

# Difficult Conversations — Workbook

This workbook is your hands-on companion to the Difficult Conversations course. Use each section before, during, and after real conversations to move from theory to practiced skill. Complete the exercises in sequence for a new situation, or return to individual tools whenever a conversation is coming up that requires preparation.

## Understanding What Makes Conversations Difficult

Build self-awareness about your own patterns and the layers at work in any difficult conversation.

### Exercise: Three Conversations Audit

Think of a difficult conversation you recently avoided or handled badly. Walk through the Three Conversations Model to map all three layers that were active.

- What was the 'What Happened' dispute — what were the competing versions of events or who-did-what?

---

- What emotions were present for you that you did not express? What emotions do you think were present for the other person?

---

- What identity concern was underneath it for you — what did the situation threaten about how you see yourself?

---

- If you had acknowledged all three layers explicitly in that conversation, what might you have said differently?

### Worksheet: Contribution Map

Before your next difficult conversation, complete this map to shift from blame to contribution. Be honest and start with your own column.

Situation / what the conflict or issue is about

---

My contribution: actions I took that made this worse or allowed it to continue

---

My contribution: assumptions I made that turned out to be wrong

---

My contribution: things I failed to say or do clearly

---

Their contribution: actions on their side that contributed (fill after completing yours)

---

One thing I now see differently about my role in this situation

---

---

## Checklist: Avoidance Pattern Awareness

- I can name my most common avoidance pattern (email workaround / hint-and-hope / explosion / third-party venting / procedural escape)
- I have identified one current situation I am avoiding and can describe what I am doing instead of the direct conversation
- I understand the specific cost this avoidance is imposing on the relationship or the work
- I have set a date and time to initiate the conversation I have been avoiding
- I have written down what I am afraid will happen if I have the conversation — and tested whether that fear is based on evidence or assumption

## Preparing for the Conversation

Complete the structured pre-conversation planning work that separates intentional dialogue from reactive confrontation.

### Worksheet: Pre-Conversation Preparation Sheet

Complete all fields for a specific upcoming difficult conversation before you initiate it.  
The specific situation or issue I need to address

---

My Intent Statement (complete: 'My goal in this conversation is to...')

---

Check: does my Intent Statement contain 'make them see,' 'prove,' or 'get them to admit'? (rewrite if yes)

---

SBI Opening — Situation (when/where exactly)

---

SBI Opening — Behavior (observable action, no judgment words)

---

SBI Opening — Impact (what it caused for me, the team, or the work)

---

Opening question I will ask after my SBI statement

---

Setting: where, when, and estimated duration

---

Advance notice message I will send (what I will say to schedule the conversation)

---

### Exercise: Reaction Mapping

Map the two or three most likely responses the other person might have and plan your move for each. This removes surprise from the high-pressure opening minutes.

- What is the most likely immediate reaction from this person — denial, counter-attack, shutdown, or quick agreement? What will you say or do if that happens?
- What is a second possible reaction you should be prepared for? Write your planned response.
- What is the one response that would most throw you off balance? How will you recognize it and what will you do to stay grounded?

---

## Checklist: Conversation Readiness Checklist

- My Intent Statement is written and does not contain winning, punishing, or avoiding as the goal
- My SBI opening has been drafted and reviewed for judgment words (all removed or replaced with observable behavior)
- I have mapped at least two likely reactions and prepared a response for each
- The setting is private, unhurried (45+ minutes scheduled), and on neutral ground if possible
- I have sent an advance notice message at least 24 hours before the conversation
- I know my personal emotional triggers for this specific person or dynamic and have a plan if they activate
- I have completed a Contribution Map and can name my own role in the situation

## Navigating the Conversation in Real Time

Practice the in-the-moment skills of listening, staying regulated, and de-escalating defensiveness so you can use them automatically under pressure.

### Exercise: Three-Level Listening Practice

Use a recent conversation — or role-play with a partner — to practice listening at all three levels simultaneously. After the other person speaks for 60-90 seconds, write or say a paraphrase that covers content, emotion, and identity.

