

DEATH OF DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Toolkit User Guide

*A Practical Guide to Choosing, Combining, and Using the 10
Leadership Tools*

Companion to The Death of Difficult Conversations Leadership Toolkit

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How to Use This Guide

The Leadership Toolkit is not a workbook that should be completed from beginning to end. It is a set of decision, conversation, and accountability tools to use when a specific leadership problem appears. This guide helps you identify the right tool, complete it with discipline, combine tools when the situation requires more than one step, and convert the worksheet into an actual conversation, decision, action, or follow-up.

Leadership Toolkit, How to Use This Toolkit and The 10 Tools (p. 3)

THE OPERATING RULE

Start with the leadership problem, not the worksheet. Use the smallest number of tools necessary to improve your thinking and produce a better leadership response.

Before You Write Anything

- Describe observable behavior before assigning motives, labels, or character judgments.
- Distinguish what is verified from what you believe, fear, predict, or infer.
- Use questions to learn, not to corner the other person into agreeing with you.
- Do not confuse discomfort with danger. Some necessary leadership conversations are uncomfortable by definition.
- End the process with ownership and timing. If nobody knows who will do what by when, the worksheet did not finish the work.

Start With the Problem, Not the Tool

If the leadership problem is...	Start with...	Often follow with...
I know a conversation is being avoided.	Tool 1: Discomfort & Avoidance Diagnostic	Tool 5: Hard Conversation Planner
I am emotionally certain about what happened.	Tool 2: Facts, Feelings & Assumptions	Tool 8 or Tool 10
The group agrees too quickly or one voice dominates.	Tool 3: Respectful Dissent / Groupthink Check	Tool 10: Clear Thinking Decision Worksheet
Policy gives structure but not a complete answer.	Tool 4: Think Beyond the Checklist	Tool 10 if the decision is consequential
I need to prepare for a difficult conversation.	Tool 5: Hard Conversation Planner	Tool 6 or Tool 9 if accountability is involved

Performance or behavior is below an established standard.	Tool 6: Accountability Conversation Planner	Tool 9: Early Intervention & Follow-Up Tracker
I need to deliver difficult information clearly.	Tool 7: Direct Without Cruelty	Tool 5 if dialogue is also required
I am too activated to respond well.	Tool 8: Emotional Control Reset	Tool 2, 5, or 10 after the reset
Small concerns keep recurring.	Tool 9: Early Intervention & Follow-Up Tracker	Tool 6 if escalation is needed
The decision is consequential and information is incomplete.	Tool 10: Clear Thinking Decision Worksheet	Tool 3 or Tool 4 when relevant

How the Tools Work Together

Many leadership problems are not one-step problems. Use these common pathways as a guide, not as a mandatory sequence.

AVOIDED PERFORMANCE ISSUE

Tool 1 → Tool 2 → Tool 5 → Tool 6 → Tool 9

Name the avoidance, separate evidence from assumptions, prepare the conversation, establish accountability, then follow through.

EMOTIONALLY CHARGED COMPLAINT

Tool 8 → Tool 2 → Tool 10

Regulate the immediate response, establish what is actually known, then make a defensible decision.

HIGH-STAKES TEAM DECISION

Tool 3 → Tool 4 → Tool 10

Create dissent, test whether process is enough, then document the reasoning and revisit criteria.

DIFFICULT ORGANIZATIONAL MESSAGE

Tool 2 → Tool 7 → Tool 5

Clarify facts and uncertainty, build the message, then prepare for the two-way conversation that follows.

1. Discomfort & Avoidance Diagnostic

Leadership Toolkit, Tool 1: Discomfort & Avoidance Diagnostic (pp. 4–6)

Use This When

Use this when an issue is repeatedly delayed, softened, redirected, discussed around, or discussed with everyone except the person who can address it.

What This Tool Is Really Testing

The tool tests whether the obstacle is really lack of information or whether discomfort, fear of conflict, fear of consequences, or position-protection is driving delay.

