

# The Difficult Conversations Toolkit

*Three Questions That Transform Conversation-Avoiding Cultures into  
Psychologically Safe, High-Performing Teams*

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## INTRODUCTION

Your team isn't having difficult conversations. Well, actually they are—just not with you. And that silence is costing you talent, trust, and results.

This toolkit provides you with the framework, scripts, and exercises to create the conditions where the conversations that matter actually happen. It's based on over 20 years of working with leaders and organisations to build psychologically safe, high-performing teams.

### The Problem with 'Open Door' Policies

Many leaders genuinely believe they have an open door policy. They say things like "my door is always open" in meetings and encourage feedback. But too often, the team has learned that the door is actually closed—not because leaders are bad people, but because every time someone tried to walk through that door with a difficult conversation, something happened that taught them: *don't do that again*.

Maybe their concern was met with defensiveness. Maybe it was dismissed as "not the right time." Maybe the leader listened, but nothing changed. Whatever the response was, the team learned: *difficult conversations aren't welcome here*.

### How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit contains:

1. **The Three Questions Framework** – The core questions that reverse conversation-avoiding cultures
2. **Conversation Scripts** – Exact language you can use in different scenarios
3. **Team Exercises** – Structured activities to build psychological safety
4. **Facilitation Guides** – Step-by-step instructions for running sessions
5. **Common Mistakes to Avoid** – What derails most leaders and how to prevent it

## PART ONE: THE THREE QUESTIONS FRAMEWORK

These aren't questions you just ask once in a workshop and then tick a box. These are questions you embed into how you lead.

### Question 1: "What conversation are we not having?"

This question does something powerful: it acknowledges that avoidance exists. It names the elephant in the room before you even know what the elephant is.

#### When to Use This Question

- When you sense tension or misalignment but no one's addressing it directly
- In team meetings where important topics seem to be skirted around
- When decisions are being made without the full picture
- After noticing recurring frustrations that never get resolved

#### How It Works in Practice

1. In a team meeting, pause the agenda
2. Say: "Before we move on, I want to ask: what conversation are we not having right now? What's the thing that we're dancing around but not actually addressing?"
3. Accept that the first time you ask this, you might get silence—and that's okay
4. Wait uncomfortably if necessary (at least 30 seconds)
5. When someone speaks, **do not defend, do not dismiss, do not problem-solve immediately**
6. Simply acknowledge: "Thank you for naming that. That's important."
7. Then ask: "Does anyone else feel this way, or does anyone see this differently?"

**Key Principle:** You're not trying to fix it in that moment. You're trying to make it safe to name it.

### Question 2: "What would make it safe to have that conversation?"

Once you know what conversation is being avoided, this question shifts from diagnosis to design. You're asking your team to co-create the conditions for safety.

#### What Teams Typically Need

When I've worked with teams who felt they couldn't challenge decisions, here's what they've told me would help:

- "If it happened one-on-one first, not in front of the whole team"
- "If it was framed as 'I'm seeing something different—help me understand your thinking' rather than 'you're wrong'"
- "If there was a follow-up conversation, not just in the heat of the moment"

#### Your Role as Leader

1. Listen to what they need
2. Actually implement it
3. If they say they need one-to-ones, schedule them
4. If they say they need time to process before responding, build that in

**Warning:** This is where most leaders fail. They ask the question, get the answer, and then nothing changes. That teaches the team: "We're not really interested in making things safe. We just wanted to look like we cared."

### Question 3: "What's the cost of continuing to avoid it?"

This is the question that creates urgency. Here is the truth: avoidance might feel safe in the short term—it's comfortable, it's conflict-free—but it is expensive.

#### The Real Costs of Avoidance

When you ask "If we don't have this conversation, what does that cost us?" consider:

- **Trust** – What does it cost in team trust when issues fester?
- **Morale** – How does avoidance affect team energy and engagement?
- **Talent** – Which good people might leave because of unaddressed issues?
- **Performance** – What does it cost high performers to watch you tolerate what you shouldn't?
- **Mission** – How does avoidance undermine what you're trying to achieve?
- **Financial** – Sometimes there are direct financial implications too

**The Spiral:** When good people leave, the work doesn't go away. It falls on the people who stay, who are already overworked, which leads to burnout, which leads to more people leaving.