- Write a paraphrase of something the other person said that reflects only their content (facts and claims).  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Now rewrite the paraphrase to also include the emotion you sensed underneath the words.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Now add what identity concern you think was present — what did the situation threaten for them? Check with: 'Is that close to what you mean?'  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What would you normally have said in response, and how does the three-level version change the likely direction of the conversation?  
\_\_\_\_\_

### Worksheet: Personal Trigger Inventory

Complete this worksheet once and update it after significant conversations. Self-knowledge of your triggers is the foundation of in-the-moment regulation.

Trigger phrase or dynamic #1 that reliably activates a disproportionate emotional response in me

How I typically react when this trigger fires (behavior I want to change)

Early physical signal I can use to recognize the trigger activating (e.g., tightness in chest, faster speech)

Regulation technique I will use when I notice this signal (physiological sigh / labeling / the pause)

Trigger phrase or dynamic #2

How I typically react

Early physical signal

Regulation technique

Conversation situation where I am most likely to flip the lid (who, what type of conversation)

---

---

## Checklist: In-the-Moment De-escalation Moves

- I can recognize the physical signs of defensive escalation in myself before I act on them
- I know the CURA protocol (Calm / Understand / Recognize / Affirm intent) and can recall it under stress
- I can name the emotion I sense in the other person without diagnosing or projecting ('It sounds like this feels unfair to you')
- I have practiced the paraphrase-and-check technique at least once before using it in a high-stakes conversation
- I know the redirect phrase to use when the conversation goes off-track ('Can we stay with this situation for now?')
- I am comfortable using the pause ('Give me a moment to think about that') without interpreting silence as weakness
- I know when to table a conversation that has escalated beyond productive dialogue and how to do it without abandoning the issue

## Closing Well and Following Through

Build the habits of agreement-creation, relationship repair, and deliberate practice that make difficult conversations produce durable results.

### Worksheet: Mutual Agreement Record

Complete this within 24 hours of any significant difficult conversation and send a summary to the other party. This is your shared reference for follow-through.

Date and participants

---

The specific behavior that will change (observable, not attitudinal)

---

Who is responsible for this change

---

Timeline and frequency (by when, how often)

---

Scheduled check-in date to review progress

---

What I committed to change or do differently (my side of the mutual agreement)

---

Obstacles the other person raised and how we agreed to address them

---

Any unresolved issues and when we will address them

---

### Exercise: After-Action Review

Within 24 hours of a significant difficult conversation, spend 10 minutes answering these four questions. This structured reflection accelerates skill development faster than experience alone.

- What did you intend to happen? (your plan and hoped-for outcome going in)
- What actually happened? Be specific and behavioral — what did you do, what did the other person do, what was the outcome?
- What explains the gap between your intent and what happened? What did you do that contributed to the

difference? What did the other person do?

- 
- What is one specific thing you will do differently in the next similar conversation? (Not a general self-improvement goal — one observable behavior change)
- 

### Checklist: Follow-Through and Practice-Building Habits

- I sent or shared a written summary of the agreement within 24 hours of the conversation
- I acknowledged the other person's effort to engage (without over-praising or over-pursuing)
- I noticed and specifically acknowledged the behavior change when it happened
- I have a scheduled check-in in my calendar for the agreed date
- I completed an After-Action Review within 24 hours of the conversation
- I have identified a low-stakes situation this week to practice SBI feedback
- I have a practice partner I can debrief conversations with and role-play upcoming ones
- I have reviewed my personal trigger inventory and updated it if needed after this conversation

### Your Action Plan

1. Identify one conversation you have been avoiding and name the specific avoidance pattern you are using
2. Complete a Contribution Map for that situation, starting with your own column
3. Write an Intent Statement that focuses on mutual understanding and a specific outcome — no winning, punishing, or avoiding
4. Draft your SBI opening, check it for judgment words, and revise until it contains only observable behaviors
5. Map two or three likely reactions and write a planned response for each before you initiate
6. Schedule the conversation with at least 24 hours notice, in a private, unhurried, neutral setting
7. During the conversation, lead with your SBI opening then stop and ask a genuine question before adding more
8. Practice three-level listening and paraphrase-and-check at least once during the conversation
9. Close with a four-part agreement: specific behavior, timeline, check-in date, and your mutual commitment
10. Complete an After-Action Review within 24 hours and implement one behavioral adjustment in your next conversation