How to Work Through It

1. Write the real issue in one sentence. If your sentence is vague, rewrite it until another leader could understand the problem without additional explanation.
2. Rate the statements based on current behavior, not intention. A leader who plans to address an issue 'soon' is still avoiding it today.
3. Answer both cost questions: what you fear will happen if you address the issue and what is already happening because you have not.
4. Name the conversation, the person who must initiate it, and a specific deadline.

EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE

A supervisor has missed documentation deadlines three times. The manager has reminded the entire team about timeliness rather than addressing the supervisor directly. The feared cost is damaging the relationship. The actual cost of avoidance is growing resentment, inconsistent standards, and continued late work.

Common Mistakes

- Using a team-wide reminder to avoid an individual conversation.
- Writing a symptom instead of the actual issue or
- Leaving the final action without an owner or date.
- Treating a future intention as evidence that the issue is being addressed.

What Good Looks Like

You can state the issue plainly, explain the cost of continued avoidance, and identify exactly who will have the conversation and when.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Move to Tool 5 when the conversation needs preparation. If the issue involves a clear performance or behavior standard, use Tool 6 after you have clarified the problem.

2. Facts, Feelings & Assumptions Worksheet

Leadership Toolkit, Tool 2: Facts, Feelings & Assumptions Worksheet (pp. 7–8)

Use This When

Use this before reacting to a complaint, conflict, disappointing result, accusation, or event that produces a strong emotional interpretation.

What This Tool Is Really Testing

The tool tests whether emotional certainty or a plausible story has quietly become evidence.

How to Work Through It

1. Put only verifiable information in Facts. If a neutral third party could not confirm it, reconsider where it belongs.
2. Name the emotional response without arguing with it. Feelings matter because they influence interpretation and behavior.
3. Put motives, predictions, explanations, and unverified conclusions in Assumptions.
4. Use the critical-thinking questions to identify missing information, competing explanations, and the other perspective.
5. Decide what additional information or conversation is necessary before acting.

EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE

An employee goes to HR after a disagreement with a supervisor. Work the worksheet this way:

FACTS:

The employee contacted HR after the disagreement. The supervisor and employee disagreed during the meeting.

FEELINGS:

The supervisor feels angry, exposed, and undermined.

ASSUMPTIONS:

'The employee is trying to get me in trouble' and 'Going to HR means the employee is acting in bad faith.'

WHAT IS STILL UNKNOWN:

What the employee reported, why the employee went to HR, whether the employee first attempted to resolve the concern directly, and what HR has actually concluded.

NEXT STEP:

Do not retaliate or make a performance decision based on motive. Gather the missing information, hear the employee's perspective, and then determine whether a leadership response is necessary.

The value of the worksheet is not that it eliminates emotion. It prevents an emotionally convincing story from quietly becoming evidence.

Do Not Use This Tool To

Do not use this worksheet to prove that your interpretation is wrong, suppress a legitimate emotional response, or create artificial neutrality. Its purpose is narrower: keep emotion and inference from being mislabeled as evidence so you can decide what still needs to be learned.

Common Mistakes

- Writing interpretations in the Facts column.
- Suppressing an emotion instead of identifying it.
- Assuming that a strong feeling proves a strong conclusion.
- Asking only for information that confirms the first story.

What Good Looks Like

You know what is established, what is emotional reaction, what is inference, and what you still need to learn.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

If emotional intensity remains high, use Tool 8. If the information is sufficient and a consequential decision remains, use Tool 10.

3. Respectful Dissent / Groupthink Check

Leadership Toolkit, Tool 3: Respectful Dissent / Groupthink Check (pp. 8–9)

Use This When

Use this when agreement arrives quickly, one person dominates, dissent disappears, or the stakes are high enough that the preferred answer should be challenged.

What This Tool Is Really Testing

The tool tests the quality of the decision process, not whether the group ultimately agrees.

How to Work Through It

1. Ask the dissent questions before the decision is finalized.
2. Invite quieter participants before senior or dominant voices repeat their positions.
3. Require at least one credible counterargument or failure scenario.
4. Separate criticism of the idea from criticism of the person presenting it.
5. Document what dissent changed, exposed, or strengthened and why the final decision survived or changed.

EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE

A leadership team immediately supports a restructuring proposal after the executive leading the meeting announces that it is the 'obvious' solution. The group pauses, invites independent views, identifies a staffing risk nobody had raised, and modifies the implementation plan.

