

Difficult Conversation Cheat Sheet for Leaders

1. FBI Framework

How to Start:

“I’m about to have a difficult conversation with you. I want us to work through this together.”

Script:

- F (Feelings): “I feel concerned...”
- B (Behavior): “...because I’ve noticed [specific behavior].”
- I (Impact): “This has impacted the team/project by [specific impact].”

Example:

“I’m about to have a difficult conversation with you. I feel concerned because I’ve noticed your reports have been late this month. This has delayed our project schedule and put extra pressure on your colleagues.”

2. SBI Model (Situation–Behavior–Impact)

How to Start:

“Can we talk about what happened in [situation]?”

Script:

- Situation: “In [describe specific situation]...”
- Behavior: “...you [describe the observed behavior]...”
- Impact: “...which resulted in [describe the impact].”

Example:

“In yesterday’s meeting, you interrupted several times, which made it hard for others to share their ideas.”

3. DESC Script (Describe, Express, Specify, Consequences)

How to Start:

“I want to talk about something that’s affecting our work together.”

Script:

- Describe: “When [describe the behavior/situation]...”
- Express: “...I feel [your feelings]...”
- Specify: “...I need [your need or expectation]...”
- Consequences: “...otherwise [outline potential consequences].”

Example:

“When you miss deadlines for updates, I feel frustrated. I need timely updates to keep the team on track. Otherwise, we risk missing our project goals.”

4. Nonviolent Communication (Observation, Feeling, Need, Request)

How to Start:

“I’d like to discuss something I’ve noticed.”

Script:

- Observation: “I noticed that [specific fact/behavior]...”
- Feeling: “...and I feel [your feeling]...”
- Need: “...because I need [your need/priority]...”
- Request: “...would you be willing to [your specific request]?”

Example:

“I noticed the weekly report was late. I feel anxious because I need timely information to do my job well. Would you be willing to send the next report by Friday morning?”

Tips for Using These Frameworks

- Prepare your key points in advance—don’t wing it.
- Stay calm, direct, and respectful; avoid blame.
- Invite the other person’s perspective and listen actively.
- End with clear next steps and follow up.