

— A MODEST PROPOSAL

How to have hard conversations at work

The conversation you are avoiding is the one your team is waiting for.

Hard conversations are hard for a reason

Whatever the reason, you can always avoid them — that's what most people do most of the time. You can also fall into the trap of expecting too much: a perfect, idealized conversation where everyone leaves grateful.

Or you pretend you are going to listen when really you only want to deliver a message you were never happy to deliver in the first place. None of these approaches give you the result you want.

REASON ONE

The cost of silence

Avoided conflicts fester. They erode trust, and they cost time — usually far more time than the conversation would have taken.

REASON TWO

It is a muscle

Courageous dialogue is a leadership capacity, not a personality trait. Practice is what strengthens a culture.

Go in curious, not certain. Your goal is shared understanding — not scoring points.

The pre-conversation checklist



01 *Define the purpose*

Ask yourself: if this ends well, what will be different?

02 *Regulate yourself*

Three deep breaths. Then name the emotion out loud — "I'm anxious."

03 *Check timing and setting*

Quiet space. No looming deadlines. Enough time to finish what you start.

04 *Craft your one-sentence lead*

Clear, respectful, fifteen words maximum.

05 *Sort facts from stories*

List the neutral facts. Set your interpretations and assessments aside.

It is as easy as one, two, three

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There are plenty of frameworks, and they all effectively say the same thing. Here it is, distilled into three reasonably easy steps.

STEP ONE

Open

Ask permission, then state your purpose.

"Can we talk about yesterday's client call? I want to make sure we're aligned going forward."

STEP TWO

Explore

Run the curiosity loop: ask, listen, paraphrase, validate. Then run it again.

"Tell me more." · "How did you see it?" · "What feels most important here?"

STEP THREE

Resolve

Co-create the next steps. Do not leave with a feeling instead of an agreement.

"What does success look like for both of us?" · "What's one action we each own?"

Four things to do, four to leave alone

DO

Speak to impact

Describe what happened and what it cost.

Use "I" statements

Own your view as a view, not a verdict.

Pause and breathe

Silence is where the real answer arrives.

Agree on follow-up

Name the action and the date before you leave.

DON'T

Mind-read motives

You know the impact. You don't know the why.

Globalize

"Always" and "never" end the conversation early.

Fill every silence

Talking past the point undoes the point.

Assume nods mean agreement

Ask them to say the agreement back to you.



PLUG AND PLAY

Three openers you can borrow

Say them in your own voice. The point is the shape of the ask, not the wording.

PEER FEEDBACK

"I value working with you. Can we unpack how our hand-offs went last sprint?"

MANAGING UP

"I'm noticing a pattern that may hurt our timeline — can we look at it together?"

A TOUGH PERFORMANCE TALK

"I want to support your growth, and I've noticed missed deadlines — can we talk about what's in the way?"

Keep the momentum

You prepared yourself, found the right moment, actually listened, and delivered the feedback while keeping the relationship intact. Now comes the part that gets dropped: sometimes we are so relieved the conversation happened that the follow-through slips through the cracks.

Send a brief recap email within a day. Five lines is plenty.

01

Issue

02

Insight

03

Agreement

04

Action

05

*Check-
in date*

*One difficult conversation is worth more than a
hundred friendly ones that avoid the truth.*

GO DEEPER

The conversation is the practice

Need a deeper skill-builder? Big Self's coaches, workshops, and AI-enabled platform, Emma, are here to support you — and the people you lead.

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