Common Mistakes

- Announcing your preferred answer before asking for input.
- Treating silence as agreement.
- Inviting dissent after the decision is effectively made.
- Rewarding agreement and subtly punishing challenge.

What Good Looks Like

The strongest opposing view is visible in the record, participants were able to challenge the idea safely, and the final decision is stronger because it was tested.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Use Tool 10 for the final consequential decision. Use Tool 4 when policy or standard process is constraining the discussion.

4. Think Beyond the Checklist Decision Aid

Leadership Toolkit, Tool 4: Think Beyond the Checklist Decision Aid (pp. 10–11)

Use This When

Use this when a policy, procedure, metric, form, or standard process provides structure but does not fully answer what should happen.

What This Tool Is Really Testing

The tool tests whether the leader understands the purpose behind the rule and can distinguish procedural compliance from thoughtful professional judgment.

How to Work Through It

1. State exactly what policy or process requires.
2. Identify why that requirement exists and the outcome it is designed to protect.
3. Identify information the process does not capture.
4. Ask what changed after the initial answer or what new information matters.
5. Define where professional judgment is appropriate, where authority ends, or where escalation is needed.
6. Document the decision and why it remains consistent with the intended outcome.

EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE

A checklist indicates that all required steps were completed, but new information changes the risk picture. Rather than treating completion as proof that the matter is resolved, the leader identifies the purpose of the process, evaluates the new information, and escalates where authority requires it.

Common Mistakes

- Using 'policy says' as a substitute for reasoning.
- Ignoring policy because professional judgment feels more appropriate.
- Forcing new information into the original answer.
- Failing to recognize when the decision exceeds your authority.

What Good Looks Like

You can explain both the applicable requirement and the reasoning that connects your decision to the intended outcome.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

For high-consequence decisions, move to Tool 10. If the decision is being made by a group, Tool 3 can test the reasoning before finalization.

5. Hard Conversation Planner

Leadership Toolkit, Tool 5: Hard Conversation Planner (pp. 11–14)

Use This When

Use this before a conversation you are tempted to postpone, especially when the issue is sensitive, relational, or likely to create defensiveness.

What This Tool Is Really Testing

The tool tests whether you can be clear without becoming accusatory and curious without becoming vague.

How to Work Through It

1. Define why the conversation needs to happen now.
2. Write observable facts or behavior without labels, motives, or character judgments.
3. State the impact on the work, team, client, outcome, or relationship.
4. Identify what you genuinely need to understand from the other person.
5. Prepare several questions and a clear opening sentence.
6. Write the message you must say even if it creates discomfort.
7. Define the desired outcome and a follow-up date.

EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE

A leader is concerned about an employee's conduct in team meetings. Instead of opening with 'Your attitude has become a problem,' work the planner:

WHY NOW: The behavior has occurred in three meetings and is beginning to affect participation and follow-through.

OBSERVABLE FACTS: The employee interrupted colleagues repeatedly and left before action items were assigned.

IMPACT: Other team members stopped contributing and responsibilities were unclear after the meetings.

WHAT I NEED TO UNDERSTAND: What is driving the behavior? Is there context I do not know?

OPENING: 'I want to talk about three recent team meetings in which you interrupted colleagues and left before action items were assigned. I want to understand what is happening and discuss the effect it is having on the team.'

QUESTIONS: 'What is your perspective?' 'Is something making these meetings difficult for you?' 'What do you think needs to change?'

DESIRED OUTCOME: A direct conversation, a clear expectation for meeting behavior, and a specific follow-up point.

-The planner prepares the leader to say the difficult part clearly without deciding the employee's explanation in advance.

Do Not Use This Tool To

Do not use the planner to script the other person's response, build a prosecution case, or rehearse a speech you intend to deliver regardless of what you hear. Preparation should increase clarity while preserving genuine curiosity.

Common Mistakes

- Opening with a label such as 'negative,' 'unprofessional,' or 'difficult.'
- Over-rehearsing a speech and leaving no room to listen.
- Softening the opening so much that the person cannot identify the issue.
- Entering the conversation without a desired outcome or follow-up.

