



STARBUCK ACADEMY

Manager Skills

Manager Skills: Difficult Conversations

Practical tools to prepare for, open, steady and follow up the conversations you would rather put off

Five lessons, about 2.5 learning hours in total including the workplace tasks. Use one lesson a week alongside the videos.

Name

Date

STARBUCK & ASSOCIATES

COACHING & LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

How to use this workbook

Every manager has conversations they would rather not have. This course helps you prepare for them, open them well, stay steady when they get heated, and follow them up so something actually changes.

There are five short video lessons. Each one gives you a few practical ideas, a tool in this workbook and a workplace task to try before the next lesson. Knowledge checks help the ideas stick, and you receive a certificate of completion. You have 12 months' access. Allow about 2.5 learning hours in total, including the tasks.

Work through the lessons in order. The tasks build on each other: by the end you will have chosen, planned, held and followed up at least one real conversation.

By the end of the course you will be able to

- Recognise why you put conversations off, and what that costs
- Prepare using facts, impact, the outcome you need and their likely view
- Open a difficult conversation clearly and kindly in the first minute
- Stay calm and curious when emotions rise
- Agree next steps, keep a fair record and follow up
- Know when an issue needs HR and your organisation's policies

Programme map

LESSON	TITLE	YOUR TOOL
01	Why we avoid difficult conversations	The Avoidance Audit
02	Preparing for the conversation	The Conversation Planner
03	Opening the conversation	The Opening Lines Builder
04	Staying calm when it gets heated	The Calm Under Pressure Reset
05	Agreeing next steps and following up	The Follow-Up Record

A NOTE ON SERIOUS ISSUES

This course is about everyday difficult conversations. Serious issues such as possible misconduct, grievances, harassment, discrimination or health concerns should follow your organisation's policies and involve HR.

LESSON 1

Why we avoid difficult conversations

Most managers can name at least one conversation they have been putting off. This lesson looks honestly at why, and at what waiting quietly costs.

Key ideas

- A conversation feels difficult when something important is at stake and you cannot be sure how it will go.
- The reasons we give for waiting often protect us from discomfort more than they protect the other person.
- Avoidance is not neutral. The person cannot fix what they do not know about, and the team notices.
- Saying clearly and respectfully what you have noticed gives someone the chance to improve.
- Start with the conversation that has the highest cost and the least time before it gets harder.

EXAMPLE

Jo has noticed for two months that Sam arrives late to the morning handover. Jo keeps telling herself it is a busy patch for Sam. Meanwhile, two others have started arriving late too.

The conversation Jo has been avoiding is now a conversation with three people, not one.

Reflect

Which conversation have I been putting off longest, and what reason have I been giving myself?

What is my waiting costing the person, the team and me?

YOUR WORKPLACE TASK THIS WEEK

Complete the Avoidance Audit on the next page. List the conversations you have been putting off, note what each is costing and choose the one you will have first.

TOOL 1

The Avoidance Audit

Be honest and specific. Include conversations with your team, your peers and your own manager.

Step 1: List what you are putting off

THE CONVERSATION, AND WITH WHOM	WHAT IT IS COSTING (WORK, TEAM, PERSON, ME)	HOW LONG CAN IT WAIT?

Step 2: Rate the cost of waiting

IF THIS WAITS ANOTHER MONTH	LITTLE CHANGE	SOME HARM	REAL HARM	SERIOUS HARM
Conversation 1	☐	☐	☐	☐
Conversation 2	☐	☐	☐	☐
Conversation 3	☐	☐	☐	☐

Step 3: Choose your first

The conversation I will have first is:

The reason I have been giving myself for waiting is:

EXAMPLE

Jo lists three conversations. Sam's lateness scores highest because others are copying it. Jo chooses that one first, and moves a conversation about holiday rotas to next month.

Preparing for the conversation

You do not need a script. You need to be clear on four things before you go in, and to choose the right moment.

