

Navigating Difficult Conversations with Confidence



Presented by:
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New Hampshire
Library Trustees Association
To serve, improve, and promote New Hampshire public libraries

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Primex
NH Public Risk Management Exchange



HARD CONVERSATIONS

13 Phrases Great CEOs Don't Say (and What They Say Instead)

By Eric Partaker

Don't Say This

1. "You always miss deadlines."
2. "That's not how we do things here."
3. "I'm disappointed in you."
4. "You need to step it up."
5. "This is unacceptable."
6. "You should have known better."
7. "I don't have time for this."
8. "That's your problem to figure out."
9. "Everyone else gets it. Why don't you?"
10. "We've talked about this before."
11. "You're not meeting expectations."
12. "I expected more from you."
13. "Figure it out and get back to me."



Instead, Say This

1. "I noticed the last three projects came in late. What's getting in your way?"
2. "Help me understand your approach. Here's what usually works for us..."
3. "This isn't the result we needed. Let's figure out what went wrong."
4. "What do you need to hit these goals? Let's make a plan."
5. "This didn't work out. What can we learn from it?"
6. "Let's go over this together so it's clear next time."
7. "This is important. When can we dig into it properly?"
8. "You seem stuck. How can I help you move forward?"
9. "I see you're having trouble with this. What part is tricky?"
10. "It seems like we're still having issues here. What's different now?"
11. "Here's where we need to be. What's keeping us from getting there?"
12. "I know you can do better than this. What support do you need?"
13. "Take some time to think through options. Let's reconnect tomorrow."

87 % of
leaders avoid hard
conversations.

Source: Partaker, Eric. (2025, June). Hard Conversations. LinkedIn.



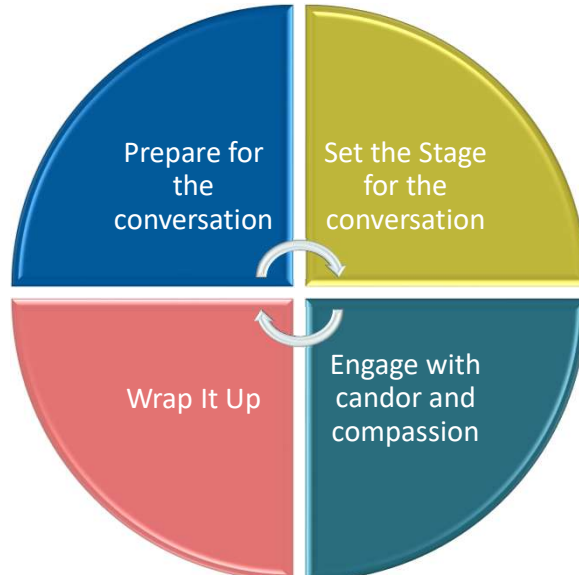
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How to Say Hard Things



