

CORPORATE TABOOS

*Leadership Failures We All See But No One Fixes*

Issue #5

# The Conversation You Keep Not Having

*— Why Leaders Ghost Difficult Conversations  
and a Simple Script to Handle Them Like a Pro*

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*The newsletter for leaders who prefer honest diagnosis over comfortable denial.*

## The War Story

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Tom had been running the same mental simulation for eleven weeks.

He would pull up his calendar, find a slot, draft the invite in his head — 'Quick sync with Kevin' — and then find a reason to close the tab without sending it. Kevin had been late on deliverables four times in the last quarter. The quality had been inconsistent for longer than that. Tom knew it. Kevin's peers knew it. The project leads who had quietly started routing around Kevin knew it with the specific, practiced fluency of people who have learned to work around a problem rather than name it.

What kept Tom from having the conversation wasn't cruelty or cowardice in any simple sense. It was a tangle of things. Kevin had been through a difficult divorce eighteen months ago. He'd seemed better lately — or maybe Tom had just stopped looking as closely. There was a product launch in six weeks and Tom didn't want to 'destabilize' Kevin right before it. There was also the specific quality of dread that Tom had learned to associate with Kevin's defensiveness — the way Kevin's jaw set when he felt criticized, the two days of pointed silence that followed any pointed feedback.

So Tom kept not having the conversation. He redistributed Kevin's most critical work without explanation. He wrote Kevin's last performance review with the careful vagueness of a man trying not to commit to anything. And Kevin, who was not oblivious, understood at some level that something was wrong — but couldn't name it, couldn't address it, couldn't improve against feedback he was never given.

The launch happened. Kevin missed his piece of it by two days. In the post-mortem, Tom finally said the things he'd been rehearsing for eleven weeks — except now he said them in a meeting with three other people present, and Kevin heard them not as feedback but as ambush.

***Avoidance isn't the absence of a difficult conversation. It's the slow accumulation of the conditions that make every conversation harder than the last.***

## Name the Failure: The Conversation That Lives in the Draft Folder

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Issue #1 of this newsletter touched on accountability and the conversations leaders avoid to escape discomfort. This issue goes deeper — because the problem is more specific, more varied, and more psychologically interesting than 'leaders are just avoidant.'

The difficult conversations leaders most commonly dodge aren't random. They cluster around a predictable set of situations, each with its own specific flavor of dread. Understanding which conversation you're avoiding — and why that specific one — is the first step toward being able to have it.

The Conversation Type	The Specific Dread	What Gets Said Instead
Underperformance feedback	Fear of the emotional reaction. Fear of being seen as the bad guy. Fear that naming it makes it real and forces a decision.	Vague positive framing in reviews. Quiet redistribution of work. 'I'll bring it up next quarter.'
Behavior or attitude correction	Unlike performance, behavior feels personal. Naming it feels like a character attack. The leader worries about being wrong, or being accused of bias.	'They're just going through something.' Tolerating the behavior until it explodes in a team context.
Salary or promotion denial	The leader either doesn't have the authority to give what the person deserves, or doesn't believe they deserve it and doesn't want to explain why.	Non-committal timelines. 'Let's revisit this.' False hope that delays the honest conversation for months.
Role fit or career mismatch	Telling someone they're in the wrong role — or that their ceiling in this organization is lower than they think — feels devastating to deliver.	Continued assignment of work below the person's aspirations. Watching good people stagnate rather than giving them information to make better decisions.
Conflict between two team members	Intervening feels like taking sides. The leader fears making it worse, fears the political fallout, or simply doesn't know what to do.	Hoping it resolves itself. Structural workarounds that avoid the actual conflict. Letting it fester until one person leaves.
Bad news about the business	Sharing difficult organizational news — restructuring, budget cuts, a failed initiative — feels like taking ownership of something the leader didn't cause.	Delayed communication that lets rumor fill the vacuum. Vague language that creates anxiety without information.

## The Psychology: Why Smart Leaders Keep Not Having the Conversation

The leaders who avoid difficult conversations are not, in most cases, lacking the intelligence to know the conversation is necessary. They are caught in a set of cognitive and emotional patterns that make avoidance feel, in the moment, like the rational choice.

