

Managing Difficult Conversations

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR PROJECT MANAGERS

Difficult conversations are one of the most avoided parts of project management, yet one of the most essential. Whether it's maintaining a boundary, addressing a team member who isn't pulling their weight, or pushing back to a client to protect the project, these conversations are simply part of the job. We have yet to meet a PM who enjoys having them, but what ensures success in this area isn't confidence or comfort. It's approach.

Why We Avoid Difficult Conversations

Even the most effective Project Managers will avoid difficult conversations. Some fear conflict or an emotional reaction, while others might worry about damaging the relationship with the client or stakeholder, or even team member.

It's also hard knowing how to start a difficult conversation and what to say. But it's essential to raise any issues as soon as they appear as the longer it is left, the harder it becomes.

The Frameworks

Here are two frameworks, drawn from leading fields in psychology, that help with difficult conversations.

1

SBI: Situation, Behaviour, Impact

The SBI Model helps you give feedback that is specific, factual, and free of personal judgement.

- Situation: Name the specific moment. "In yesterday's client call..."
- Behaviour: Describe what was observed, not interpreted. "...you interrupted the client twice while they were explaining their concern."
- Impact: State the effect it had. "It meant we didn't get the full picture of what they needed, and I think it came across as dismissive."

Why it works: it separates observation from interpretation. People can debate how you interpreted something, but they can't easily debate what happened. This reduces the instinct to get defensive.

2

COIN: Context, Observation, Impact, Next steps

The COIN Model adds a fourth element that moves the conversation toward resolution.

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- Context: Set the scene. "I wanted to talk about the budget for this project."
- Observation: State the specific, factual behaviour. "Due to the unexplained issue with the third party integration last week, the budget is projected to go over by [x] amount."
- Impact: Explain the consequence. "Due to this it means that we will no longer be able to complete [x] feature."
- Next steps: Agree what happens going forward. "If you're happy to, we can either use the contingency budget, or we can revisit the prioritisation list?"

Why it works: ending on next steps turns the conversation from a critique into a collaboration, which keeps the relationship intact and gives the other person agency in the fix.

Delivery Tips

- If it's a team member, choose a private, calm moment. Do not raise it publicly. If it's with a client, make sure the right people from your team are on the call or in the meeting, so all bases are covered.
- Lead with facts, not feelings or assumptions.
- Keep your tone neutral and warm.
- Pause after you've said your piece. Let them respond.
- End with a clear next step

If Things Get Emotional

- Acknowledge the feeling without validating the behaviour. "I can see this is upsetting to hear."
- Refocus on the shared goal. "I'm raising this because I want us to work well together."
- If it escalates, it's okay to pause and continue another time.