

DEBORAH UDAKIS
PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE SERIES

Leading *with* Professional *Courage*

HANDLING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS
WITH CONFIDENCE

A Practical Workbook for
New Early Years Leaders



PRACTICAL GUIDANCE
for new early
years leaders



CONFIDENT CONVERSATIONS
build trust and
stronger teams



UPHOLD STANDARDS
and support
continuous
improvement



**KEEP CHILDREN
AT THE CENTRE**
of every decision
and every
conversation



Practical tools,
real examples and
reflective exercises
to help you lead with
**KINDNESS,
INTEGRITY and
PROFESSIONAL
COURAGE.**



PREPARE WELL • SPEAK WITH RESPECT • LEAD WITH PROFESSIONAL COURAGE

CHILDREN THRIVE IN STRONG, SUPPORTIVE CULTURES

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01

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Lead with kindness. Speak with clarity. Act with integrity.

Welcome

Stepping into a leadership role is both exciting and rewarding. It is also one of the biggest professional transitions many practitioners will make.

Alongside the responsibility of leading practice, supporting children and guiding a team comes a challenge that almost every new leader experiences: having conversations they would rather avoid.

Whether it is addressing persistent lateness, challenging poor practice, discussing safeguarding concerns or managing conflict within a team, these conversations can feel uncomfortable. It is perfectly natural to worry about upsetting someone, damaging relationships, or saying the wrong thing.

The truth is that effective leadership is not about avoiding difficult conversations—it is about approaching them with professionalism, kindness, and courage.

When handled well, these conversations strengthen relationships, build trust, and create a culture where high standards are understood, supported, and maintained. Most importantly, they help ensure that every child experiences the safe, nurturing, and high-quality provision they deserve.

This workbook has been designed as a practical companion for practitioners who are new to leadership. It does not attempt to cover every possible situation. Instead, it offers straightforward guidance, opportunities for reflection and realistic case studies to help you prepare for some of the conversations that every leader will face.

You do not need to have all the answers. You do not need years of leadership experience. You simply need a willingness to listen, to prepare carefully and to lead with integrity.

Every conversation you have contributes to the culture of your setting. Every conversation is an opportunity to support improvement.

Above all, remember that leadership is not measured by the conversations you avoid, but by the ones you have with honesty, compassion and a clear focus on achieving the very best outcomes for children.

1. Why We Avoid Difficult Conversations

Very few people enjoy having difficult conversations. If you are new to leadership, you may feel anxious about challenging a colleague, giving constructive feedback, or raising concerns about practice. These feelings are entirely understandable.

Many new leaders have worked alongside their colleagues for years before stepping into a leadership role. Overnight, relationships change. You are no longer simply a team member—you have a responsibility to uphold standards, support improvement and, where necessary, challenge practice that falls short of expectations.

That can feel uncomfortable.

Perhaps you are worried about upsetting someone, damaging a friendship, or creating tension within the team. You may lack confidence because you have never had these conversations before. Or perhaps you simply do not know how to begin.

Whatever the reason, remember this:

Avoiding a difficult conversation rarely makes the problem disappear. More often, the issue becomes harder to address, affects other members of the team and, ultimately, impacts the quality of care and education children receive.

Effective leaders understand that having honest, respectful conversations is not about criticising people—it is about supporting them to succeed. Most colleagues appreciate clear expectations, constructive feedback, and the opportunity to improve when conversations are handled professionally and with respect.

Leadership is not about being the loudest voice in the room. It is about having the courage to address concerns promptly, fairly, and consistently, even when it feels uncomfortable.

Leadership Insight

The conversation you avoid today often becomes the problem you manage tomorrow.

Addressing concerns early is usually kinder, fairer, and more effective than allowing problems to grow.

Professional Reflection

Take a few moments to think about your own experiences.

Which conversations do you find most difficult?

What worries you most about having them?

Have you ever delayed a conversation? What happened as a result?

What might be different if you addressed concerns earlier?

Write down one conversation you know you need to have in the coming weeks.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

2. Your Role as a Leader

Becoming a leader is about much more than having a different job title. It is about accepting a different responsibility.