### The Empathy Trap

Leaders who care about their people — which is most good leaders — are especially susceptible to this one. They imagine how Kevin will feel when he hears the feedback, and that imagined pain becomes the primary data point in the decision. The math, unconsciously performed, is: 'If I have this conversation, Kevin will feel bad. If I don't, he won't feel bad right

now.' The long-term cost to Kevin of not receiving honest feedback doesn't register with the same emotional weight as the immediate imagined discomfort.

Empathy is a profound leadership asset. The empathy trap is what happens when it's applied to a single moment in isolation rather than to the full trajectory of the person's career and wellbeing.

### **The Identity Protection Mechanism**

Many leaders have an implicit self-concept that includes being liked, being supportive, and being the kind of manager people enjoy working for. A difficult conversation threatens that identity. In the leader's mind, 'delivering hard feedback' and 'being a good manager' have been unconsciously coded as opposites, when they are in fact the same thing.

This is why some leaders are perfectly capable of having difficult conversations when they frame it to themselves as 'being honest' or 'caring about this person's development,' and completely paralyzed when they frame it as 'criticizing' or 'confronting.' The conversation is identical. The identity framing changes everything.

### **The Preparation Deficit**

A significant portion of avoided conversations aren't avoided because of fear — they're avoided because the leader genuinely doesn't know what to say or how to start. They can feel that the conversation is necessary without being able to visualize how it begins, where it goes, or how it ends without catastrophe.

This is the problem with the most practical solution: a concrete script removes the preparation deficit as an obstacle. When the leader can see, word for word, how the conversation opens, the dread loses much of its power. The conversation is no longer a vague confrontation with unknown terrain — it's a structured exchange with a mapped route.

### **The Timing Fallacy**

'Now isn't the right time' is the most durable rationalization in the avoidance toolkit, because there is always something that makes now imperfect. The product launch. The personal difficulty. The holiday stretch. The quarter-end crunch. The leader who waits for the perfect moment discovers that perfect moments don't exist — and that each imperfect moment allowed to pass makes the next conversation slightly more weighted with the history of all the conversations that didn't happen.

#### **The Compounding Problem**

Every week a difficult conversation is avoided, two things happen. The original problem continues or worsens. And a new problem begins accumulating: the fact of the avoidance itself. By the time the conversation finally happens, the leader isn't just addressing the original issue — they're implicitly accounting for why it took this long. The person on the receiving end has every right to ask: 'If this was a problem, why didn't you tell me sooner?' The honest answer is uncomfortable. The practical lesson is: the cost of delay is always additive, never neutral.

## The Framework: How to Structure Any Difficult Conversation

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The following framework works across all six conversation types in the table above. It doesn't eliminate discomfort — that's not the goal. It makes the conversation structured enough that discomfort stops being a reason not to have it. The framework has four movements: Open, Explore, Align, Close.

### Movement 1: Open — Name It Without Drama

The opening of a difficult conversation sets everything that follows. Most leaders either open too softly — so much preamble and throat-clearing that the actual topic gets buried — or too abruptly, landing the difficult news before the other person has any context for what's happening.

The effective opening does three things: signals that this is a real conversation (not small talk), names the topic directly but without accusation, and creates space for the other person rather than launching immediately into lecture.

#### Script: The Opening Move

*"I want to talk with you about something important, and I want to make sure we do it properly rather than rushing it. This is about [the specific situation — deliverables, behavior, career trajectory, etc.]. I have some observations I want to share, and I genuinely want to hear your perspective. Can we spend the next twenty minutes on this?"*

What this opening does: it signals seriousness without alarm, names the topic without pre-judging it, and explicitly invites the other person's perspective. That last piece matters enormously — it frames the conversation as a dialogue rather than a verdict.

### Movement 2: Explore — State the Observation, Then Ask

The most common failure in difficult conversations is that leaders state their conclusion ('your performance has been below expectations') rather than their observation ('the last four deliverables came in late'). Conclusions invite defensiveness. Observations invite response.

