

Top 10 Mistakes with Difficult Conversations

1. Avoiding the conversation altogether

When things are uncomfortable, leaders sometimes delay or skip the conversation, hoping it'll "sort itself out." Spoiler: it rarely does. Avoidance breeds confusion, resentment, and repeat behaviour.

Example: That team member who keeps turning up late? If you don't raise it, they'll think it doesn't matter. And so will everyone else.

2. Going in without a plan

Winging it is fine for karaoke. Not for conversations with legal or emotional consequences. A little structure helps you stay clear and calm.

Example: Trying to address "performance issues" with vague language like "lift your game" just leaves people guessing.

3. Talking too much, listening too little

Nerves can turn a feedback session into a monologue. But when you don't leave space for the other person, you miss important context, or come off like a lecture.

Example: You launch into what went wrong on a client call without realising their headset cut out for half of it.

4. Sugar-coating the message

Trying to be "nice" by softening the issue too much confuses people. Clarity is kindness. If they don't know what needs to change, they can't change it.

Example: You say "It would be great if you could maybe..." when you actually mean "You need to stop doing X by Friday."

5. Making it personal

You're addressing behaviour, not personality. Criticising who someone is rather than what they did invites defensiveness and hurts trust.

Example: "You're lazy" versus "You missed the last two deadlines without warning." One's an insult, the other's a fact.

6. Dumping feedback in bulk

Saving up all your gripes for one epic conversation can feel like an ambush. Feedback works best when it's timely and specific, not a year's worth of notes in one go. You can then fall victim to recency bias.

Example: "Also, I've been meaning to say, back in March..." is not helpful mid-September.

7. Getting emotional or defensive

Difficult doesn't mean dramatic. If you lose your cool, they will too. Stay grounded. The goal is behaviour change, not catharsis.

Example: If they push back and your voice rises with theirs, you've entered the least productive version of a debate.

8. Not agreeing on next steps

You've had the talk — great. But now what? Without a clear plan or agreement, nothing changes. And accountability goes out the window.

Example: You say "Let's work on that," and they walk away thinking "What exactly am I meant to do differently?"

9. Doing it in the wrong setting

Privacy matters. So does neutrality. The wrong environment can make things feel performative or unsafe.

Example: Calling someone out in front of others or doing a serious 1-on-1 in the staff kitchen = rookie move.

10. Failing to follow up

One conversation won't fix everything. Reinforcement, support, and follow-up show that you're serious and invested.

Example: You give great feedback Monday, but never check back in. It lands as "out of sight, out of mind."

10 MISTAKES MADE BY LEADERS IN DIFFICULT WORKPLACE CONVERSATIONS



1 Not Preparing

Entering a conversation without proper preparation can lead to misunderstandings. Taking time to consider your key points ensures clarity.

2 Avoiding the Issue

Sidestepping the main issue can prolong problems and erode trust. It's important to tackle difficult topics head-on.

3 Lacking Empathy

Focusing solely on your own perspective can make you seem detached or uncaring. Empathy doesn't mean agreeing with the other person — it means taking the time to understand their view before responding.

4 Talking Too Much

Nerves can turn a feedback session into a monologue. But when you don't leave space for the other person, you miss important context, or come off like a lecture.

5 Being Too Direct

Honesty matters, but tone matters too. Blunt delivery can shut people down before your message even lands. You can be clear without being cutting — it's about balancing truth with tact.

6 Failing to Listen

Not actively listening can cause key points to be missed and the conversation to derail. Engaging in attentive listening shows that you value the other person's input.

7 Letting Emotions Take Over

Allowing frustration or anger to dominate can escalate tensions. Maintaining composure helps keep the discussion productive.

8 Not Setting Clear Outcomes

Focusing only on the issue without discussing resolutions can result in ambiguity and a lack of accountability.

9 Ignoring Nonverbal Cues

Overlooking body language and facial expressions can lead to missed signals. Observing these cues provides additional context and insight.

10 Failing to Follow Up

Without a clear plan or agreement, nothing changes.



CALCULATE THE COST OF STAFF AVOIDING TOUGH WORKPLACE CONVERSATIONS

Survey



Privately ask your team members
how much time per week they spend
on activity that could have been
prevented by a tough conversation

Employee Productivity Loss



Est weekly hours lost
x average hourly wage
x 52

\$ _____ ?

Client Dissatisfaction / Churn

Your est client annual churn rate %
x average annual client revenue
x your total number of clients



\$ _____ ?

Employee Turnover Costs

Average salary of departing staff
x 100% = replacement costs

\$ _____ ?



Legal & Compliance Risks



If your firm settles just one workplace
conflict at \$30,000, that's already more
than the cost of proactive training.

\$ _____ ?

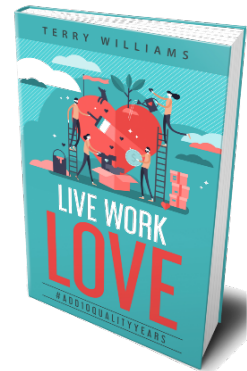
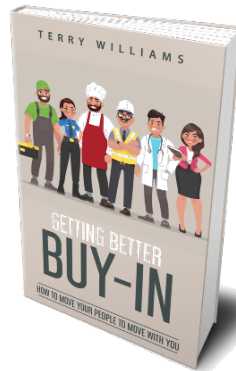
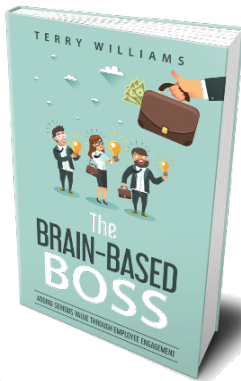
Training has a rapid & significant ROI

If even one talented team member
doesn't quit for a year with a
minimal \$50,000 salary, because
you spent \$12,500 on training, that's
good ROI!



TERRY WILLIAMS

THE PEOPLE ENGAGEMENT **EXPERTS**



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