

Difficult conversations become less difficult with preparation and practice. These exercises help you prepare for specific conversations, reflect on ones that have happened, and build the underlying capacity that makes all difficult conversations more navigable.

EXERCISE 1 — The Pre-Conversation Map

Skill: Clarifying purpose, contribution, and approach before entering a difficult conversation

Time: 20 minutes before any important conversation · Frequency: Before every difficult conversation

Answer these six questions in writing before the conversation

1. Purpose: What outcome do I actually want from this conversation — not what do I want to say, but what do I want to be true afterward?
2. My contribution: How have I contributed to this situation? What have I done or not done that has made it harder?
3. Their perspective: What do I think this looks like from their side? What might they be feeling or needing?
4. Opening: How will I start? Write the first sentence you will say — make it a question, not a statement.
5. What I will not do: What is my biggest temptation in this kind of conversation — lecture, defend, withdraw, attack? How will I notice if I'm doing it?
6. What comes next: What specific next step do I want to agree on by the end?

Reflection questions after

- Did the conversation go as you prepared for? Where did it go differently?
- Did you notice yourself doing the thing you said you would not do?
- What would you prepare differently next time?

EXERCISE 2 — The Post-Conversation Review

Skill: Learning from difficult conversations that have already happened

Time: 15 minutes after a difficult conversation · Frequency: After every significant conflict interaction

What to do

Within 24 hours of a difficult conversation, write honest answers to these questions:

1. What went well — even if the overall conversation was hard?
2. What did I do that made it harder than it needed to be?
3. What did I hear from the other person that I hadn't fully understood before?
4. What did I avoid saying that I should have said?
5. What is still unresolved — and does it need a follow-up conversation?

Reflection questions

- What pattern do you notice across multiple post-conversation reviews?
 - What is the thing you most consistently avoid saying?
 - What would it take to say it?
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EXERCISE 3 — The Rehearsal

Skill: Practicing the actual words before a high-stakes conversation

Time: 15 minutes · Frequency: Before any conversation with particularly high stakes

What to do

Say the conversation out loud — alone, or with a trusted person. Not just think about it. Say the actual words.

Start with your opening line. Then anticipate the most likely response and practice your reply. Go through at least three exchanges.

Notice where you get stuck, where your language becomes defensive or vague, and where you lose track of your purpose. Those are the moments to work on.

Reflection questions

- Where did the rehearsal feel honest and where did it feel like a performance?
- What did you discover about what you actually want to say?
- Did rehearsing change how the real conversation went?

EXERCISE 4 — The Avoided Conversation

Skill: Identifying and addressing conversations you have been postponing

Time: 30 minutes · Frequency: Monthly

What to do

Write down the conversation you have been avoiding longest. The one that comes to mind immediately when you read that sentence.

Answer: Why are you avoiding it? What is the worst realistic outcome if you have it? What is the cost of continuing to avoid it?

Then use the Pre-Conversation Map (Exercise 1) to prepare for it. Set a date to have it within the next two weeks.

Reflection questions

- What does the conversation you are avoiding most reveal about your conflict patterns?
- What would change in this relationship or situation if you had it?
- What are you protecting by not having it — and is that protection worth the cost?

For coaching support on difficult conversations, contact diazprinzh@conflictmanagementspace.com