What Good Looks Like

The other person understands why the conversation is happening, has room to provide information, and leaves knowing what was discussed and what happens next.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT - If the conversation establishes or corrects a performance standard, continue with Tool 6. Use Tool 9 to ensure the issue does not disappear after the meeting.

6. Accountability Conversation Planner

Leadership Toolkit, Tool 6: Accountability Conversation Planner (pp. 15–16)

Use This When

Use this when behavior or performance is not meeting an established expectation and correction is needed.

What This Tool Is Really Testing

The tool tests whether accountability is specific, fair, measurable, and paired with a genuine opportunity to improve.

How to Work Through It

1. Define the observable performance or behavior gap and the expected standard.
2. Describe the impact of the gap and any prior coaching or support.
3. State the issue and standard clearly, then ask for the employee's perspective.
4. Distinguish legitimate questions or barriers from resistance without assuming in advance.
5. Identify support, training, resources, or barriers that should be addressed.
6. Define what success will look like next time in observable terms.
7. Set the measure and follow-up date and document the coaching accurately.

EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE

'Communicate better' is not an accountability standard. Work the planner until the expectation becomes observable:

PERFORMANCE GAP:

Client calls are not consistently returned or documented within the required timeframe.

EXPECTED STANDARD:

Beginning Monday, return client calls within one business day and document the contact the same day.

IMPACT:

Delayed responses create service gaps and make it difficult for the team to know whether client needs were addressed.

EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE:

Ask what is contributing to the missed standard before deciding whether the problem is skill, workload, clarity, or follow-through.

SUPPORT:

Clarify priorities, provide any needed training, and remove a verified barrier where appropriate.

EMPLOYEE RESPONSIBILITY:

Meet the stated response and documentation standard consistently.

MEASURE AND FOLLOW-UP:

Review the next two weeks of calls on the agreed date.

Both sides should leave knowing exactly what improvement means, what support will be provided, and when the result will be reviewed.

Do Not Use This Tool To

Do not use this tool to manufacture a performance problem, bypass required HR or organizational procedures, or disguise a predetermined punishment as coaching. Accountability should begin with a legitimate standard, observable evidence, and a fair opportunity to respond and improve.

Common Mistakes

- Using vague expectations or Failing to follow up on the date promised.
- Turning the conversation into punishment rather than correction.
- Ignoring information learned from the employee.
- Offering support without defining the employee's responsibility.

What Good Looks Like

Both parties can state the expected behavior, how improvement will be measured, what support is available, and when progress will be reviewed.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT - Record the commitment in Tool 9. If the conversation itself is likely to be difficult, prepare with Tool 5 first.

7. Direct Without Cruelty Communication Guide

Leadership Toolkit, Tool 7: Direct Without Cruelty Communication Guide (pp. 17–18)

Use This When

Use this to prepare difficult messages during conflict, crisis, correction, uncertainty, or organizational disruption.

What This Tool Is Really Testing

The tool tests whether the message is direct, accurate, calm, specific, and honest about uncertainty.

How to Work Through It

1. Write only verified information under What I Know.
2. State uncertainty explicitly under What I Do Not Know rather than filling the gap with speculation.
3. Explain what the information means without exaggerating its impact.
4. State what happens next, including action, owner, timing, or the next update.
5. State clearly what you need from the other person.
6. Run the final message through the tone check before delivering it.

EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE

During an organizational change, a leader says what has been decided, what has not yet been decided, when the next update will occur, and what employees should do in the meantime. The leader does not use false reassurance or speculate about decisions that have not been made.

Common Mistakes

- Using vague language to avoid discomfort.
- Sounding harsh in the name of being 'direct.'
- Presenting predictions as facts.
- Overpromising certainty to make people feel better.
- Leaving the audience unsure what happens next.

What Good Looks Like

The message is concise enough to understand, complete enough to act on, and respectful without being softened into meaninglessness.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT - If the message requires dialogue rather than one-way communication, use Tool 5. If emotion is distorting the draft, use Tool 8 before sending it.