As a practitioner, your primary focus was the children in your care and the quality of your own practice. As a leader, your influence is much wider. You are now responsible for helping others to provide consistently high-quality care and education, creating a positive culture, and ensuring that professional standards are understood and maintained.

This change can feel uncomfortable, particularly if you have recently been promoted within your own team. Yesterday's colleague is now looking to you for guidance, support and, at times, challenge. It is natural to wonder whether people will still like you or whether difficult conversations might damage relationships.

The reality is that good leadership is not about being the most popular person in the room. It is about creating an environment where children thrive, colleagues feel supported and everyone understands what is expected of them.

That means recognising when something is not quite right and having the confidence to address it professionally and respectfully.

Remember, leadership is not about finding fault. It is about helping people to grow.

Every conversation should leave a colleague with a clearer understanding of expectations and the confidence to improve.

When you approach conversations with kindness, fairness, and consistency, you build trust rather than diminish it.

Leadership Insight

Leadership is not about authority—it is about responsibility.

Your role is not to catch people doing something wrong. Your role is to help people do their very best for children.

Professional Reflection

Think about the kind of leader you would like to become.

Complete the sentences below.

I want my team to see me as someone who...

The values that matter most to me as a leader are...

How will these values influence the way I handle difficult conversations?

A Moment to Remember

When preparing for a difficult conversation, ask yourself:

- Am I keeping the child at the centre of this conversation?
- Am I focusing on behaviour rather than personality?
- Am I approaching this with kindness and respect?
- Will this conversation help someone to improve?
- If I choose not to act, what message might that send to the rest of the team?

Good leaders do not look for difficult conversations.

They recognise when a conversation is necessary—and have it with professionalism, compassion, and integrity.

Leadership in Practice

Sarah has recently been promoted to Room Leader. She notices that an experienced practitioner regularly interrupts children during conversations and often finishes their sentences for them. Sarah feels uncomfortable raising the issue because the practitioner has worked at the setting for many years and helped to train her.

Reflect:

- What is Sarah's responsibility as a leader?
 - What might happen if she chooses not to address the issue?
 - How could she approach the conversation respectfully?
-
-
-

3. Before You Speak

Most difficult conversations are not difficult because of what is said. They become difficult because they happen without thought, preparation or a clear purpose.

When we feel frustrated, disappointed or under pressure, it can be tempting to react immediately. However, the most effective leaders know when to pause, reflect and prepare before speaking.

Preparation helps you approach the conversation calmly, remain objective and focus on finding a positive way forward.

Remember, your purpose is not to criticise or blame. It is to understand what has happened, clarify expectations and support improvement.

The more prepared you are, the more confident you are likely to feel.

Leadership Insight

Confidence comes from preparation, not personality.

Experienced leaders rarely walk into an important conversation without first thinking carefully about what they want to achieve.

Your Conversation Planner

Before arranging a meeting, take a few minutes to consider the questions below.

What has happened?

Describe the issue clearly and objectively.

What evidence do I have?

Focus on facts, observations, and examples rather than assumptions or opinions.

Why does this matter?

How is this affecting children, colleagues, parents, or the quality of provision?

What outcome am I hoping to achieve?

Think about what success would look like after the conversation.

What support might this colleague need?

Could there be factors you are unaware of? How might you help them to succeed?

How will I begin the conversation?

Plan an opening that is calm, respectful, and clear.

Lead with kindness. Speak with clarity. Act with integrity.

Top Tips

- ✓ Choose a private place where you will not be interrupted.
- ✓ Allow enough time so neither of you feels rushed.
- ✓ Base the conversation on facts, not assumptions.
- ✓ Keep an open mind—there may be information you do not yet know.
- ✓ Be ready to listen as carefully as you speak.
- ✓ Focus on improving practice, not assigning blame.

Leadership in Practice

Scenario

Over the past month, you have noticed that one member of staff has arrived late on several occasions. Other practitioners have started commenting that “nothing ever gets done about it,” and morning routines are becoming increasingly difficult.

You know you need to speak to your colleague, but you are worried they may become defensive.

Reflect

Before arranging the meeting, consider the following:

- What evidence should you gather?
- What assumptions should you avoid making?
- Why is it important to address the issue now?

- What outcome are you hoping to achieve?
- How might you begin the conversation in a way that is supportive rather than confrontational?