After stating the specific, behavioral observation, ask an open question before saying anything else. Listen to the answer. What comes back will either confirm your read of the situation or add information that changes it — and either outcome is useful.

#### Script: Observation + Open Question

*"Here's what I've been observing: [specific behavior, with dates or examples if possible]. That's the pattern I'm seeing from my seat. I want to understand what's been happening from yours. What's been going on?"*

#### **Why 'What's Been Going On?' Is a Better Question Than You Think**

This question is open enough to catch things you don't know — a process bottleneck, a personal difficulty, a resourcing problem that's in your power to fix. It also signals that you're interested in understanding, not just delivering a verdict. Leaders who ask this question and genuinely listen to the answer are consistently described by their teams as 'fair' — even when the conversation is difficult. Leaders who skip straight to the conclusion are described as 'surprising' at best and 'punitive' at worst.

### **Movement 3: Align — Establish What Changes and What Happens Next**

The explore phase may take the conversation in unexpected directions. That's fine — follow it. But at some point, the conversation must produce clarity: what specifically needs to change, by when, and what both parties have agreed to. Without this, you've had a difficult feeling without a useful outcome.

Alignment is not the leader issuing a directive. It's both parties walking away with the same understanding of what was decided.

#### **Script: The Alignment Move**

*"Let me make sure we're aligned on what we've discussed. Going forward, [the specific change or expectation], by [the specific timeframe]. I'm going to [what you're committing to — support, resources, check-ins]. Does that match your understanding? Is there anything I've missed that would affect your ability to do that?"*

The final question — 'Is there anything I've missed?' — is not rhetorical. It creates a final gate for the other person to surface an obstacle before the conversation closes. Leaders who skip it sometimes discover afterward that there was a structural barrier the person didn't feel safe raising, which then becomes the reason the agreed change doesn't happen.

### **Movement 4: Close — Make the Follow-Through Explicit**

The conversation isn't finished when you leave the room. It's finished when the agreed change has happened and been acknowledged, or when it hasn't happened and that has been named. Closing the conversation means naming, explicitly, how and when you'll come back to it.

#### **Script: The Close**

*"I appreciate you engaging with this directly. I'm going to check in with you in two weeks — not to audit you, but to make sure nothing has come up that's making this harder than it needs to be. If anything shifts before then, come find me. I'd rather know early than late."*

The follow-through check-in serves two purposes: it signals that the conversation was real and will be revisited, and it gives both parties an off-ramp if circumstances change. Leaders who schedule the follow-up before they leave the room are far more likely to actually conduct it.

## The Three Conversations Leaders Most Avoid — And How to Start Them

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The four-movement framework above is universal. But the three specific conversation types that generate the most avoidance deserve their own opening scripts — because the first sentence is where most leaders freeze.

### 1. The Underperformance Conversation

The freeze point: 'How do I start this without it feeling like an attack?'

#### Opening Script

*"I want to talk about your work on [specific project/area]. Over the last [time period], I've noticed [specific behavioral observation — late deliverables, quality issues, missed commitments]. I want to understand what's been happening, and I want us to figure out together what needs to change. This is a conversation I should have had sooner, and I'm having it now because I want to see you succeed here."*

Note the acknowledgment that the conversation should have happened sooner. It's honest, it preempts the 'why are you only telling me now' objection, and it reframes the conversation as being in the person's interest rather than against them.

### 2. The Behavior or Attitude Correction

The freeze point: 'This is going to feel like a personal attack and I'll sound petty or subjective.'

#### Opening Script

*"I want to give you some feedback that's harder to deliver than a performance number, so I want to be careful to be specific rather than general. In [specific situation — meeting, email, interaction], I observed [specific behavior]. The impact it had was [impact on the team, the client, the dynamic]. I don't think that impact reflects how you want to come across. Am I reading that situation right?"*

The question at the end — 'Am I reading that situation right?' — is important. Behavior conversations are the ones where the leader is most likely to be working with incomplete

information. There may be context that changes the read. Asking creates room for that without making it a debate.

### 3. The Career Ceiling or Role Fit Conversation

The freeze point: 'This will crush them and I don't know how to say it without destroying the relationship.'

