

The Owner's Guide to Difficult Conversations

A Simple Framework for Addressing Issues
Without Creating Drama

WORKBOOK

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The Owner's Guide to Difficult Conversations

A Simple Framework for Addressing Issues Without Creating Drama Introduction

In my experience, most business owners know a conversation needs to happen. What they struggle with is knowing how to have it without damaging the relationship, creating conflict, or second-guessing themselves afterward.

Leaders worry about:

- ✧ Hurting someone's feelings
- ✧ Creating conflict
- ✧ Being perceived as the bad guy
- ✧ Losing an employee
- ✧ Saying the wrong thing
- ✧ Making the situation worse

As a result, many conversations happen too late.

Small issues become big issues.

Frustration builds.

Resentment grows.

Performance declines.

The purpose of this framework is to help you address issues early, clearly, and respectfully—without creating unnecessary drama.



Step 1: Clarify the Actual Issue

Before speaking with the employee, ask yourself:
What specifically happened?

Many difficult conversations become uncomfortable because leaders enter the conversation with frustration, assumptions, or stories they've created about the situation rather than focusing on the actual behavior that needs to be addressed.

Focus on facts, not assumptions.

Instead of:

"She doesn't care."

Try:

"She has arrived 10–15 minutes late three times this month."

Instead of:

"He's not committed to the team."

Try:

"He missed two team meetings without communicating in advance."

A question I often ask business owners is:
"If I had been standing beside you, what would I have seen or heard?"

The answer is usually the fact.

The clearer you are about what is happening,
the easier the conversation becomes.

Jennifer's Leadership Note

Address the behavior, not the person.

Behavior can be discussed, corrected, and improved.
Character judgments almost always create defensiveness.



Step 2: Separate Facts From Feelings

Facts tell you what happened.

Feelings tell you why it matters.

Both are important, but they serve different purposes.

When leaders are frustrated, it's easy to jump straight into the emotional impact of a situation. The challenge is that emotions can cloud clarity and make the conversation feel personal.

Start with the facts, then explain the impact.

For example:

Fact:

"The consultation was skipped."

Impact:

"When consultations are skipped, clients may not receive the experience we promise, which can affect retention and referrals."

The goal is not to remove emotion from leadership.

The goal is to prevent emotion from leading the conversation.

Jennifer's Leadership Note

You are allowed to be frustrated.

Just don't let frustration become your strategy.



Step 3: Address It Early

**One of the biggest mistakes leaders make
is waiting too long.**

Many owners hope the issue will resolve itself.

Instead, frustration builds, resentment grows,
and what could have been a simple conversation
becomes a much larger problem.

By the time many leaders decide to address the issue,
they're no longer discussing the behavior itself—
they're discussing weeks or months of
accumulated frustration.

**Small issues are often easier to address because
they haven't yet become patterns.**

The sooner you address a concern,
the less emotional charge it typically carries.

Jennifer's Leadership Note

The conversation you avoid today is often the conversation you
have to have later—
with more frustration attached to it.
Early conversations are usually easier conversations.



Step 4: Start With Curiosity.

**One of the quickest ways to create defensiveness
is to start with assumptions.**

Instead, begin with curiosity.

Try:

"Can you help me understand what happened?"

"Is there something I'm missing?"

"Walk me through your perspective."

"Help me understand what was going on from your side."

Often there is information you don't yet have.

The goal is not to agree with everything you hear.

The goal is to understand before you respond.

Understanding someone's perspective does not mean
excusing the behavior.

It simply ensures you're responding to the full picture
rather than reacting to assumptions.

Jennifer's Leadership Note

Seek understanding before seeking agreement.



Step 5: Describe the Impact

**Once you've heard their perspective,
explain why the issue matters.**

Focus on the impact of the behavior rather
than making the conversation personal.

When people understand how their actions affect others,
they are often more willing to take ownership and make changes.

For example:

Behavior:

"A team member consistently arrives late."

Impact:

"When team members arrive late, others may feel they are carrying more of
the workload, and it can create frustration within the team."

Behavior:

"A consultation is regularly shortened or skipped."

Impact:

"When consultations are rushed or skipped, clients may not
receive the experience we promise,
which can affect trust, retention, and referrals."

The goal is not to make someone feel bad.
The goal is to help them understand why the issue needs to be addressed and
the role they play in creating a positive outcome.

Jennifer's Leadership Note

People are often more willing to change a behavior
when they understand its impact.

Address the effect of the behavior, not the value of the person.



Step 6: Align on Expectations

**Many performance issues
are actually expectation issues.**

Before holding someone accountable, make sure expectations have been clearly communicated.

Ask yourself:

Have I clearly defined the standard?

Have I explained what success looks like?

