

THE LEADERSHIP CONVERSATION CHEAT SHEET

Four hard conversations, *ready to go*

*A live-attendee bonus from **The Leadership Skills Medical Training Forgot***



THE HARDEST PART OF ANY LEADERSHIP CONVERSATION IS THAT **FIRST SENTENCE.**

Once you're in it, you can usually find your way through. But the opening — the moment where you have to translate what you mean into what you say — is where most of us hesitate, soften the message, or avoid the conversation altogether.

This cheat sheet guides you through four of the hardest conversations clinician leaders have to navigate. For each one, you'll find the exact words to say, plus three things you don't usually find in a script: **how to prepare beforehand, what to do if the conversation derails, and the most common mistake to avoid.**

Read it once now. Save it where you can find it again. **Adapt the language to your voice. Then use it.**

1

ADDRESSING SOMETHING THAT ISN'T WORKING

The situation: Someone on your team is doing something that isn't working — a single incident you've been avoiding, or a pattern that has emerged over time. Either way, the conversation has been put off long enough.

What to say:

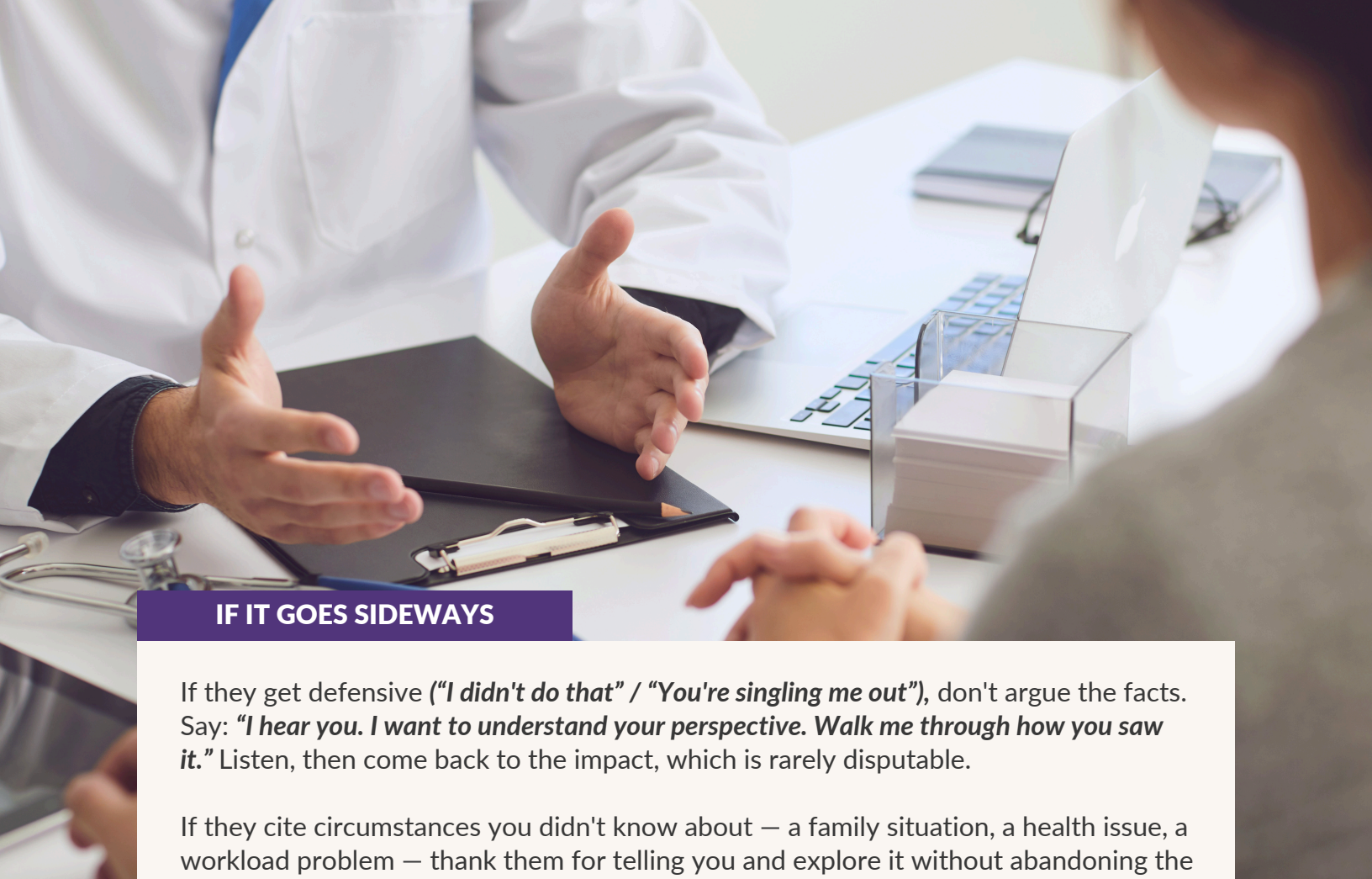
"I want to be straightforward with you because I respect you and your work. I've noticed [specific behavior or pattern], and the impact has been [specific impact on the team, the work, or the patient]. I want to understand what's going on from your perspective, and then I want to talk about what needs to be different moving forward."

