



LEADERSHIP LIBRARY



ELEVATED
LEADERSHIP

EL-002

Difficult Conversations Planner



COACHING &
CONVERSATIONS

PREPARE CLEARLY. SPEAK HONESTLY.
MOVE FORWARD **CONSTRUCTIVELY.**

A practical planning tool to help school leaders
prepare for challenging conversations, communicate
with clarity and agree meaningful next steps.



DES O'CONNOR
Founder, Elevated Leadership



Practical tools. Real conversations.
Stronger leaders. Better schools.

Why Difficult Conversations Matter

As leaders, we know that avoiding a difficult conversation rarely makes the issue go away. It usually allows uncertainty, frustration and underperformance to continue—often at a greater cost.



WHY LEADERS DELAY

- We want to maintain harmony
- We fear a negative response
- We are unsure how to start
- We hope the situation will improve on its own



WHAT DELAY COSTS

- Confusion and mixed messages
- Lower performance and standards
- Erosion of trust and respect
- Bigger problems that are harder to solve



WHAT CONSTRUCTIVE LEADERSHIP REQUIRES

- The courage to address issues early
- Clarity about expectations and impact
- Respect for the person, not just the problem
- A focus on solutions and next steps

This planner will help you prepare with purpose, lead the conversation with confidence and create the conditions for positive change. Use it to **plan**, **guide** and **review** one important conversation at a time.



“Clarity without respect damages relationships. Respect without clarity avoids responsibility.

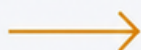
Effective leadership requires both.

THE FOUNDATION OF EVERY DIFFICULT CONVERSATION



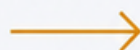
1. PREPARE CLEARLY

Understand the issue, your desired outcome and the impact on others. Plan what you want to say and why.



2. SPEAK HONESTLY

Communicate with respect, share facts and listen actively to the other perspective.



3. MOVE FORWARD CONSTRUCTIVELY

Agree clear next steps, confirm follow up and hold each other accountable.

Before the Conversation: Prepare with Purpose

Good conversations don't happen by chance. They are prepared with care and intention. Taking time to think things through before you speak will help you stay focused, calm and respectful—and increase the chances of a positive outcome.



CLARIFY THE ISSUE

- What exactly is the issue or behaviour?
- When did it start? How often does it happen?
- What is the impact on individuals, the team, students or the wider school?



SEPARATE FACTS FROM ASSUMPTIONS

- What are the facts?
- What am I assuming might be the case?
- What do I need to understand better?



IDENTIFY THE DESIRED OUTCOME

- What do I want to achieve from this conversation?
- What would a successful outcome look like?
- What change, agreement or action do I need?



CONSIDER THE OTHER PERSON'S PERSPECTIVE

- What might be going on for them?
- What could be their view of the situation?
- What might they need to hear from me?



CHECK YOUR MINDSET

- Am I approaching this with curiosity or judgement?
- Am I focused on the person or the problem?
- Can I lead this conversation with respect, calm and openness?



LEADER TIP

You don't need all the answers before the conversation. But you do need clarity about what you know, what you don't know and what matters most.

MY PREPARATION CHECKLIST

- ☐ I have clearly defined the issue.
- ☐ I have gathered relevant facts.
- ☐ I understand the impact.
- ☐ I have considered their perspective.
- ☐ I know the outcome I am seeking.
- ☐ I am ready to listen.
- ☐ I am ready to speak honestly and respectfully.

“

Preparation is not about control.
It is about showing respect—for others and for yourself.
It creates the space for honest, constructive dialogue.



Your Conversation Planner

PLAN WITH PURPOSE. LEAD WITH CLARITY.

Use this planner to prepare for one important conversation. The more clearly you plan, the more confident and effective you will be.



This is your plan.
Keep it simple, clear
and focused on a
positive outcome.

1

OPENING STATEMENT – HOW I WILL START THE CONVERSATION

How will I open the conversation in a calm, respectful and clear way?



2

KEY FACTS & EXAMPLES – WHAT I WANT TO SHARE

What specific examples or evidence will help explain the issue?



3

QUESTIONS I WANT TO ASK

What questions will help me understand their perspective?



