

From Telling to Learning

Your Difficult Conversations Takeaway

Three skills & the language to use them the next time you're standing at the edge of a hard conversation.

The Shift

Most of us go into a hard conversation trying to tell someone what's true. The shift is learning what's true together instead. You don't have the whole picture. Neither do they. A learning stance doesn't just make the conversation easier. It changes what the conversation can produce. Teams led by managers who ask before telling recover faster from change, and trust survives disagreement instead of getting damaged by it. This isn't about being softer. It's about being more accurate.

Three Skills

Inquire to Learn

Ask because you are genuinely curious, not to build a case.

"Help me understand what this has looked like from where you sit."

"What am I missing here?"

"What would need to be true for this to feel workable?"

Paraphrase for Clarity

Say back what you heard before you respond to it.

"So, what I'm hearing is... did I get that right?"

"Let me make sure I've got this. You're saying..."

"Tell me if I'm off base, but it sounds like..."



Acknowledge Feelings

Name what you're seeing, without agreeing or fixing it.

"This sounds like it's been sitting heavy."

"I can see why that would be frustrating."

"That's a real loss. I'm not going to rush past it."

Conversation Starters

For the conversations that keep getting pushed to next week:

- "I want to talk about how your role has been shifting. Can we find twenty minutes this week?"
- "I've noticed something I want to check in on before it gets bigger for either of us."
- "Things have been hard since the reorg. I don't have all the answers, but I want to hear where you're at."
- "I know more than I can share right now. That's uncomfortable for both of us, and I want to name it."

When It Goes Sideways

Pivots for the moment things get tense, defensive, or emotional:

- "Let's pause. I want to get this right more than I want to get it done fast."
- "I don't think either of us is trying to make this worse. Can we back up?"
- "I'm noticing this got tense. What's going on for you right now?"
- "We don't have to solve this today. Let's name what we agree on and pick this back up."

Source: Stone, D., Patton, B., & Heen, S. (2010). *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*.



2 If this sparked your curiosity about adaptive coaching through change, book a discovery call to learn more about Adaptive Ascent Group coaching & integration services.