Why it works: It's specific (not personal), it names the impact (not the intent), and it invites their perspective without backing away from the issue. The same opener scales: use it for a single incident, lengthen the timeframe and add more examples for a pattern. Either way, it makes clear that change is expected, not optional.

BEFORE THE CONVERSATION

Get specific in your own head before you open your mouth. Write down the exact behavior or pattern, with dates, situations, and what you saw or heard. Vague feedback is the leading cause of feedback that doesn't land. If this is becoming a pattern conversation, three or four documented instances is the minimum — it protects you if the conversation later becomes a formal performance discussion, and it protects them by ensuring you're addressing real behavior, not a vague impression.

Choose privacy and timing. Never deliver this in a hallway, between patients, or at the end of a long day. Schedule fifteen minutes in a closed room when you both have the space to think clearly. And decide in advance what "different moving forward" actually looks like — if you can't articulate the specific change you need, the conversation will end without one.



IF IT GOES SIDEWAYS

If they get defensive (*"I didn't do that"* / *"You're singling me out"*), don't argue the facts. Say: ***"I hear you. I want to understand your perspective. Walk me through how you saw it."*** Listen, then come back to the impact, which is rarely disputable.

If they cite circumstances you didn't know about — a family situation, a health issue, a workload problem — thank them for telling you and explore it without abandoning the standard. Try: ***"Thank you for sharing that. Let's talk about what support would help. The expectation still stands, and I want us to figure out together how you meet it."***

If they get emotional, give them a moment. Don't rush to reassure or backtrack. A pause says ***"this is real and I'm not running from it,"*** which is more respectful than scrambling to soften the message.

AVOID THIS

Don't open with a compliment sandwich. ***"You're doing great, but..."*** trains your team to brace whenever you praise them. Be direct. Care lives in your tone, not in your padding.

Don't let the conversation end without a specific next step and a check-in date on the calendar. ***"Let's talk again"*** evaporates within a week. ***"Let's meet again on May 28 to see how this is going"*** becomes accountability for both of you.

2

SAYING NO — AND HOLDING IT

The situation: Someone is asking you to take on something or change a decision you've already made. Maybe they're a senior colleague pushing for a yes, a peer asking for a favor, or a team member trying to negotiate after you've already declined. Either way, the answer needs to be no — and stay no.