Would two people describe the expectation the same way?

Clarity creates ownership.

**The more specific you are,
the easier it becomes for people to succeed.**

Jennifer's Leadership Note

People cannot consistently meet expectations
they don't fully understand.



Step 7: Collaborate on a Solution

One of the biggest mistakes leaders make is jumping straight into problem-solving.

While it may feel faster to provide all the answers, employees are often more committed to solutions they help create.

Once the issue has been discussed and expectations are clear, invite the employee into the solution.

Try asking:

- "What ideas do you have to prevent this from happening again?"
- "What do you think needs to happen moving forward?"
- "What support would help you be successful?"
- "What does success look like from your perspective?"

This doesn't mean lowering the standard or avoiding accountability. It means creating ownership.

When employees participate in creating the solution, they are more likely to follow through because they have invested in the outcome.

Jennifer's Leadership Note

Resist the urge to solve every problem for your team.

Great leaders create ownership by helping people think through solutions, not by providing all the answers.



Step 8: Confirm Accountability

**Before ending the conversation,
make sure both parties are clear on what happens next.**

Review:

What was agreed upon?

What needs to change?

What success looks like?

When you'll follow up?

Avoid vague endings such as:
"Let's just keep an eye on it."

Instead, create a clear commitment and timeline.

Jennifer's Leadership Note

Accountability isn't about catching people doing something wrong.
It's about making sure everyone leaves the conversation with the same
understanding of what happens next.



Step 9: Follow Up

A difficult conversation is rarely a one-time event.

Following up demonstrates that the conversation mattered
and
that you are committed to supporting improvement.

Acknowledge progress when you see it.

Provide coaching when needed.

Address setbacks early.

Leadership is not just about accountability.
It's also about support.

Jennifer's Leadership Note

Progress rarely happens because of one conversation.
It happens when leaders are willing to stay engaged long enough to reinforce
expectations, recognize improvement, and support change.

Accountability is not an event. It's an ongoing conversation.

Leadership can be lonely.

As a business owner, you're expected to have the answers.

You're responsible for your team, your clients, your finances, your growth, and the countless decisions that come with running a business.

Yet many owners have no one they can openly talk things through with.

No sounding board. No strategic partner.

No trusted advisor to help them navigate the challenges, opportunities, and decisions that come with leadership.

That's where I come in.

I'm Jennifer Ellis, a Business Coach and Strategic Partner for service-based business owners.

As a former salon owner and coach with over 14 years of experience, I've helped hundreds of business owners navigate difficult conversations, strengthen leadership skills, improve accountability, build stronger teams, and make confident business decisions.

My approach combines practical business strategy with real-world leadership experience because successful businesses are built by people, not just systems.

I help owners move from uncertainty and overwhelm to greater clarity, confidence, and ownership.

Not Sure What To Do Next?

Whether you're dealing with a difficult employee situation, a leadership challenge, staffing concerns, accountability issues, or an important business decision, you don't have to figure it out alone.

Sometimes the most valuable thing a business owner can have is a trusted partner to help them think through what comes next.

Book a Strategic Business Partner Session and gain clarity, perspective, and a practical plan for moving forward.

How I Can Support You

Strategic Business Partner Sessions

A focused coaching session designed to help you gain clarity, solve challenges, and create a practical plan for moving forward.

Owner Advisory Coaching

Ongoing support for business owners who want a trusted partner to help them navigate leadership, team performance, accountability, and growth.

Leadership Tools & Resources

Practical frameworks, worksheets, and training designed to help you lead with greater confidence and clarity.

Let's Connect

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Difficult Conversation Planning Worksheet



A simple planning tool to help you prepare for difficult conversations with greater clarity and confidence.

1 CLARIFY THE ISSUE

What specifically happened?

Describe the behavior using facts, not assumptions.

2 UNDERSTAND THE IMPACT

What impact is this having?

How is this affecting the employee, team, client experience, or business?

3 DEFINE SUCCESS

What outcome am I hoping for?

4 CHOOSE YOUR PRIMARY OUTCOME

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| ☐ Clarity | ☐ Accountability | ☐ Behavior Change |
| ☐ Understanding | ☐ Commitment | ☐ Other: _____ |

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5 ENTER WITH CURIOSITY

What questions can I ask to better understand their perspective?

6 CREATE CLARITY

What expectations need to be clarified?

7 CONFIRM ACCOUNTABILITY

What actions, timelines, or commitments need to be discussed?

8 FOLLOW-UP PLAN

When will I follow up?

Date:

Notes:



Jennifer's Conversation Prep Notes

The goal is not to
win the conversation.



The goal is to create
**clarity, accountability,
and forward movement.**



Accountability is not an event.

It's an ongoing conversation.