There is no perfect script for every conversation. The key is to prepare thoughtfully, remain professional and keep the focus on achieving the best possible outcome for everyone involved.

Leadership Tip

Never rehearse an argument. Rehearse your opening question.

Most colleagues don't expect perfection from their leader. They do expect fairness, honesty, and consistency.

4. Having the Conversation

Preparation is important, but there comes a point when you simply need to begin the conversation.

Many new leaders worry about finding the perfect words. In reality, colleagues are far more likely to remember how you made them feel than the exact words you used.

Approach every conversation with respect, curiosity, and a genuine desire to help the other person succeed. Your aim is not to prove a point or assign blame. It is to understand what has happened, clarify expectations and agree a positive way forward.

One simple way to structure a conversation is to remember the word CARE.

The CARE Conversation Model

C – Connect

Begin calmly and explain why you wanted to meet.

For example:

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. I’d like to talk about something I’ve noticed because I want us to work together to find a positive way forward.”

A – Acknowledge

Describe what you have observed.

Stick to facts rather than opinions.

Instead of saying:

“You’re always late.”

Try:

“I’ve noticed that you’ve arrived after your scheduled start time on four occasions over the past two weeks.”

Being specific helps the conversation remain objective and fair.

R – Respond Together

Give your colleague the opportunity to explain.

Listen carefully without interrupting.

Ask open questions such as:

- “Can you help me understand what has been happening?”
- “Is there anything I should be aware of?”
- “What do you think would help improve the situation?”

Remember, listening is just as important as speaking.

E – Encourage

Agree what will happen next.

Summarise the discussion, clarify expectations and offer support where appropriate.

Finish positively.

For example:

“Thank you for talking this through with me. Let’s agree the actions we’ve discussed and catch up again in two weeks to see how things are going.”

Leadership Tip

Start with curiosity, not conclusions.

The purpose of the conversation is to understand before deciding what needs to happen next.

Leadership in Practice

Scenario

You have noticed that one of your practitioners frequently uses their mobile phone while supervising children. On several occasions they have quickly put it away when they realised you were nearby.

Using the CARE model, think about how you would approach the conversation.

- How would you begin?
- What facts would you refer to?
- What questions would you ask?
- What expectations would you clarify?
- How would you end the meeting positively?

Professional Reflection

Think about your own communication style.

When you feel nervous or under pressure, are you more likely to:

- ☐ Avoid the conversation altogether.
- ☐ Talk too much.
- ☐ Become defensive.
- ☐ Rush to solve the problem.
- ☐ Listen carefully before responding.

Recognising your natural response is the first step towards becoming a calm and confident leader.

Lead with kindness. Speak with clarity. Act with integrity.

5. Leading with Professional Courage

Leadership is not always comfortable.

There will be times when you need to challenge poor practice, address behaviour that falls below expectations or have a conversation that you know may be difficult. These moments can leave even experienced leaders feeling apprehensive.

The difference is not that experienced leaders never feel uncomfortable. It is that they understand leadership sometimes requires them to step into that discomfort because the wellbeing of children, the quality of practice and the culture of the setting depend upon it.

Professional courage is not about confrontation. It is about acting with integrity.

It means addressing concerns promptly rather than hoping they will disappear. It means being honest while remaining respectful. It means supporting colleagues to improve rather than allowing them to continue without the guidance they need.

The conversations you choose to have—or avoid—shape the culture of your setting.

When concerns are ignored, expectations become unclear, inconsistency develops and confidence in leadership begins to weaken. Conversely, when leaders address issues fairly, consistently, and compassionately, they create a culture of trust, accountability, and continuous improvement.

Remember that every conversation is an opportunity.

An opportunity to coach.

An opportunity to encourage.

An opportunity to learn.

An opportunity to strengthen relationships.

An opportunity to improve outcomes for children.

You will not always find the perfect words.

You will not always get everything right.

Leadership is a journey of continual learning, reflection, and growth.

Prepare well.

Listen carefully.

Be fair.

Be consistent.

Be kind.

Above all, keep the child at the centre of every decision and every conversation.

One day, you will look back and realise that the conversations you once feared became the moments that helped you grow into the leader your team needed.

