                   |                     |                |                    |
|              |                   |                   |                     |                |                    |
|              |                   |                   |                     |                |                    |
|              |                   |                   |                     |                |                    |

### Follow-up questions

- Did the employee know there was a problem early enough to correct it?
- Was the expectation specific and measurable?
- Did I provide support rather than secretly build a case?
- Did I follow up when I said I would?
- Am I measuring the mission/outcome, not merely activity?

### Pattern or escalation decision

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## 10. Clear Thinking Decision Worksheet

Use for consequential decisions where emotion, incomplete information, competing narratives, or organizational pressure may distort judgment.

Decision to be made

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|                                              |  |
|----------------------------------------------|--|
| What happened before the problem?            |  |
| What facts are verified?                     |  |
| What information is missing?                 |  |
| What sources have I verified?                |  |
| What patterns or contributing factors exist? |  |
| What perspectives differ from mine?          |  |
| What are the consequences if I am wrong?     |  |
| What outcome matters most?                   |  |

## Decision discipline

- I sought understanding before assigning blame.
- I separated emotion from evidence.
- I considered more than one contributing factor.
- I listened before speaking.
- I did not confuse activity with effectiveness.
- I am willing to make the decision and learn from the result.

## Decision

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## Rationale

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## What would cause me to revisit this decision?

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## Review date / result

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## Leadership Commitment

Difficult conversations become easier to avoid when nobody decides in advance what good leadership requires.

The conversation I have been avoiding is:

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The assumption I need to challenge is:

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The accountability issue I need to address earlier is:

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The leadership behavior I will change first is:

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I will act by:

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*Discomfort is not always a sign that something is wrong. Sometimes it is a sign that something important is going on.*