



Ten Tough Conversations Every Leader Should Master

A Practical Guide for Senior Decision-Makers in New Zealand Workplaces

1. Addressing Underperformance

Scenario: An employee's work consistently falls short of required standards.

Benefits of Addressing:

- Restores productivity and team morale.
- Signals fairness and accountability.

Costs & Risks of Avoidance:

- Declining output spreads to others.
- High performers disengage or leave.

One Tool: C-B-A format (Context, Behaviour, Action). Clearly state the context, describe the behaviour factually, and agree on the action required.

Case Study Example: At a national building supplies retailer, a section supervisor noticed a team member routinely missed merchandising deadlines, leaving aisles untidy before peak weekend traffic. The manager, hesitant to confront the issue, hoped it would "self-correct." Instead, two other team members began cutting corners. When the supervisor finally used the C-B-A format, the underperformer admitted they didn't understand the new planogram system. A short refresher training fixed the problem and signaled to the rest of the team that standards mattered.

2. Handling Persistent Lateness or Absenteeism

Scenario: A reliable team member's attendance begins slipping.

Benefits of Addressing:

- Maintains fairness.
- Reduces operational disruption.



Costs & Risks of Avoidance:

- Resentment from punctual staff.
- Potential compliance issues.

One Tool: Impact Lens. Link attendance issues directly to impacts on workload, clients, and culture.

Case Study Example: At a major hotel chain, a front desk staff member began arriving 15–20 minutes late three times a week, leaving colleagues to handle queues during morning check-outs. Using the Impact Lens, the manager highlighted how the delays led to rushed service, poor guest reviews, and extra strain on peers. Framing it in terms of guest satisfaction and team wellbeing prompted the employee to commit to better time management.

3. Managing Conflict Between Team Members

Scenario: Two employees' disagreements are starting to affect others.

Benefits of Addressing:

- Restores collaboration and trust.
- Prevents escalation into HR/legal matters.

Costs & Risks of Avoidance:

- Toxic culture.
- Increased turnover.

One Tool: Shared Goal Reset — Get both parties to agree on a common outcome before addressing grievances.

Case Study Example: At a large manufacturing and distribution company, two dispatch coordinators clashed over resource allocation, with tension spilling onto the warehouse floor. The operations manager brought them together, asking each to outline what “a good day’s work” looked like. Both said “on-time deliveries and fewer driver complaints.” That shared goal reset the tone, allowing them to negotiate a fairer allocation process.



4. Delivering Negative Feedback

Scenario: A high performer drops the ball on a key project.

Benefits of Addressing:

- Drives improvement.
- Reinforces standards.

Costs & Risks of Avoidance:

- Underperformance normalises.
- “Silent quitting” spreads.

One Tool: Feed-Forward Framing. Focus on what to do differently next time.

Case Study Example: At a regional logistics provider, a team lead mishandled a major client’s urgent order. Instead of dwelling on the error, the manager framed the conversation around future action: “Next time we get an urgent multi-site request, what’s the first thing we’ll do differently?” The discussion turned into a process review that improved turnaround time by 18%.

5. Discussing Career Progression Limitations

Scenario: A valued employee expects a promotion that isn’t available.

Benefits of Addressing:

- Builds trust.
- Retains talent via lateral growth.

Costs & Risks of Avoidance:

- Disengagement.
- Losing them to a competitor.

One Tool: Option Mapping. Present three development or stretch options besides promotion.

Case Study Example: At a business technology solutions firm, a client manager believed they were next in line for a senior sales role. The manager explained the role wouldn’t open for at least 18 months but used Option Mapping to offer leadership training, a major account project, and mentoring



a junior rep. The employee stayed and entered the next promotion round with stronger qualifications.

6. Handling Resistance to Change

Scenario: Staff push back on a new process or technology.

Benefits of Addressing:

- Faster adoption.
- Less sabotage and morale dips.

Costs & Risks of Avoidance:

- Delayed projects.
- Lost opportunities.

One Tool: Listen-Label-Link. Listen to the concern, label the emotion, link change to shared values or benefits.

Case Study Example: At a city council, a new digital filing system met with resistance from long-serving administrators. In a group meeting, the manager acknowledged ("It sounds like this is frustrating and disruptive for you"), then linked the system to faster public service and reduced backlogs. Adoption rates improved once staff saw the connection to their shared goal of better community service.

7. Talking About Mental Health & Wellbeing Concerns

Scenario: Signs of stress or burnout appear in an employee.

Benefits of Addressing:

- Early intervention reduces absenteeism.
- Strengthens organisation's reputation.

Costs & Risks of Avoidance:

- Burnout and resignations.
- Legal/health & safety exposure.

One Tool: Signpost & Support. Signpost the concern, ask open questions, connect to support.



Case Study Example: At a large catering and facilities services provider, a site supervisor noticed a chef showing visible signs of fatigue and irritability. Using the Signpost & Support method, they raised the changes they'd observed, asked how the chef was coping, and arranged temporary schedule adjustments. The chef accessed EAP services and avoided extended sick leave.

8. Challenging Unethical or Unsafe Behaviour

Scenario: You witness a breach of safety or ethics.

Benefits of Addressing:

- Maintains compliance.
- Protects wellbeing and brand.

Costs & Risks of Avoidance:

- Legal penalties.
- Loss of trust.

One Tool: Zero-Tolerance Script. State behaviour, reference the standard breached, outline immediate steps.

Case Study Example: At an energy and infrastructure services company, a crew member bypassed a lockout-tagout procedure to speed up a repair. The site manager immediately used the Zero-Tolerance Script, halting work, citing the safety breach, and reinforcing that speed could never outweigh safety. This firm stance prevented a repeat and reinforced a culture of safety.

9. Dealing with Cultural or Behavioural Misalignment

Scenario: An employee's conduct clashes with organisational values.

Benefits of Addressing:

- Preserves culture.
- Encourages inclusion within agreed norms.

Costs & Risks of Avoidance:

- Erosion of identity.
- Lost cohesion.



One Tool: Values Alignment Conversation. Describe the gap, reference values, co-create solutions.

Case Study Example: At a premium home fixtures supplier, a new hire in the showroom was technically skilled but often dismissed colleagues' ideas. The manager referenced the company's stated value of "Collaboration in Design" and worked with the employee to develop more inclusive meeting behaviours. Within months, peer feedback improved markedly.

10. Managing Up – Giving Feedback to a Senior

Scenario: You need to address an issue with someone above you.

Benefits of Addressing:

- Improves decision-making.
- Builds mutual trust.

Costs & Risks of Avoidance:

- Poor processes persist.
- Missed innovation opportunities.

One Tool: Evidence-Impact-Request. Present facts, describe the impact, make a respectful request.

Case Study Example: At a commercial interiors fit-out company, a project manager found that last-minute design changes from the GM were derailing schedules. In a one-on-one, they presented evidence of delays, outlined impacts on client satisfaction, and requested earlier involvement in decision-making. The GM agreed to weekly check-ins, reducing changes mid-project by 40%.

Why These Conversations Matter

- Avoiding these conversations costs far more than having them.
- Leaders need confidence, structure, and skill to get them right.
- Training makes these skills consistent across your organisation, reducing risk and increasing performance.