## PART TWO: CONVERSATION SCRIPTS

Use these scripts as starting points. Adapt the language to feel natural to you, but maintain the core principles behind each phrase.

### Script 1: Introducing the Framework in a Team Meeting

Setting Context

*"I want to try something today. I'm asking because I genuinely want to know—not because I have an agenda or a right answer already in mind."*

Asking the First Question

*"What conversation are we not having as a team right now? What's the thing we're dancing around but not actually addressing?"*

[Wait at least 30 seconds. It will feel long. Let it.]

Responding to What's Shared

*"Thank you for sharing that. I'm glad you named it."*

[Do not defend. Do not explain. Do not jump to solutions.]

Moving to Question 2

*"What would need to be true for us to have that conversation in a way that feels safe and productive?"*

[Listen. Take notes. Commit to at least one thing they've suggested.]

Closing the Meeting

*"Thank you for being open with me today. I've heard [summarise key themes]. I'm going to [specific action] by [specific timeframe]. I'll follow up with you on this."*

### Script 2: One-to-One Check-In

Opening

*"I want to make sure I'm creating an environment where you can bring things to me—even the difficult stuff. Is there anything you've been holding back or anything that's been on your mind that we haven't talked about?"*

If They Share Something

*"Thank you for telling me. I appreciate you trusting me with this. Can you help me understand more about [specific aspect]?"*

If They Say "Nothing"

*"That's good to hear. I want you to know that if something does come up—even if it's about me or decisions I've made—I genuinely want to know. The door is always open for those conversations."*

### Script 3: Following Up on a Raised Issue

Within one week of the original conversation:

*"I wanted to follow up on what you raised last week about [issue]. I've [action taken]. I'd like us to have that fuller conversation now. Based on what you said would help—[reference their conditions for safety]—here's how I'd like to approach it..."*

If you can't act yet:

*"I wanted to follow up on what you raised. I'm not able to address it fully yet because [honest reason], but I want you to know I haven't forgotten. I'll be able to [specific action] by [specific date]."*

### Script 4: When You're the Issue Being Raised

*"Thank you for telling me this. I can see this took courage, and I want you to know I'm not going to be defensive about it. Can you help me understand more specifically what I did and how it affected you/the team? I want to understand so I can do better."*

[After listening fully:]

*"I hear you. And I'm sorry that my [specific behaviour] had that impact. Here's what I'm going to do differently going forward: [specific commitment]. Would it be okay if we check in on this in [timeframe] so you can tell me if things have improved?"*

## PART THREE: TEAM EXERCISES

These exercises help teams practice having difficult conversations in a structured, safe environment.

### Exercise 1: The Elephant Mapping Exercise

**Purpose:** Surface unspoken issues in a low-risk way

**Time:** 45-60 minutes

**Materials:** Sticky notes, markers, flip chart or whiteboard

#### Instructions

1. **Individual reflection (5 mins):** Each person writes on sticky notes: "What are the elephants in our room? What topics do we avoid? What do we complain about to others but never address directly?"
2. **Anonymous posting (2 mins):** Everyone places their sticky notes on the flip chart at the same time
3. **Clustering (10 mins):** As a group, silently cluster similar themes together
4. **Naming (10 mins):** Give each cluster a name that captures the theme
5. **Prioritising (10 mins):** Each person gets 3 dots to vote on which elephants are most important to address
6. **Designing safety (15 mins):** For the top elephant, ask: "What would make it safe to have this conversation?"
7. **Commitment (5 mins):** Schedule when and how you'll have the conversation

## Exercise 2: The Cost-Benefit Analysis

**Purpose:** Create urgency around addressing avoided conversations

**Time:** 30-40 minutes

**Materials:** Worksheet (template below), pens

Instructions

1. Identify a specific conversation the team has been avoiding
2. In pairs or small groups, complete the worksheet
3. Share findings with the full group
4. Discuss: "Now that we see the cost, what are we going to do about it?"

