

PEOPLE | FEEDBACK | GROWTH | RESULTS

DAY ONE

LEADERSHIP TOOLS

The background of the lower half of the cover features the silhouettes of two people, a man and a woman, facing each other in conversation. The man is on the left, and the woman is on the right. They are set against a dark background with vertical gold lines and circular gold patterns on the sides.

DIFFICULT DISCUSSION GUIDE

BASED OFF OF **PERFORMANCE BEGINS ON DAY ONE**
BY KRISTA HAYES, SPHR

The Day One Mindset

1 THE FOUNDATION

A difficult conversation should not be a surprise event. In a healthy performance culture, leaders build trust through frequent micro 1:1s, invest in developmental touchpoints, and use formal performance conversations to confirm what has already been discussed.

The goal is not to win the conversation. The goal is to create shared understanding and a workable path forward.

2 THREE LAYERS OF A STRONG PERFORMANCE CULTURE

MICRO 1:1s

Brief, consistent check-ins surface concerns early, before frustration hardens into conflict.

DEVELOPMENTAL TOUCHPOINTS

Coaching, mentoring, and feedback create the support needed to improve.

FORMAL PERFORMANCE CONVERSATIONS

Clear documentation and evaluation should contain no surprises.

3 WHEN TO HAVE THE CONVERSATION

Act when behavior, a missed expectation, a breakdown in trust, or unresolved tension begins affecting results or relationships. Do not wait for the annual review. Address urgent safety, harassment, discrimination, or serious misconduct concerns through the appropriate organizational process.

4 BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Can I describe the facts without labeling the person? Am I open to their perspective? Can I explain the impact and expectation? Am I prepared to offer support and agree on a next step?

Prepare with Purpose

1

CONVERSATION PREPARATION WORKSHEET

Focus on observable facts, the impact of the issue, and the outcome you want - not assumptions about intent.

WHAT HAPPENED? SPECIFIC ACTIONS, DATES, EXAMPLES, OR COMMITMENTS

WHAT WAS THE IMPACT ON PEOPLE, WORK, CUSTOMERS, OR OUTCOMES?

WHAT EXPECTATION OR STANDARD NEEDS TO BE EXPLICIT?

WHAT MIGHT I BE MISSING? WHAT QUESTIONS WILL I ASK?

WHAT SUPPORT, RESOURCES, OR FLEXIBILITY CAN I OFFER?

2

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SETTING

Schedule private, uninterrupted time. Explain the topic without ambushing the employee. Allow space for dialogue, and distinguish coaching from formal discipline.

The CLEAR Conversation

1 FIVE STEPS TO A PRODUCTIVE DIALOGUE

C

CONNECT

Open with respect and purpose.

"I want to discuss something important because I value your contribution and want us to succeed together."

L

LAY OUT THE FACTS

Describe behavior without exaggeration.

"The last two project updates were submitted after the agreed deadline."

E

EXPLORE THE PERSPECTIVE

Invite the other person in; listen and clarify.

"How are you seeing the situation? What context should I understand?"

A

ALIGN ON EXPECTATIONS

State the needed change clearly.

"Going forward, updates need to arrive by 3 p.m. Thursday, or I need an early warning."

R

REINFORCE AND REVISIT

Agree on actions, support, ownership, and a check-in.

"Let us review how this is working next Friday."

Be candid about the gap. Be curious about the cause. Be specific about the next step.

Scripts for Real Situations

1 WORDS THAT OPEN THE DOOR

MISSED COMMITMENTS

“We agreed on Friday delivery, and it arrived Tuesday. That delay affected the team timeline. Walk me through what happened. What would help prevent a repeat?”

DEFENSIVE RESPONSE

“I hear that you disagree with the assessment. Let us separate what happened from what we each think it means, then agree on what success looks like.”

INTERPERSONAL TENSION

“In yesterday’s meeting, there were several interruptions while others were speaking. I want to understand what was happening and discuss how we can make the conversation more productive.”

DECLINING PERFORMANCE

“I have noticed a change in the quality and timeliness of work over the last month. I would like to understand what may be contributing and discuss support and standards going forward.”

LEADER OWNING THEIR PART

“I realize I did not make the priority clear enough. That contributed to the confusion. Here is what I will do differently, and here is what I need from you.”

WHEN AGREEMENT IS NOT POSSIBLE

“We may see the situation differently. I want your perspective heard while being clear about the expectation and next steps.”

2 LANGUAGE TO AVOID

Avoid “You always,” “You never,” mind-reading, public criticism, threats, and vague directions such as “Be more professional.” Use observable examples, precise expectations, and clear commitments instead.

Commitment & Follow-Through

1 DOCUMENT THE SHARED PATH FORWARD

End with mutual clarity. The conversation is not complete until each person knows what happens next.

WHAT SPECIFIC BEHAVIOR OR OUTCOME WILL CHANGE?

WHAT WILL THE EMPLOYEE DO, AND BY WHEN?

WHAT WILL THE LEADER DO TO SUPPORT PROGRESS?

HOW WILL PROGRESS BE RECOGNIZED? WHAT EVIDENCE WILL WE USE?

DATE OF NEXT MICRO 1:1 OR DEVELOPMENTAL CHECK-IN

2 CLOSE THE LOOP

Summarize agreed facts, expectations, resources, and timelines neutrally. Follow through on promised support. Recognize improvement promptly. If the issue persists, use documented performance and HR procedures.

Conversation Reflection & Notes

1

AFTER THE CONVERSATION

WHAT DID I LEARN FROM THE EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE?

WHERE DID WE FIND COMMON GROUND?

WHAT REMAINS UNRESOLVED?

WHAT FOLLOW-UP DID I PROMISE?

2

THE DAY ONE REMINDER

No surprises. More clarity. Better conversations. Stronger performance.

This original companion resource is informed by Performance Begins on Day One. It is not a substitute for company policy, HR guidance, or legal advice.