Leadership Tip

People may not remember every word you said, but they will remember whether they felt respected, listened to, and treated fairly.

Professional Reflection

Take a few moments to consider your leadership journey.

Complete the sentences below.

The leadership quality I most want to develop is...

The conversation I know I need to have is...

The first step I will take is...

How will having this conversation benefit the children, my colleagues, and the setting?

Lead with kindness. Speak with clarity. Act with integrity.

A Final Thought

Leadership is not about being fearless.

It is about doing the right thing, at the right time, for the right reason.

Have the conversation.

Lead with professionalism.

Lead with compassion.

Lead with courage.

Appendix 1

Conversation Starters

Beginning a difficult conversation is often the hardest part. The words you choose in the first few moments can help create a calm, respectful, and constructive discussion.

These examples are not scripts to memorise. They are conversation starters that you can adapt to suit the situation, your relationship with the colleague and the culture of your setting.

Remember to speak privately, remain calm, and approach every conversation with curiosity rather than judgement.

1. Persistent Lateness

“Thank you for taking a few minutes to meet with me. I have noticed you have arrived after your scheduled start time on several occasions recently, and I’d like us to talk about what’s been happening and how we can move forward.”

2. Poor Practice

“I’d like to talk about something I observed earlier today. My intention is to understand what happened and to think together about the best way forward.”

3. Safeguarding Concerns

“I need to discuss something important that I’ve observed. As you know, safeguarding is everyone’s responsibility, so I’d like us to look at what happened together.”

4. Mobile Phone Use

“Can we have a quick chat? I’ve noticed your mobile phone has been out during the session on a few occasions, and I’d like to talk about that with you.”

5. Dress Code or Professional Appearance

“Could we spend a few minutes talking about our expectations around professional appearance? There’s something I’ve noticed that I’d like us to discuss.”

6. Conflict Between Colleagues

“I’ve become aware that there seems to be some tension within the team. I’d like to understand what’s been happening and explore how we can move forward positively.”

7. Negative Attitude or Low Morale

“I’ve noticed that you don’t seem quite yourself recently, and I’m concerned. Can we have a chat about how things have been going?”

8. Failure to Follow Procedures

“I’d like to talk about one of our agreed procedures. I’ve noticed it hasn’t always been followed, and I’d like us to explore what might be getting in the way.”

9. Concerns Raised by a Parent

“A concern has been shared with me that I’d like us to discuss. I want to hear your perspective before we decide what, if anything, needs to happen next.”

10. Giving Constructive Feedback

“I’d like to share some feedback with you. There are many things you’re doing well, and there’s one area where I think I can help you develop even further.”

11. Repeated Mistakes

“We’ve spoken about this before, and I’ve noticed the same issue has happened again. I thought it would be helpful for us to look together at what’s preventing improvement.”

12. Recognising Potential

Not every important conversation is about addressing concerns.

“I’ve noticed some real strengths in your practice, and I’d like to talk about how we can build on them and support your professional development.”

Leadership Tip

Start with facts. Continue with curiosity. Finish with encouragement. Most difficult conversations begin well when the other person understands three things:

- Why you wanted to meet.
- What you've observed.
- That your intention is to support, not to criticise.

When people feel respected, they are far more likely to listen, reflect and engage positively in finding a way forward.

Appendix 2

Words That Build Trust

The language we use as leaders can either open the door to a constructive conversation or create unnecessary defensiveness.

Small changes in the words we choose can make a significant difference. They help colleagues feel respected, encourage honest discussion, and keep the focus on improving practice rather than assigning blame.

Use the examples below as a guide and adapt them to suit your own style and the situation.

Instead of saying...	Try saying...
"You always..."	"I've noticed..."
"You never..."	"Can we talk about something I've observed?"
"Why did you do that?"	"Can you help me understand what happened?"
"That's not acceptable."	"Let's look together at what happened and what we need to do differently."
"You're doing it wrong."	"Can I show you another approach that might work better?"
"That's your problem."	"How can I support you to move forward?"
"You need to improve."	"Let's think about how we can strengthen this area of practice."
"You weren't listening."	"I'm not sure we've understood each other. Let's go through it together."
"Calm down."	"Let's take a moment so we can talk this through."
"You need to change your attitude."	"Can we explore what's been affecting you recently?"
"You're making excuses."	"I appreciate your perspective. Let's think about what happens next."