Key ideas

- Start with specific, observable facts, not stories about what the behaviour means.
- Name the impact on the team, the customer, the work or you.
- Decide what you need to be different afterwards, and what is a must rather than a nice to have.
- Think about how the other person might see it, so you arrive curious rather than certain.
- Choose a private space and enough time, and check your own state before you begin.

EXAMPLE

Priya's first draft of the plan reads: "Tom is not pulling his weight." That is a story. Her facts: Tom has missed three of the last four deadlines for the client tracker, and two customers have chased updates.

Priya realises she does not know why. Tom's likely view becomes a question she will ask, not an answer she assumes.

Reflect

What am I assuming about this person that I have not checked?

What outcome do I need, and what would I be willing to let go of?

YOUR WORKPLACE TASK THIS WEEK

Complete the Conversation Planner on the next page for the conversation you chose in lesson 1.

The Conversation Planner

About fifteen minutes. Keep each answer short. If you cannot fill a row, that is useful information too.

STEP AND PROMPT	MY NOTES
The facts: what did I see or hear, and when?	
The impact: on the work, team, customer or me?	
What I need: what must be different afterwards?	
Their likely view: what might they know, feel or be dealing with?	
My first sentence: why I want to talk	
Time and place: private, unhurried, not late on a Friday	

Before you go in

- Have I checked my facts, and removed labels such as lazy or difficult?
- Am I calm enough to listen? If not, can it wait a day?
- Does any policy apply, for example on absence, performance or conduct?

WHEN TO SPEAK TO HR FIRST

If the issue could involve misconduct, a grievance, harassment, discrimination or someone's health, follow your organisation's policies and speak to HR before you begin. This planner is for everyday conversations, not formal processes.

Opening the conversation

The first minute sets the tone. Aim to name the issue clearly, kindly and quickly, then invite the other person in.

Key ideas

- People judge quickly whether a conversation feels safe or threatening. A calm, clear opening helps.
- Skip the long warm-up and the praise sandwich. Reach the issue within a minute.
- Use situation, behaviour and impact, a model from the Center for Creative Leadership.
- Once you have said what you noticed, stop and ask for their view. Then listen.
- Clear and kind work together. Avoid sarcasm, labels, and words like always and never.

EXAMPLE

Sam's manager, Jo, opens: "Sam, I want to talk about the morning handover. On four days in the last two weeks you arrived after it had started. The team has had to repeat updates, and two others are now arriving late too. How do you see it?"

Sam explains a change in childcare. They agree a later handover time on two days a week.

Reflect

How do I usually open a hard conversation, and what does that do to the other person?

Which words or habits do I need to drop from my openings?

YOUR WORKPLACE TASK THIS WEEK

Use the Opening Lines Builder on the next page to write the first minute of your planned conversation. Say it out loud, then have the conversation.

TOOL 3

The Opening Lines Builder

Build your first minute in five short parts. Read it aloud. If it takes longer than a minute, cut it down.

PART	WHAT IT DOES	EXAMPLE LINE
Purpose	Says why you want to talk	I want to talk about the client tracker.
Situation	When and where	Over the last month, on the Acme account...
Behaviour	What they did or said, specifically	...three of the four updates were late...
Impact	The effect it had	...and two customers have chased us for news.
Invite	Opens the conversation	What is happening from your side?

Your opening

PART	MY WORDS
Purpose	
Situation	
Behaviour	
Impact	
Invite	

HELPS

- Short, plain sentences
- Specific examples and dates
- A genuine question at the end

GETS IN THE WAY

- "You always..." or "You never..."
- A long warm-up or praise sandwich
- Labels such as careless or negative

Staying calm when it gets heated

Even well planned conversations can turn. Your job is not to control the other person's reaction, but to stay steady and keep the conversation useful.

Key ideas

- Your own body reacts first. Slow your breathing, lower your voice and plant your feet.
- Ask a genuine question before you defend your position.
- Play back what you heard before adding your view, and let silence do some work.
- Acknowledge defensiveness, then return to the facts and the impact.
- If someone is upset or angry, slow down. A short break is not a failure.