### Cost-Benefit Analysis Worksheet

Cost of Avoiding	Benefit of Addressing
<b>Impact on trust:</b>	<b>What becomes possible:</b>
<b>Impact on morale:</b>	<b>Who would benefit:</b>
<b>Impact on talent retention:</b>	<b>Problems it would solve:</b>
<b>Impact on performance:</b>	<b>Relationships it would improve:</b>
<b>Financial impact:</b>	<b>Opportunities it would unlock:</b>
<b>Impact on our mission:</b>	<b>How we'd feel:</b>

## Exercise 3: Pair Practice – Safe Conversation Design

**Purpose:** Practice designing conditions for difficult conversations

**Time:** 25-30 minutes

**Materials:** Scenario cards (provided below)

### Instructions

1. Pair up team members
2. Each pair takes a scenario card
3. Person A describes what would make it safe for them to have this conversation
4. Person B asks clarifying questions to fully understand
5. Switch roles with a new scenario
6. Debrief: What themes emerged? What do we need as a team?

### Scenario Cards

Scenario A	Scenario B
You disagree with a decision your manager made that affects your workload significantly.	A colleague's behaviour in meetings is undermining your contributions.
Scenario C	Scenario D
You've noticed a team pattern that's causing problems but no one is talking about it.	You're feeling burnt out but worried about being seen as not coping.
Scenario E	Scenario F
You need to give feedback to someone more senior than you.	A process isn't working but the person who designed it is protective of it.

## PART FOUR: FACILITATION GUIDES

Step-by-step guides for running different types of sessions.

### Guide 1: First Team Meeting Introduction

**Duration:** 20-30 minutes (as part of a longer meeting)

**Best for:** Introducing the framework for the first time

#### Preparation

- Review the three questions and scripts
- Prepare yourself mentally for whatever might be shared
- Clear your calendar for follow-up within the week

#### Session Flow

1. **Set context (2 mins):** "I want to try something today. I'm asking because I genuinely want to know—not because I have an agenda or a right answer already in mind."
2. **Ask Question 1 (5-10 mins):** "What conversation are we not having as a team right now?" Wait at least 30 seconds. Let silence do its work.
3. **Acknowledge responses (3-5 mins):** Thank each person. Check if others share the view or see it differently. Don't defend or problem-solve.
4. **Ask Question 2 (5-8 mins):** "What would need to be true for us to have that conversation in a way that feels safe and productive?"
5. **Commit to action (3-5 mins):** Summarise what you heard. Make at least one specific commitment. Set a follow-up date.

#### After the Session

- Follow up within one week—either have the conversation or explain the delay
- Use the conditions the team identified
- Check in on how it went

### Guide 2: Workshop Session (Half-Day)

**Duration:** 3-4 hours

**Best for:** Deeper team development, building psychological safety

#### Agenda

1. **Welcome & context (15 mins):** Why we're here, what we'll cover, ground rules
2. **The case for difficult conversations (20 mins):** Share the research on psychological safety and team performance. Discuss the cost of avoidance.
3. **Exercise: Elephant Mapping (60 mins):** Full exercise as described above
4. Break (15 mins)
5. **The Three Questions Framework (30 mins):** Teach the framework with examples
6. **Exercise: Pair Practice (30 mins):** Safe Conversation Design exercise
7. **Action planning (30 mins):** What will we do differently? Who owns what? When will we check in?
8. **Close (10 mins):** Reflections and commitments

### Guide 3: One-to-One Check-In

**Duration:** 15-20 minutes (as part of a regular 1:1)

**Best for:** Building individual psychological safety

#### Approach

1. Start with genuine curiosity, not a checklist
2. Ask: "Is there anything you've been holding back or anything on your mind that we haven't talked about?"
3. If they share: listen fully, thank them, don't defend
4. If they say nothing: acknowledge that's fine, reinforce the open door
5. Ask periodically—not every session, but regularly enough to show you mean it

### Guide 4: Ongoing Team Practice

**Duration:** 5-10 minutes per meeting

**Best for:** Embedding the practice into team culture

#### Monthly Rhythm

1. **Week 1:** "What conversation are we not having?" Quick check-in at the start or end of a team meeting
2. **Week 2:** Follow up on any issues raised. Have the conversations identified.
3. **Week 3:** Reflection: "How did those conversations go? What did we learn?"
4. **Week 4:** Reset: "What else is emerging? What are we noticing?"

