



FREE TASTER

Free taster

Manager Skills: Difficult Conversations

A practical first step from the course: seeing which conversations you are avoiding, and what waiting is costing

About 20 minutes. You will need to think about your team, your peers and your own manager.

Name

Date

STARBUCK & ASSOCIATES

COACHING & LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

WHAT THIS IS

For managers who put hard conversations off

Manager Skills: Difficult Conversations is a short course for managers and team leaders at any level. It helps you handle the conversations most of us would rather avoid, clearly, kindly and fairly.

It helps when a performance or behaviour issue has been drifting, when you dread a conversation for days, when things get heated, or when a conversation happens but nothing changes afterwards.

How it works

Five short video lessons, each with a practical tool in the course workbook and a workplace task. Knowledge checks help the ideas stick, and you receive a certificate of completion. About 2.5 learning hours, with 12 months' access.

What is inside

LESSON	WHAT YOU GET
01 Why we avoid difficult conversations	Why we avoid them, what it costs, and the Avoidance Audit.
02 Preparing for the conversation	Facts, impact, what you need and their view: the Conversation Planner.
03 Opening the conversation	A clear, kind first minute: the Opening Lines Builder.
04 Staying calm when it gets heated	Emotions, silence, defensiveness, tears and anger: the Calm Under Pressure Reset.
05 Agreeing next steps and following up	Actions, records, follow-up and when to involve HR: the Follow-Up Record.
Knowledge checks	Five short questions after each lesson.
Certificate	A certificate of completion when you finish.

HOW TO USE THIS TASTER

Read page 2, then complete the audit on page 3 for your own role. Page 4 shows where the full course goes next.

Why we avoid difficult conversations

A conversation feels difficult when something important is at stake and we cannot be sure how it will go. The subject is rarely the hardest part. The hard part is the sense of risk: to the relationship, to their feelings and to our own confidence.

The reasons we give ourselves

- It is not the right time.
- They are under enough pressure already.
- Maybe it will sort itself out.
- I do not want to spoil a good working relationship.

Each sounds kind or sensible, and sometimes it is. Often, though, these reasons protect us from discomfort more than they protect the other person.

What avoidance costs

WHO PAYS	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE
The person	They carry on without knowing anything is wrong, so they cannot put it right.
The team	Others notice, and may decide the standard has quietly changed.
You	Frustration builds, and the conversation, when it comes, is later and sharper.

Saying clearly and respectfully what you have noticed gives someone the chance to respond, explain and improve. That makes honesty a form of respect.

EXAMPLE

Jo has noticed for two months that Sam arrives late to the morning handover, and keeps telling herself it is a busy patch. Meanwhile, two others have started arriving late too. The conversation Jo has been avoiding now involves three people, not one.

YOUR TURN

Your Avoidance Audit

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

Exercise 1: List what you are putting off

THE CONVERSATION, AND WITH WHOM	WHAT IT IS COSTING	HOW LONG CAN IT WAIT?

Exercise 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	☐	☐	☐	☐

Exercise 3: Choose your first

Which conversation has the highest cost and the least time before it gets harder?

What reason have I been giving myself for waiting, and is it really protecting them, or me?

From choosing to following up

This taster helps you choose which conversation to have. The full course takes you through having it well, from the plan to the follow-up.

1

Prepare.

Lesson 2 and the Conversation Planner: facts, impact, what you need and their likely view.

2

Open well.

Lesson 3 and the Opening Lines Builder: a clear, kind first minute using situation, behaviour and impact.

3

Stay steady.

Lesson 4 and the Calm Under Pressure Reset: handling defensiveness, silence, tears and anger.

4

Follow up.

Lesson 5 and the Follow-Up Record: clear agreements, a fair record, and when to involve HR.

Who gets most from it

- New managers facing their first performance or behaviour conversation
- Experienced managers who know they tend to put things off
- Team leaders who find conversations get heated or go nowhere

HOW PEOPLE USE IT

A practical rhythm is one lesson a week, with a real conversation planned, held and followed up by the end.

Serious issues such as misconduct, grievances, harassment or health concerns should always follow your organisation's policies and involve HR.

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 taster?

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

What am I carrying forward?

READY FOR THE FULL COURSE?

Manager Skills: Difficult Conversations

Five short video lessons, each with a practical tool and workplace task, to help you prepare for, open, steady and follow up the conversations managers find hardest.

£49 per person, one-off, inc. VAT

Enrol at academy.starbuckassociates.com/courses/manager-skills-difficult-conversations

Part of the Starbuck Academy free resources from Starbuck & Associates. If you would like support using this across a team or a leadership programme, we would be glad to help. This taster is general learning and development material, not professional advice. © 2026 Starbuck & Associates Limited.