MODULE OVERVIEW

Difficult conversations: Have them before the problem grows

Adaptive module | ~20 min

Addressing a lapse, denying a promotion, announcing a sensitive decision: 69% of managers say they are uncomfortable communicating with their team members (Interact/Harris Poll survey), and a postponed conversation works like a debt that builds up interest. This module combines the Harvard Negotiation Project's framework of the three conversations (facts, emotions, and identity) with a five-step approach, and covers the realities of 2026: remote conversations, practice with AI, and when to involve HR.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

01 Understand what avoiding a difficult conversation costs, for the relationship and for the team.

02 Distinguish the three conversations that happen at once (facts, emotions, and identity) so you no longer wear yourself out on just one.

03 Lead the conversation in five steps: prepare, open directly, listen first, say it with "I" statements, and close with commitments.

04 Adapt the conversation to today's situations: holding it remotely, practicing with AI, and involving HR when the situation requires it.

WHO IT'S FOR

Managers who want a method for sensitive topics, from corrective conversations to announcing a delicate decision.

- **Prerequisite:** none

HOW THE MODULE WORKS

Self-paced, with practice tailored to each learner.

1. **Self-assessment**: on 9 dimensions, to gauge current habits and guide the practice.
2. **Expert video**: 10 minutes, with 3 pauses for reflection.
3. **Practice scenarios**: the first 2 chosen from the self-assessment, then 16 optional ones. Every answer gets feedback: what it leads to, and one way to improve.
4. **Dated commitment**: one action to try, written by the learner or picked from the suggestions.
5. **Memo to download**: key takeaways, questions, commitment, personal notes and checklists.

A SAMPLE PRACTICE SCENARIO

You manage Inès, a senior engineer whose opinion carries weight. For two months, in design meetings, Inès has been interrupting the two juniors, who no longer suggest anything. Your two reminders to the whole team haven't changed anything. Inès's annual review is in six weeks. How do you handle it?

ASSESSMENT AND COMPLETION

Pass mark: 80%

The score takes into account your answers to the practice scenarios, your commitment and, where relevant, any additional learning activities. Passing requires a commitment and a score of at least 80%.

METHODS & MODELS

- Three-conversations framework (facts / emotions / identity) — Stone, Patton & Heen, "Difficult Conversations," Harvard Negotiation Project, 1999.
- Afthonios 5-step method: prepare, open, listen, say what you need to say, close.
- I-message — Thomas Gordon.
- Practicing with an AI assistant — contemporary preparation.

SOURCES & REFERENCES

- Interact/Harris Poll — 69% of managers say they feel uncomfortable communicating with their team members (reported by Harvard Business Review)
- Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen, "Difficult Conversations" (Harvard Negotiation Project, 1999) — the three-conversations framework (facts, emotions, identity)
- Harris Poll for Cornerstone OnDemand — nearly 70% of US managers say they are afraid to talk to their employees
- Acas (2014) — preparing for and holding difficult conversations at work

Module created by Afthonios.com.

Content reviewed on 4 October 2026