

The difficult conversation planner

One page, filled in before you walk in. For the conversation you have been carrying around since last Tuesday.

You know the one. It has been on your list for three weeks, you have rehearsed it twice in the car, and every time the moment arrives you find a reason it would be better on Thursday.

Why plan it on paper

Because the version in your head is not a plan. It is a loop — the same three sentences and the worst possible reply, running again. Rehearsing it doesn't prepare you; it raises the stakes.

Writing it down does two useful things. It forces you to separate what you observed from what you concluded, which are almost always tangled. And it makes you state, in advance, what you expect to happen — which turns out to matter more than anything else on the page.

THE PREDICTION IS THE POINT

You are going into this with a forecast, whether or not you have admitted it: they will get defensive, they will not take it seriously, it will damage the relationship. That forecast is shaping how you open, and it is often wrong. **Write it down before, and check it after.** Managers who do this for three or four conversations usually discover their predictions are more pessimistic than the outcomes, and start having the conversations earlier.

Three rules for the page

- **Observations, not verdicts.** "Missed the deadline twice" is checkable. "Doesn't care about quality" is a theory about someone's inner life and cannot be discussed usefully.
- **One thing.** If you have four points, you have a performance review, and they will hear only the harshest. Pick the one that matters most and let the others wait.
- **Know what you want to be true afterwards.** Not what you want to say — what you want to be different in a fortnight. If you cannot name it, the conversation is about relieving your own frustration, which is a reason to wait.

How to use it

Print the next page. Fill it in the day before, not five minutes before — you want the gap between writing and speaking. Take it in with you if it helps; nobody minds a manager who has thought about it.

Then fill in page three within a day of the conversation, while you still remember what actually happened rather than what you have started telling yourself about it.

WHO

WHEN

1 • WHAT I HAVE ACTUALLY OBSERVED*Specific instances with dates. Things a camera would have caught. No conclusions yet.***2 • WHAT I HAVE CONCLUDED FROM IT***Your interpretation, named as one. This is the part you must not present as fact.***3 • WHAT MIGHT BE GOING ON THAT I CAN'T SEE***At least two possibilities, at least one of them generous. Workload, something at home, an instruction from someone else, a constraint you don't know about.***4 • THE ONE THING THIS CONVERSATION IS ABOUT***One sentence. If it needs an "and", cut something.***5 • WHAT I WANT TO BE DIFFERENT IN TWO WEEKS****6 • MY OPENING TWO SENTENCES, WRITTEN OUT***Write them. The opening is the part that goes wrong, and it is the part you can control completely.***7 • MY PREDICTION — WHAT I THINK WILL HAPPEN***Honestly. How they will react, how it will end, how you will feel afterwards. Seal it and check it later.*☐ I have one point, not four☐ My observations are checkable☐ I have a question, not just a statement☐ I know what I want to be different

Within a day of the conversation

This is the half everyone skips, and it is where the learning is. Five minutes.

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED

COMPARED WITH MY PREDICTION — WHERE WAS I WRONG?

Go back to box 7. Most people find the conversation was less bad than forecast. If yours was worse, that is worth knowing too.

WHAT I LEARNED THAT I DID NOT KNOW BEFORE

About the situation, or about them. If nothing, you probably talked more than you listened.

WHAT I COMMITTED TO

WHAT THEY COMMITTED TO

WHEN WE PICK THIS UP AGAIN

Put it in the diary now. One conversation is an event; the follow-up is what makes it a change.

AFTER THREE OR FOUR OF THESE

Read back through your predictions and what happened. The gap between the two is the most useful management data you will generate about yourself this year — and it usually says the same thing: you are waiting longer than you need to.

WHERE THIS GOES NEXT

This planner is the tool. *Why feedback doesn't land* is the argument behind it — worth reading if the conversations keep going well and changing nothing.