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How to Say Hard Things

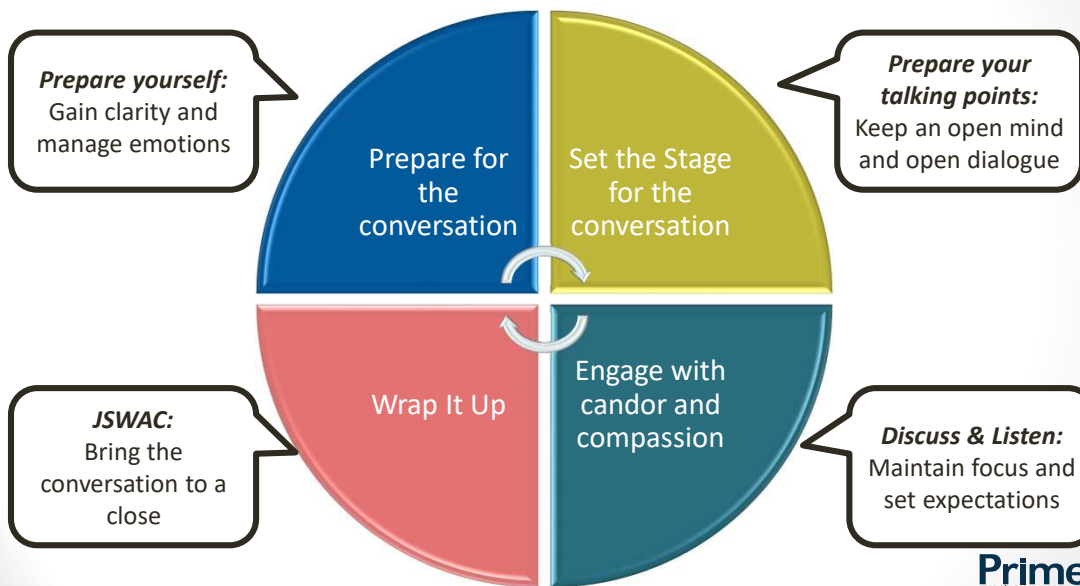


Adapted from Source: HRM Services. (n.d.). How To Say Hard Things. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from www.workwithhrm.com.

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Scenarios



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Scenario #1

Communication Breakdown on Major Decisions

The library director approved a shift in programming priorities (reducing adult programs to expand youth services) without informing the board in advance. Several trustees feel blindsided after hearing complaints from the community.



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Step 1: Prepare Yourself

- What are the facts vs. feelings/assumptions?
- What do you want this discussion to change/improve?
- Think about what questions you might ask / what more you need to understand
- How is this issue impacting the library, the culture, the board, etc.?
- What are our expectations going forward?

Facts: Programming priorities were shifted (reduced adult programs, expanded youth services) without prior board awareness. Community feedback has already surfaced.

Feelings: Concerned, blindsided, and uneasy about governance alignment.

Assumptions: The director may view this as purely operational.

Clarify roles, improve communication, and prevent future disconnects.

What led to the decision being made without board awareness?
How does the director define operational vs. strategic decisions?

Impact: Erodes board trust, creates community confusion, and risks misalignment.

Expectations: Clear communication on significant program shifts moving forward.



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Step 2: Prepare Your Talking Points

“Thank you for meeting with me. I’d like to talk about the recent shift in programming priorities, specifically the reduction in adult programs and expansion of youth services.”

(Pause)

“It looks like this decision was made recently, but the board wasn’t aware beforehand. That’s concerning because we’re now hearing feedback from the community and weren’t prepared to respond.”

(Pause)

“Can you help me understand how this decision came about and your perspective on it?”



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Step 3: Discuss & Listen

- Allow the director to explain fully.
- If accountability is unclear:
 - “How do you see the board’s role in decisions like this?”
 - “What’s the impact when the board isn’t informed ahead of time?”
 - “What could we do differently to ensure better alignment going forward?”
- If the decision was made under pressure, explore support:
 - “What would help you loop the board in more effectively in the future?”

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Step 4: Just So We Are Clear...

State what was agreed to:

- “We agree that these types of significant program shifts should be shared with the board in advance.”
- “Going forward, we expect earlier communication on decisions that may affect community perception.”
- “If this doesn’t happen, it could lead to further confusion or erosion of trust.”
- Schedule a follow-up (e.g., next board meeting check-in).
- “Thank you for working through this conversation with me.”