## PART FIVE: COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID

These are the mistakes I see leaders make most often when trying to implement this framework.

### Mistake 1: Asking Once and Giving Up

**What it looks like:** You ask the questions in one meeting, get silence or minimal response, and conclude "this doesn't work for our team."

**Why it happens:** If your team doesn't immediately open up, it doesn't mean this doesn't work. It means they've learned over months or years that it's not safe. You're asking them to unlearn that—and that takes consistency.

**What to do instead:** Keep asking. Keep creating space. Keep following through on what does get raised. Over time, your team will learn that difficult conversations are welcome here.

### Mistake 2: Asking But Not Changing Anything

**What it looks like:** You ask the questions, people share honestly, and then... nothing happens. No follow-up. No change. No acknowledgement that anything was said.

**Why it's worse than not asking at all:** Now you've confirmed what they already suspected—that you didn't really want to know. You just wanted to look like you cared.

**What to do instead:** If you're going to ask, you have to be willing to act on what you hear. Even if you can't solve everything immediately, acknowledge what was shared and explain what you're going to do.

### Mistake 3: Making It About Fixing the Team

**What it looks like:** You treat conversation avoidance as a team problem to be fixed, rather than examining your own leadership.

**The real question:** When teams avoid difficult conversations, the first question isn't "what's wrong with them?" It's "what have I done—or failed to do—that taught them it's not safe?"

**What to do instead:** Look at your own behaviour first. How do you respond when someone brings you a problem? When they challenge a decision? When they give you feedback you don't want to hear? This is about your leadership, not their dysfunction.

### Leader Self-Reflection: Have I Inadvertently Closed the Door?

Use this checklist honestly. For each behaviour, consider whether you've done this—even once—and what message it might have sent.

Behaviour	Have I done this?
Responded defensively when someone raised a concern	Yes / No / Sometimes
Dismissed feedback as "not the right time"	Yes / No / Sometimes
Listened but didn't take action or follow up	Yes / No / Sometimes
Explained or justified rather than truly heard	Yes / No / Sometimes
Jumped to problem-solving before fully understanding	Yes / No / Sometimes
Made the person feel like they were the problem	Yes / No / Sometimes
Said "my door is always open" but showed otherwise	Yes / No / Sometimes

## QUICK REFERENCE: THE THREE QUESTIONS

Print this page and keep it visible as a reminder.

### Question 1

*"What conversation are we not having?"*

**Purpose:** Name the elephant. Acknowledge avoidance exists.

### Question 2

*"What would make it safe to have that conversation?"*

**Purpose:** Co-create conditions for safety. Listen and implement.

### Question 3

*"What's the cost of continuing to avoid it?"*

**Purpose:** Create urgency. Make avoidance more uncomfortable than conversation.

### Remember

- These aren't one-time questions—they're embedded practices
- Your response when someone speaks teaches everyone whether it's really safe
- Do not defend. Do not dismiss. Do not problem-solve immediately.
- Follow up within a week—or explain why you can't yet
- Consistency builds trust. Keep asking, keep creating space, keep following through.

## About Claire Salerno

Claire Salerno is a leadership development consultant with over 20 years of experience teaching leaders and organisations how to create the conditions where the conversations that matter actually happen.

She works with organisations including sports teams, charities, and businesses to build psychologically safe, high-performing teams through difficult conversations training, team development, and coaching.

### **Get in touch:**

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YouTube: Subscribe for more frameworks on creating psychologically safe, high-performing teams

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