What to say:

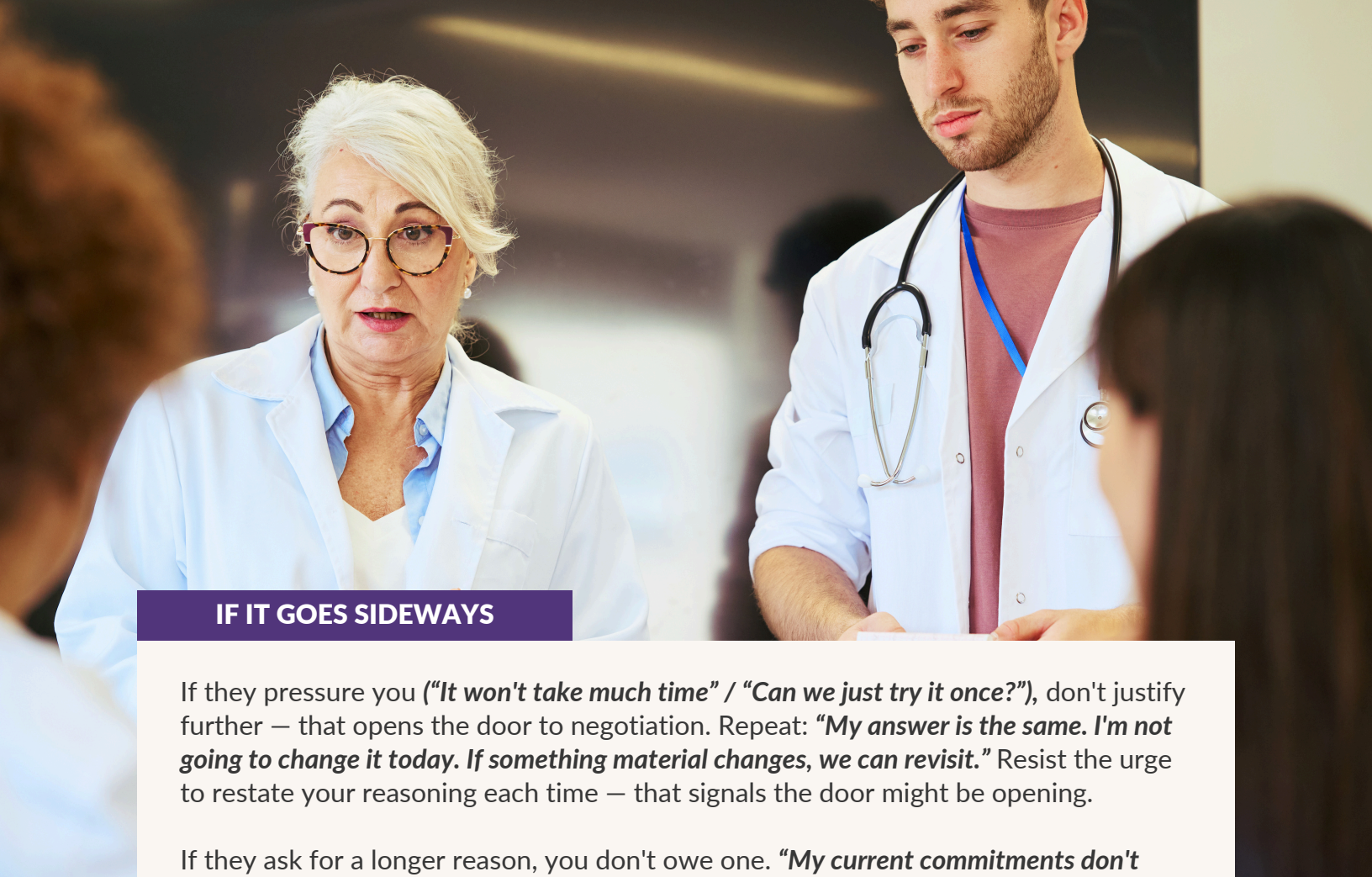
"Thank you for thinking of me, and I hear that this matters. The answer is no, and here's why: [one sentence]. I'm open to talking about [an alternative path or a future revisit], but not about changing this decision."