Instead of saying...	Try saying...
"This conversation is over."	"Let's agree the next steps and arrange a time to review how things are going."

Leadership Tip

Challenge the behaviour, not the person.

Focus on what has happened rather than making assumptions about someone's character or intentions. Most people respond positively when they feel they are being treated with fairness, dignity, and respect.

Leadership in Practice

Read each statement below and rewrite it using language that is calm, respectful, and supportive.

1. "You're always on your phone."

2. "You clearly weren't paying attention."

3. "I've told you this before."

4. "You need to stop doing that."

5. Think of a difficult conversation you may need to have in the future. Write down how you could begin the conversation in a way that encourages openness rather than defensiveness.

A Thought to Take Away

People are far more likely to respond positively when they feel listened to, respected and valued.

The words you choose matter.

The way you say them matters even more.

Every conversation is an opportunity to strengthen trust; build confidence and reinforce the culture you want to create as a leader.

My Leadership Pledge

Leadership is a privilege. Every day, our words, actions, and decisions influence the experiences of children, families, and colleagues.

As I continue my leadership journey, I commit to leading with professionalism, integrity, and compassion.

I pledge to...

- ☐ Keep children at the heart of every decision I make.
- ☐ Lead by example and model the standards I expect from others.
- ☐ Address concerns promptly, fairly, and respectfully.
- ☐ Listen with curiosity before reaching conclusions.
- ☐ Challenge poor practice with kindness, honesty, and professional courage.
- ☐ Recognise and celebrate the strengths, talents, and achievements of others.
- ☐ Create an environment where colleagues feel valued, supported, and able to learn from mistakes.
- ☐ Be fair, consistent, and approachable in my leadership.
- ☐ Continue to reflect, learn, and develop as a leader.
- ☐ Remember that every conversation has the power to shape the culture of my setting.

My Leadership Commitment

The kind of leader I want to be is...

The leadership strength I most want to develop is...

One conversation I will commit to having over the coming weeks is...

The first step I will take is...

My Personal Commitment

I recognise that leadership is not about having all the answers. It is about creating a culture where children flourish, colleagues grow and high standards are achieved through trust, respect, and shared purpose.

I will lead with professionalism.

I will lead with integrity.

I will lead with compassion.

I will lead with courage.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Leading *with* Professional Courage

HANDLING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS WITH CONFIDENCE

Every leader will face conversations that feel challenging. The difference is not in avoiding them, but in having the confidence and professional courage to handle them well.

Leading with Professional Courage is a practical workbook written especially for new early years leaders. It provides clear guidance, real examples and reflective activities to help you lead with clarity, kindness and integrity.

Lead with
KINDNESS
Lead with
INTEGRITY
Lead with
PURPOSE

Every
conversation
shapes the
culture.
Every leader
makes a
difference.

Children rarely hear
your leadership conversations.
They experience the culture
those conversations create.

Inside this workbook you will find:



PRACTICAL TOOLS

Frameworks and
strategies to help
you prepare and
lead with confidence.



REAL-LIFE SCENARIOS

Case studies and
examples to support
your decision-
making.



REFLECTIVE ACTIVITIES

Opportunities
to reflect, evaluate
and strengthen
your leadership.



CONVERSATION STARTERS

Practical opening
lines for common
situations and
challenges.



LEADERSHIP GUIDANCE

Clear advice to help
you uphold standards
and build strong,
positive cultures.



LEADERSHIP PLEDGE

A personal commitment
to guide your ongoing
journey as a leader
of choice.

Lead with kindness. Speak with clarity. Act with integrity.

LEAD WITH PROFESSIONAL COURAGE.



ABOUT DEBORAH UDAKIS

Deborah Udakis is an early years specialist consultant, former Her Majesty's Inspector (Ofsted) and founder of Deborah Udakis Consultancy Ltd.

With over 45 years of experience in early years education and more than two decades in inspection, Deborah is passionate about supporting leaders to create the best possible outcomes for children and their teams.

Inspiring excellence. Improving outcomes.

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