4

KEY MESSAGE – WHAT I WANT THEM TO UNDERSTAND

What is the most important message I want to communicate?



5

BOUNDARIES & NON-NEGOTIABLES

What are the standards, values or expectations that must be clear?

6

DESIRED NEXT STEPS – WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

What specific actions, agreements or decisions do I want to achieve?

CONVERSATION CONTEXT

Topic / Issue:

Who is involved:

Date:

Where:

Time:

NON-NEGOTIABLES

What matters most
and why?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

POTENTIAL OUTCOMES

What are the possible outcomes
of this conversation?

- Best case: _____
- Most likely: _____
- Worst case: _____

REMEMBER



The goal is not
to win the conversation.
The goal is to reach
understanding and
agree the best way
forward.



A good plan leads to a better conversation. A better conversation leads to **positive change**.



Conducting the Conversation: A Practical Framework

Use this four-step framework to guide the conversation.
Stay calm, be present and listen as much as you speak.



Lead with clarity.
Listen with respect.
Aim for understanding
and positive change.

1**OPEN**

Start with clarity and respect.

- Set the right tone.
- Explain the purpose.
- Describe the issue briefly and factually.

TRY SAYING...

- “I wanted to speak with you about...”
- “My intention is to understand what is happening and agree how we move forward.”

2**EXPLORE**

Listen before reaching conclusions.

- Ask open questions.
- Listen actively.
- Acknowledge their perspective.

TRY ASKING...

- “Can you help me understand what has been happening?”
- “What am I missing from your perspective?”

3**CLARIFY**

Address the issue honestly.

- Summarise what you've heard.
- Explain the impact.
- Restate expectations and standards.

TRY SAYING...

- “I understand your perspective. At the same time, we need to be clear that...”
- “The impact of this is...”
“Going forward, I need...”

4**AGREE**

Create a clear way forward.

- Agree actions and who will do what.
- Confirm timelines and support.
- Agree how progress will be reviewed.

TRY SAYING...

- “So that we're both clear, what will happen next is...”
- “What support do you need to succeed?”



WHEN THE CONVERSATION BECOMES DIFFICULT



SLOW DOWN

Pause. Take a breath.
Rushing increases tension and reduces understanding.



RETURN TO FACTS

Focus on observable behaviour and impact, not assumptions or personalities.



ACKNOWLEDGE EMOTION

It's okay to name how someone feels without abandoning the issue.



PAUSE IF NECESSARY

If emotions are high, suggest a short break and reconvene.



The goal is not to “win” the conversation.
The goal is to understand, agree on next steps and strengthen the relationship.
That is how leaders create positive change.

After the Conversation: Reflect, Follow Through & Continue

The conversation doesn't end when you close the door.
What you do next builds trust, drives progress and shows leadership.



Leadership is measured not only by the conversations we start, but by the way we follow through.



1. AGREED ACTIONS & RESPONSIBILITIES

Capture what was agreed so you are both clear.

ACTION	WHO	BY WHEN	NOTES / SUPPORT NEEDED



2. FOLLOW-UP

Plan when and how you will check in.



FOLLOW-UP DATE:

FOLLOW-UP METHOD:



Meeting



Email



Other _____

PURPOSE OF FOLLOW-UP: _____



3. MY REFLECTION

Take time to learn and grow from the experience.



What went well in the conversation?



What could I do differently next time?



What did I learn about the person or the situation?



4. MY COMMITMENT

How will I continue to lead well? _____

FOLLOW THROUGH BUILDS TRUST



DO WHAT YOU SAID

Keep your commitments and act on what was agreed.



FOLLOW UP

Check in as planned. Review progress and offer support.



KEEP COMMUNICATING

Stay open and available. Continue the dialogue when needed.



CELEBRATE PROGRESS

Acknowledge improvement and reinforce positive steps forward.



What you do after the conversation is just as important as what you say during it.

Consistency over time creates credibility and lasting change.



CONTINUE YOUR LEADERSHIP JOURNEY

Strong leaders keep learning, reflecting and growing every day.
Explore more resources in the Elevated Leadership Library.



PRACTICAL
TOOLS



LEADERSHIP
INSIGHTS



REAL-WORLD
APPLICATION



ONGOING
GROWTH