#### Opening Script

*"I want to have a conversation about your career here that I think will be more useful if it's honest, even though parts of it will be hard to hear. My job in this conversation is to give you the clearest picture I can, so you have real information to make decisions with. Is that a conversation you're ready to have?"*

Asking for consent to have the hard conversation is not a stalling tactic — it's a genuine preparation move. It gives the person a moment to shift into receiving mode rather than being blindsided. Almost no one says no. And the ones who ask for a day to prepare are usually more ready to engage productively when the conversation happens.

### Quick Reference: The Difficult Conversation Framework

Movement	What You're Doing	The Key Rule	Common Mistake
1. Open	Name the topic directly; signal it's real; invite their perspective	No preamble longer than two sentences; name the topic in the first breath	So much setup that the actual topic gets buried — the person doesn't know what's happening until minute five
2. Explore	State the specific observation; ask an open question; listen to the answer before responding	Lead with the observation, not the conclusion. Ask before you tell.	Stating conclusions ('your attitude has been poor') rather than behaviors ('in Tuesday's meeting, you spoke over three colleagues')
3. Align	Establish specifically what changes, by when, and what both parties are committing to	Get explicit verbal agreement — not nodding, not silence, actual words	Ending without a clear, mutually understood expectation. 'Let's figure it out' is not alignment.

Movement	What You're Doing	The Key Rule	Common Mistake
4. Close	Name the follow-through — when and how you'll come back to it	Schedule the check-in before you leave the room	Treating the conversation as complete when it ends. The completion is the follow-through, not the dialogue.

## What Actually Happens When You Have the Conversation

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Leaders who avoid difficult conversations consistently overestimate how badly they will go. The mental simulation that keeps the conversation in the draft folder is almost always worse than the actual exchange.

The research on difficult conversations in organizational settings consistently shows:

- Most people, when given specific and behaviorally grounded feedback delivered with respect, receive it without the emotional explosion the leader was anticipating. Defensiveness is common. Catastrophic breakdown is not.
- People almost always know something is wrong before the conversation happens. The conversation rarely surprises the recipient the way the leader imagines it will. What it does is replace ambient dread with specific information — and specific information, even when difficult, is almost always preferred to ambiguity.
- The relationship rarely suffers the way the leader fears. Leaders consistently report that difficult conversations, when handled well, improve rather than damage the relationship. The team member understands they are being taken seriously enough to be told the truth.
- The leader's sense of their own credibility improves. One of the quiet costs of avoidance is the low-level shame of knowing you haven't done something you should have done. Having the conversation — even imperfectly — removes that weight.

***The conversation you're imagining is almost certainly worse than the conversation you'll actually have. The one you keep not having, however, is guaranteed to get harder.***

## The Bottom Line

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Tom eventually had the conversation with Kevin — eleven weeks too late, in the wrong context, without the structure that would have made it land as feedback rather than ambush. Kevin left four months later. In his exit interview, he said the thing that exit interviews always say when this happens: 'I wish someone had told me sooner. I could have done something about it.'

That sentence — 'I could have done something about it' — is worth sitting with. The delayed conversation doesn't just cost the leader comfort and the organization performance. It costs the person on the receiving end the chance to course-correct while there was still time and opportunity to do so. Avoidance, framed as kindness, is often the least kind thing a leader can do.

The conversation you're not having right now — the one that's been living in the back of your mind as you've read this issue — has a name, a face, and a first sentence. The first sentence is the hardest part. Everything after it is easier than the thing you've been imagining.

Open a calendar. Find a slot. Send the invite.

#### **Coming Up in Issue #6**

Hiring and Retaining Toxic High-Performers — Why 'Results at Any Cost' Is Killing Your Company. The brilliant jerk who hits every number and poisons every team they touch. The leader who keeps them because the alternative feels unaffordable. Next issue: the real math on toxic high-performers, and how to remove them without losing your output.

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*Corporate Taboos is written for leaders who prefer honest diagnosis over comfortable denial.*

**Forward it to someone who needs it. You know who they are.**