

Framing and Delivering Feedback and Hard Conversations



Area of Preparation	Guiding Question	Preparation	Research Connection	Why It Matters
Purpose	Why is this conversation necessary?	Decide whether the conversation is about coaching, clarification, correction, support, or accountability. Be able to state the purpose in one clear sentence and explain why the issue needs to be addressed now rather than later.	Feedback is more effective when people understand the goal of the conversation and how it connects to growth, performance, or professional responsibility.	A clear purpose keeps the conversation focused, reduces unnecessary defensiveness, and prevents the meeting from becoming reactive or vague.
Issue Definition	What exactly is the concern?	Identify the specific behavior, pattern, decision, or breakdown that must be addressed. Distinguish the actual issue from your frustration about it, and determine whether this is an isolated incident or part of a larger pattern.	People respond better to specific, behavior-centered feedback than to broad judgments or character-based conclusions.	Precision makes the conversation more credible, fairer, and more likely to result in actual change.
Facts and Evidence	What do I know, and what am I assuming?	Gather the relevant examples, dates, documentation, prior communication, and observable impact. Separate what you directly know from what you suspect, infer, or feel. Enter the meeting with enough factual grounding to speak clearly and confidently.	Difficult-conversation research stresses the importance of grounding dialogue in observable reality rather than in assumptions or emotional interpretations.	Evidence-based preparation increases fairness, strengthens credibility, and reduces argument over what actually happened.
Expectation or Standard	What expectation applies here?	Clarify the role expectation, policy, professional norm, agreed-upon responsibility, or team standard that was not met. Prepare to explain not just what happened, but how it differed from what was expected.	Feedback works best when it is anchored to a visible standard rather than personal preference or style.	This keeps the conversation professionally grounded and helps the other person understand the gap that needs to be closed.
Desired Outcome	What should come from this conversation?	Decide what success looks like at the end of the meeting. That may include awareness, acknowledgment, ownership, correction, recommitment, a plan for improvement, or a documented next step.	Effective conversations are directed toward visible outcomes, not simply the expression of concern or frustration.	Without a clear outcome, the meeting can feel weighty but produce little movement.
Process Clarity	What happens once the conversation occurs?	Determine in advance what the process will require after the meeting, including support, monitoring, documentation, formal next steps, and, if appropriate, consequences. Know how the issue will move forward once it has been addressed.	People respond more productively when expectations, accountability, and procedural next steps are clear rather than implied.	Process clarity reduces uncertainty and helps the leader prepare consistently and fairly.

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Follow-Through	What will I need to sustain afterward?	Decide how you will revisit the issue, check for progress, reinforce change, provide support, or respond if improvement does not occur. Preparation includes being honest about whether you are willing to do the leadership work that follows the conversation.	Feedback has impact when it includes feed forward: what happens next, and how improvement will be supported and assessed over time.	The real meaning of the conversation is established afterward, not during it. Follow-through is what turns talk into leadership.
Dignity and Setting	Under what conditions should this conversation happen?	Plan the meeting's setting and conditions. This includes privacy, timing, seating, level of formality, and whether anyone else should be present. Preparation also includes deciding how to address the concern seriously without humiliating the person or creating performative pressure.	Research on procedural fairness and psychological safety shows that dignity, respect, and interpersonal treatment strongly influence whether people perceive a process as fair and remain open to learning.	People are more able to reflect, respond, and improve when dignity is preserved and the setting supports seriousness without shame.
Emotional Readiness	Am I calm enough to do this well?	Regulate frustration, disappointment, anxiety, or urgency before the meeting. Draft notes, rehearse key language, or pause long enough to ensure your tone will be steady and respectful rather than sharp or impulsive.	Emotional regulation supports psychological safety and increases the likelihood that the other person will remain reflective rather than defensive.	People react first to tone, threat, and intensity. If the leader is dysregulated, the conversation often deteriorates quickly.
Opening Language	How will I start?	Prepare the first few sentences so the conversation begins with clarity, seriousness, and respect. The opening should orient the person to the purpose, reduce ambiguity, and signal that the conversation is about professional responsibility and improvement.	The opening often determines whether the other person engages thoughtfully or shifts into self-protection.	A strong opening creates stability, lowers confusion, and sets the tone for the rest of the conversation.
Listening Readiness	Am I prepared to hear an explanation or a disagreement?	Be ready to hear context, clarification, disagreement, or surprise without losing direction. Listening does not mean surrendering the meeting's purpose, but it does mean making room for information you may not yet have.	People are more likely to accept hard feedback when they feel heard and treated with dignity, even if the conversation remains difficult.	Listening strengthens fairness, improves accuracy, and keeps the conversation from becoming one-sided or performative.

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