

# Handling Difficult Conversations with Skill and Compassion



*Practical strategies for managers to lead  
with confidence and care*

by



faye beddow  
CONSULTING



# Introduction

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## Why Stepping in to Difficult Conversations Matters

When tough conversations are avoided, frustrations build, misunderstandings grow, and relationships suffer. But handled well, these conversations can be turning points—moments of clarity, building trust and stronger working relationships.

This guide offers a toolkit to prepare, engage, and follow through with difficult, but critical, conversations at work. We share practical approaches and human-centred insight to say the things that really matter, with care.

“*When we avoid difficult conversations, we trade short-term discomfort for long-term dysfunction.*”

— *Peter Bromberg*

# About Me

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I'm Faye, founder of Faye Beddow Consulting. I'm a facilitator, trainer and organisational development consultant with a background in supporting health, education and public service teams through growth, challenge and change.



What energises me most is helping people think well together – to slow down, ask better questions, and find a way forward that truly fits.

I've created this resource because I believe that stepping into difficult conversations with positive intention, compassion and care is one of the most powerful ways to lead high performing teams built on trust and psychological safety. And, I believe it's a skill that more people could feel confident using, with careful planning and a positive goal in mind.

This guide is designed to support those everyday moments where stepping into a conversation that feels tricky is absolutely the right thing to do – for you, for the other person and for your wider team.

*Faye*



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# 01 Why do some conversations feel so hard?

Because they matter. The stakes are high, emotions run strong, and we worry about damaging relationships. If it's keeping you awake at night or playing on your mind, it probably needs a conversation.

## **Understand What Makes it "Difficult"**

A conversation feels difficult when there's tension, power imbalance, or uncertainty about the reaction. Recognise this as a signal that the conversation is important, not something to avoid.

Here are six practical insights to help you approach tough conversations with clarity, compassion, and confidence.



# 02 Clarify your Intention

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- Before you talk, pause and ask: What do I want to achieve? Be honest—sometimes the goal is to understand, sometimes it's to correct behaviour, sometimes it's to preserve the relationship.
- Use your internal compass: Let your intention be constructive (not punitive). Leaders often confuse feedback with judgement – it helps to check: Am I going to help or to blame?
- Write down your desired outcome (in 1–2 sentences) and key points you want covered. That kind of preparation steadies you in the heat of the moment.



# 03

## Create Psychological Safety

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*The first principle of psychological safety:  
The harder you make it to voice problems, the harder it  
becomes to solve them.”*

*— Adam Grant*

# Creating Psychological Safety

- Choose a time and place where there's privacy, minimal interruption, and emotional safety.
- Start by acknowledging the shared purpose: *"I want us both to find a way forward"*. Managers who signal *"I care and I'm open to listening"* set a better tone.
- Offer empathy before analysis: *"I imagine this is a challenging situation for you."* That opens space for the other person's view rather than putting them immediately on the defensive.

## Be Human and Compassionate

Always recognise the person behind the problem.

- 1 Acknowledge their perspective
- 2 Empathise with their situation
- 3 Act in ways that genuinely support their progress



# 04 Landing Feedback

- Describe what you saw/heard (behaviour), and then name the impact (on team, morale, deadlines).
- Rather than *"You're always negative,"* say, *"When you interrupted others in the meeting (behaviour), I noticed people paused and then the energy dropped; it meant we lost momentum (impact)."*
- Avoid assumptions or labels (*"you always," "you're lazy"*). Stick to what you observed.
- Invite their perspective: *"What was going on for you in that moment?"*
- Give them opportunity to respond (Stay Silent!!)



# 05 Seek to Understand



- Empathetic listening is crucial when handling difficult conversations - it builds trust, validates the other person's feelings, and fosters understanding.
- When we listen with the intention to understand the other person's perspective , we help to de-escalate tension, allow for more open and honest communication and opens the way to find common ground and effective solutions to the issue.
- By focusing on the other person's perspective, you create a safe environment for them to share their thoughts and feelings without judgement, which is essential for productive dialogue.