8. Emotional Control Reset

Leadership Toolkit, Tool 8: Emotional Control Reset (pp. 18–19)

Use This When

Use this before sending an email, confronting someone, imposing discipline, or making a decision while emotionally activated.

What This Tool Is Really Testing

Tool tests whether you can acknowledge emotion without allowing the emotional spike to make the decision.

How to Work Through It

1. Recognize the emotion without minimizing or justifying it.
2. Identify the evidence that is actually established.
3. Separate assumptions, motives, and predictions from that evidence.
4. Evaluate the consequences if your first conclusion is wrong.
5. Choose the response that best serves the principle or outcome rather than the impulse.

EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE

A leader receives an email that feels disrespectful and begins drafting a sharp reply. At an emotional intensity of 8, the leader pauses, identifies the verified content of the email, recognizes the assumptions being made about intent, and waits before responding. The eventual reply addresses the issue without escalating the conflict.

Do Not Use This Tool To

Do not use RESET to avoid a necessary decision or postpone a difficult conversation indefinitely. The pause is for regulation and clearer judgment. Once you can respond proportionately, move back into the leadership work.

Common Mistakes

- Using RESET to convince yourself that you should not be upset.
- Sending the response while still highly activated because the facts seem obvious.
- Using delay as permanent avoidance rather than temporary regulation.

What Good Looks Like

You can explain the response later, after the emotional intensity has passed.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT - Use Tool 2 to sort facts from assumptions. Use Tool 5 for the conversation or Tool 10 if a significant decision remains.

9. Early Intervention & Follow-Up Tracker

Leadership Toolkit, Tool 9: Early Intervention & Follow-Up Tracker (pp. 19–20)

Use This When

Use this when small performance, behavior, or communication concerns are appearing and need timely coaching before they become formal crises.

What This Tool Is Really Testing

The tool tests whether leaders address concerns early, communicate expectations clearly, provide support, and actually follow up.

How to Work Through It

1. Record the issue and date when it is addressed, not weeks later.
2. State the expected standard in observable terms.
3. Record that the conversation occurred and the employee's commitment.
4. Record the support the leader agreed to provide.
5. Return to the issue on the promised follow-up date and document the result.
6. Look across entries for patterns before deciding whether escalation is necessary.

EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE

An employee misses one required deadline. The supervisor addresses it promptly, clarifies the standard, identifies a workload barrier, agrees on support, and follows up the next week. A second occurrence is no longer treated as an isolated surprise because the earlier coaching is visible.

Common Mistakes

- Waiting until several small concerns become one large complaint.
- Secretly building a case instead of coaching the employee.
- Recording activity without recording the expected outcome.
- Failing to provide promised support.
- Missing the follow-up date.

What Good Looks Like

The record shows timely coaching, clear expectations, leader support, employee commitments, and whether the pattern improved or requires escalation.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT - If the pattern continues or the standard is not met, move to Tool 6 for a more formal accountability conversation.

10. Clear Thinking Decision Worksheet

Leadership Toolkit, Tool 10: Clear Thinking Decision Worksheet (pp. 21–23)

Use This When

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

What This Tool Is Really Testing

The tool tests whether the decision is evidence-based, considers competing perspectives and consequences, and remains open to revision when new information appears.

How to Work Through It

1. Define the decision precisely.
2. Establish what happened before the immediate problem and what facts are verified.
3. Identify missing information and the sources you have actually checked.
4. Look for patterns, contributing factors, and perspectives that differ from yours.
5. Ask what happens if your conclusion is wrong and what outcome matters most.
6. Make the decision and document the rationale.
7. Identify the information or result that would cause you to revisit the decision and set a review point when appropriate.

EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE

Two credible employees provide conflicting accounts of an incident. Work the decision worksheet rather than choosing the more confident or familiar person:

DECISION:

Determine what organizational response, if any, is justified by the available evidence.

VERIFIED FACTS:

Both employees were present; their accounts conflict; the incident occurred during the identified meeting.

MISSING INFORMATION:

Exact statements, sequence of events, relevant context, and whether anyone else directly observed the interaction.

SOURCES TO CHECK:

Witnesses, contemporaneous emails or messages, meeting notes, and other records that can corroborate timing or content.