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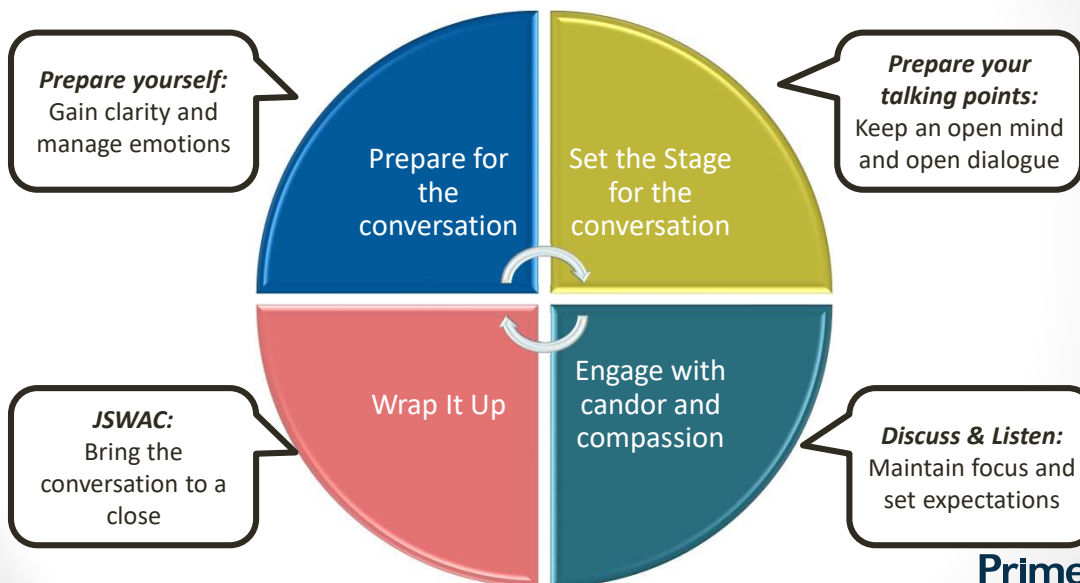
Scenario #2

Concerns About Director Performance

The trustees have noticed missed deadlines, incomplete board reports, and a general lack of follow-through from the director over the past few months.

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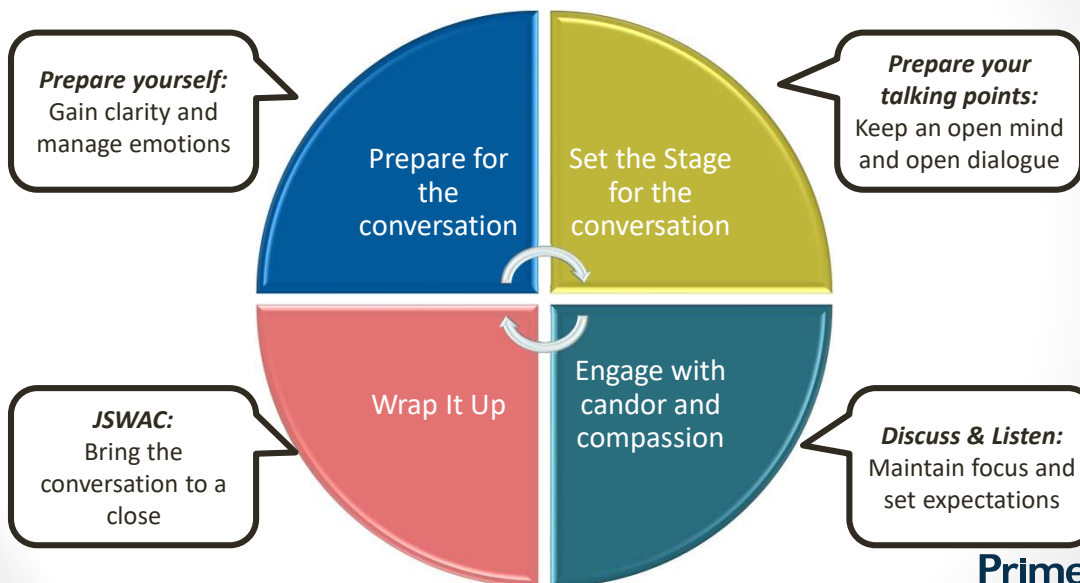
Scenario #3

Community Complaint Escalation

A community member complains directly to a trustee about a staff interaction and demands immediate action. The trustee feels pressure to respond quickly but hasn't yet spoken with the director.

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Thanks for your time today!

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