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*The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood. The best way to understand people is to listen to them.”*

*— Ralph G. Nichols*



# Empathetic Listening

Great communication starts with deep, attuned listening. Great leaders don't just listen to respond – they listen to understand.



This means:

- Being fully present and paying careful attention – not just hearing words, but noticing tone, energy and what's left unsaid, demonstrating empathy,
- Using reflective language to play back what the person is saying,
- Listening without the pressure to fix, summarise, or jump in – holding back the urge to offer solutions,
- Using silence as a powerful tool – to give the person space to think, breathe and go deeper

*When we resist the urge to fill the silence, we often discover what matters most.*

# 06

## Co-Create Next Steps

- Once the issue is surfaced, shift toward *“What now?”*
- Invite the other person: *“What would help you move forward from here?”*
- Offer your own suggestions – and negotiate mutual agreement on actions, responsibilities, and check-in times.
- You may want to reframe the “closing” with ongoing dialogue: *“I’ll follow up with you in two weeks. Let’s review what’s changed and what support you need.”*



# Positive Endings

It is important to end conversations with a mutual clear understanding of what has been agreed, what are the actions, who is responsible and what support is available.



## End with Clarity and Positivity

Before you close:

- Summarise what's been agreed.
- Check mutual understanding.
- Set a time to revisit progress.
- End with encouragement:  
*"I believe you can succeed  
— and I'll support you."*

## Support beyond the Conversation

The work doesn't end when the meeting does.

- Offer specific, positive feedback as changes happen.
- Keep confidentiality to protect trust.
- Show that you're invested in their success.

# 07 Managing Emotions

This is something managers often struggle with:

- Choose the right time - you need to tackle situations as soon as possible after the event, but give yourself time to effectively manage your emotions first so you can be authentic in your positive intent..
- Notice your emotional triggers (anger, frustration, avoidance) and pause if needed.
- Notice their emotional triggers - acknowledge with empathy. Offer a break (just 10 minutes to get emotions in check - anything more and it's likely we will move back towards avoidance).
- Use "I" statements: *"I feel concerned when deadlines are missed because I care about the team's reputation."*
- Validate without condoning: *"I can see why you're upset. Let's figure out how to move forward."*

## Final thought

If you were underperforming, behaving poorly, creating conflict or facing significant change in the workplace, would you want to know?

Probably yes — but you'd want to hear it in a way that treats you with dignity and respect. That's the role of a compassionate leader.

Difficult conversations aren't one-off events—they're part of ongoing relationships. The goal isn't to deliver a perfect monologue, but to move from tension into connection and action. You may stumble or feel awkward; that's normal. What makes the difference is your intention, your presence, and your willingness to follow through.



# 08

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## About Us

At Faye Beddow Consulting, we help organisations create compassionate, connected and values-led workplaces. We do this through facilitation, leadership development, and bespoke learning experiences that make people feel seen, supported and able to thrive.

Our approach is grounded in:

- Compassion – creating psychologically safe spaces where people feel heard and respected
- Inclusivity – ensuring all voices are welcome and valued
- Collaboration – guiding groups to co-create solutions they believe in.

We work with HR and L&D professionals, senior leaders, and cross-sector partnerships to unlock potential, improve communication, and build alignment – even in complex or emotionally charged settings.



# Lets keep the conversation going

Of course, some conversations call for deeper support – when dynamics are complex, tensions and emotions are high, and trusting relationships really matter. In those moments, bringing in an experienced trainer to support your managers to develop the skills, confidence and courage to take on the most challenging conversations, can really help shift difficult situations to transformative solutions.



If you'd like hands-on guidance, I offer:

- Workshops where managers practice difficult conversation scenarios,
- Tailored programmes designed for your organisation's specific challenges,
- Executive/leadership coaching for 1:1 support.

Visit [www.fayebeddow.co.uk](http://www.fayebeddow.co.uk) or email [info@fayebeddow.co.uk](mailto:info@fayebeddow.co.uk) to discuss what would work best for you.



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