COMPETING EXPLANATIONS:

Misunderstanding, different perceptions of the same exchange, incomplete recollection, or intentional misconduct.

IF THE CONCLUSION IS WRONG:

One employee could be unfairly disciplined, or legitimate misconduct could go unaddressed.

DECISION STANDARD:

Choose the response supported by the strongest verified evidence, acknowledge remaining uncertainty, and document the rationale.

REVISIT IF:

New corroborating evidence, a credible witness, or additional documentation materially changes the factual picture.

The goal is not certainty at any cost. It is a decision whose evidence, reasoning, uncertainty, and reconsideration criteria can be explained later.

Do Not Use This Tool To

Do not use the worksheet to create paperwork that makes a predetermined decision look objective. If contrary evidence cannot realistically change your conclusion, you are documenting justification, not conducting a decision process.

Common Mistakes

- Deciding first and using the worksheet to justify the decision afterward.
- Verifying only sources that support the preferred narrative.
- Treating incomplete evidence as proof.
- Ignoring the consequences of a false positive or false negative.
- Refusing to revisit a decision because changing course feels like weakness.

What Good Looks Like

You can explain the decision, the evidence used, the reasoning behind it, the uncertainty that remains, and what would justify reconsideration.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT - Make the decision, communicate it through the appropriate channel, and return to it when the stated review condition or new evidence appears.

Using the Toolkit in Real Leadership Situations

A recurring performance problem

Tool 1 → Tool 5 → Tool 6 → Tool 9

Use Tool 1 if you have delayed addressing the problem. Tool 5 prepares the conversation. Tool 6 establishes the performance standard and opportunity to improve. Tool 9 ensures the commitment is actually revisited.

A complaint that makes you angry

Tool 8 → Tool 2 → Tool 10

RESET first so the emotional spike does not drive the response. Then separate facts, feelings, and assumptions. If a consequential decision remains, use Tool 10.

A team that agrees with you too easily

Tool 3 → Tool 10

Create meaningful dissent before the decision. Then document the evidence, alternatives, consequences, and rationale.

A policy-compliant answer that may still be wrong

Tool 4 → Tool 10

Clarify what the process requires and why. Identify what the process misses. If the consequences matter, use Tool 10 to make the final decision defensible.

A difficult message during uncertainty

Tool 7 → Tool 5

Build an accurate message that distinguishes known from unknown. If the audience will need dialogue, questions, or accountability, prepare the conversation with Tool 5.

Leadership Commitment: Turning the Toolkit Into Behavior

Leadership Toolkit, Leadership Commitment (pp. 24–25)

The final Leadership Commitment is not an extra worksheet. It is the bridge between reflection and behavior. Complete it after you have used the toolkit enough to recognize where your own leadership patterns are creating delay, ambiguity, or weak accountability.

Complete the Commitment in This Order

1. Name the conversation you have been avoiding. Make it specific enough for you to schedule it.
2. Identify the assumption you need to challenge. Look for a belief about motive, intent, capability, or likely outcome that you have not fully tested.
3. Identify the accountability issue you need to address earlier. Focus on the pattern you have allowed to continue longer than it should.
4. Choose one leadership behavior you will change first. Do not list five improvements; select the one that will materially alter your behavior.
5. Set the action date. A commitment without timing is still an intention.

LEADERSHIP STANDARD

The purpose is not to promise that difficult conversations will feel easy. The standard is that discomfort will no longer determine whether necessary leadership work happens.

A 30-Day Application Plan

Use the toolkit as a leadership operating practice for one month. The objective is repetition, not completion.

Week 1 — Notice

Identify one avoided conversation and one assumption you may be treating as fact. Use Tools 1 & 2.

Week 2 — Act Earlier

Prepare and hold one necessary conversation using Tool 5. If a standard must change, add Tool 6.

Week 3 — Test Your Thinking

Use Tool 3, 4, or 10 on a real team or operational decision before finalizing it.

Week 4 — Follow Through

Review commitments and small concerns using Tool 9. Complete the Leadership Commitment based on the pattern you observed.

Every tool should lead to one of four things:

A Conversation, A Decision, An Action, or A Follow Up.