EXAMPLE

When Tom hears about the deadlines, he says, "So it is all my fault, then." Priya feels her face get hot. She pauses, breathes out slowly and says, "I can hear this feels unfair. What am I missing?"

Tom explains he has been covering a colleague's accounts as well. The conversation moves to workload.

Reflect

How do I notice that I am getting wound up in a conversation?

What do I tend to do when someone gets upset or angry, and what would I like to do instead?

YOUR WORKPLACE TASK THIS WEEK

Complete the Calm Under Pressure Reset on the next page before your next difficult conversation.

The Calm Under Pressure Reset

A short sequence to use in the moment, when you feel the temperature rise.

- 1 **Pause.**
Stop talking for a moment. You do not have to reply straight away.
- 2 **Breathe.**
One slow breath out, longer than the breath in. Feet flat, shoulders down.
- 3 **Name it.**
Acknowledge what you see: "I can see this is upsetting."
- 4 **Get curious.**
Ask a genuine question, then listen to the whole answer.
- 5 **Decide.**
Carry on, return to the facts, or agree a break and a time to continue.

IF THEY...	YOU MIGHT SAY
Get defensive	I can see this feels unfair. Can we look at what happened together?
Get upset	Take your time. There is no rush. Would a few minutes help?
Get angry	I can see you are angry. I want to understand. Can we slow down?
Go quiet	Take a moment. What is going through your mind?

MY WARNING SIGNS	MY RESET	MY TWO CURIOUS QUESTIONS

WORTH KNOWING

If behaviour becomes threatening, end the meeting calmly and seek support. If someone seems very distressed, point them to your employee assistance programme or HR.

Agreeing next steps and following up

A difficult conversation only helps if something changes afterwards. Clear agreements, a fair record and a real follow-up make the difference.

Key ideas

- End with specific actions, owners and dates, and summarise them out loud.
- Agree what support you will give, then follow through.
- Write a brief, factual note soon afterwards, and consider sharing a summary.
- Diary the follow-up and start by recognising progress.
- Possible misconduct, grievances, harassment, discrimination or health concerns follow your policies and involve HR early.

EXAMPLE

Jo and Sam agree a later handover on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and that Sam will be on time on other days. Jo will update the rota by Friday. Jo sends a three-line summary that afternoon and books a ten-minute check-in for three weeks' time.

Reflect

What do I usually do after a difficult conversation, and what gets missed?

Which issues in my area should go to HR, and do I know who to contact?

YOUR WORKPLACE TASK THIS WEEK

Complete the Follow-Up Record on the next page, set a follow-up date, then choose your next conversation from the Avoidance Audit.

The Follow-Up Record

Complete this soon after the conversation. Keep it factual and neutral, as if the other person might read it.

RECORD	NOTES
Date, who was there	
What we discussed	
Actions agreed (who, by when)	
Support I will give	
Follow-up date	

At the follow-up

SINCE WE SPOKE	NO CHANGE	SOME PROGRESS	GOOD PROGRESS	RESOLVED
Tick one	☐	☐	☐	☐

What has gone well that I can recognise?

What, if anything, needs another conversation?

WHEN TO INVOLVE HR

Follow your organisation's policies and involve HR early for possible misconduct, a grievance, harassment, discrimination or concerns about someone's health, or if an issue continues after clear agreements. If you are unsure, ask before you act.

What I am going to do

Two or three small changes that you actually make will do more than a long list you never start.

My three actions

WHAT I WILL DO	WHEN	WHO I WILL TELL

Coming back to this

Put a date in your diary about a month from now and answer these three questions.

What has changed since I did this workbook?

What did I not get to, and what got in the way?

What am I carrying forward?

KEEP GOING

Manager Skills: Difficult Conversations

Revisit any lesson, video or tool whenever the next difficult conversation comes along, throughout your 12 months' access.

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