Why it works: It's gracious without being apologetic. It states the no clearly, with one reason. It offers a direction forward without reopening what you've already decided. And the same opener works whether you're saying no for the first time or holding a no someone is trying to negotiate — just lean harder on "my answer is the same" if they keep pushing.

BEFORE THE CONVERSATION

Decide if you will justify your **"no"** before you say it. If you do, know that **"I'm protecting my capacity for [X]"** is a much steadier answer than **"I'm too busy."** **"Too busy"** invites negotiation; **"protecting my capacity for [X]"** names a specific commitment, which is harder to argue with. Know that justifying your answer is not required, however. Unless the person making the ask is your supervisor or manager, avoid justifying when not asked to.

Practice saying it out loud once before the conversation. The first time you decline a senior person, your voice will tremble if you haven't rehearsed. By the third or fourth time, it gets easier — but the first time is real. Calm doesn't come from confidence; it comes from preparation.



IF IT GOES SIDEWAYS

If they pressure you (*“It won't take much time” / “Can we just try it once?”*), don't justify further — that opens the door to negotiation. Repeat: ***“My answer is the same. I'm not going to change it today. If something material changes, we can revisit.”*** Resist the urge to restate your reasoning each time — that signals the door might be opening.

If they ask for a longer reason, you don't owe one. ***“My current commitments don't leave room for this”*** is a complete answer. You don't need to itemize your workload to validate your no.

If they get angry, don't match their energy. Lower your voice slightly and slow your pace. Calm doesn't mean cold — it means *“I'm not going to be moved by escalation.”* That posture, more than any specific words, holds the line.

AVOID THIS

Don't say ***“maybe later”*** when you mean no. ***“Maybe later”*** is a delayed yes you'll regret. If the answer is no, say no — cleanly, kindly, and once.

Don't apologize for the no itself. ***“I'm sorry, but the answer is no”*** undermines the decision before you've finished saying it. Apologize for the impact if appropriate (***“I know this is disappointing”***), but never apologize for the boundary itself.

3

ASKING YOUR SUPERVISOR FOR CLARITY

The situation: Your role is undefined, your authority is ambiguous, or you don't know what success looks like, and you've been quietly figuring it out alone.

What to say:

"I want to make sure I'm spending my time on what matters most to you and to the organization. Can we set aside 20 minutes to talk through what success looks like in this role over the next [timeframe], and where you most want me focused?"

Why it works: It frames the ask around their priorities, not your uncertainty. It positions you as proactive, not lost. And it gives them a small, specific commitment instead of an open-ended one.

BEFORE THE CONVERSATION

Make a list of the three or four things you're currently uncertain about — priorities, decision-making authority, scope, or how success will be measured. Don't bring all of them to the conversation, but knowing them helps you ask the right follow-up questions when the door opens.

Frame this as **"I want to do this well,"** not **"I'm confused."** The first invites partnership; the second invites pity — and pity rarely produces clarity.



IF IT GOES SIDEWAYS

If your supervisor gives you a vague answer (*"Just keep doing what you're doing"*), don't accept it as final. Try: *"That's helpful. To make sure I'm prioritizing well, can you tell me which two or three things on my plate matter most to you over the next quarter?"* Specific questions get specific answers.

If they say *"we'll figure it out as we go,"* translate that into a concrete commitment. *"Great – can we put a 30-minute check-in on the calendar for [date] so we can recalibrate together?"* Recurring clarity beats one-time clarity every time.

AVOID THIS

Don't use this conversation to vent about everything that's been confusing. The fastest way to lose a supervisor's attention is to make them feel like they're being criticized. Stay forward-looking: this is about clarity going forward, not about what hasn't been clear up to now.

4

DELIVERING DISAPPOINTING NEWS TO A RESPECTED PEER

The situation: Someone you respect — a colleague, a team member, possibly a friend — didn't get the promotion, the bonus, the recognition, or the role they were hoping for. You have to be the one to tell them.

What to say:

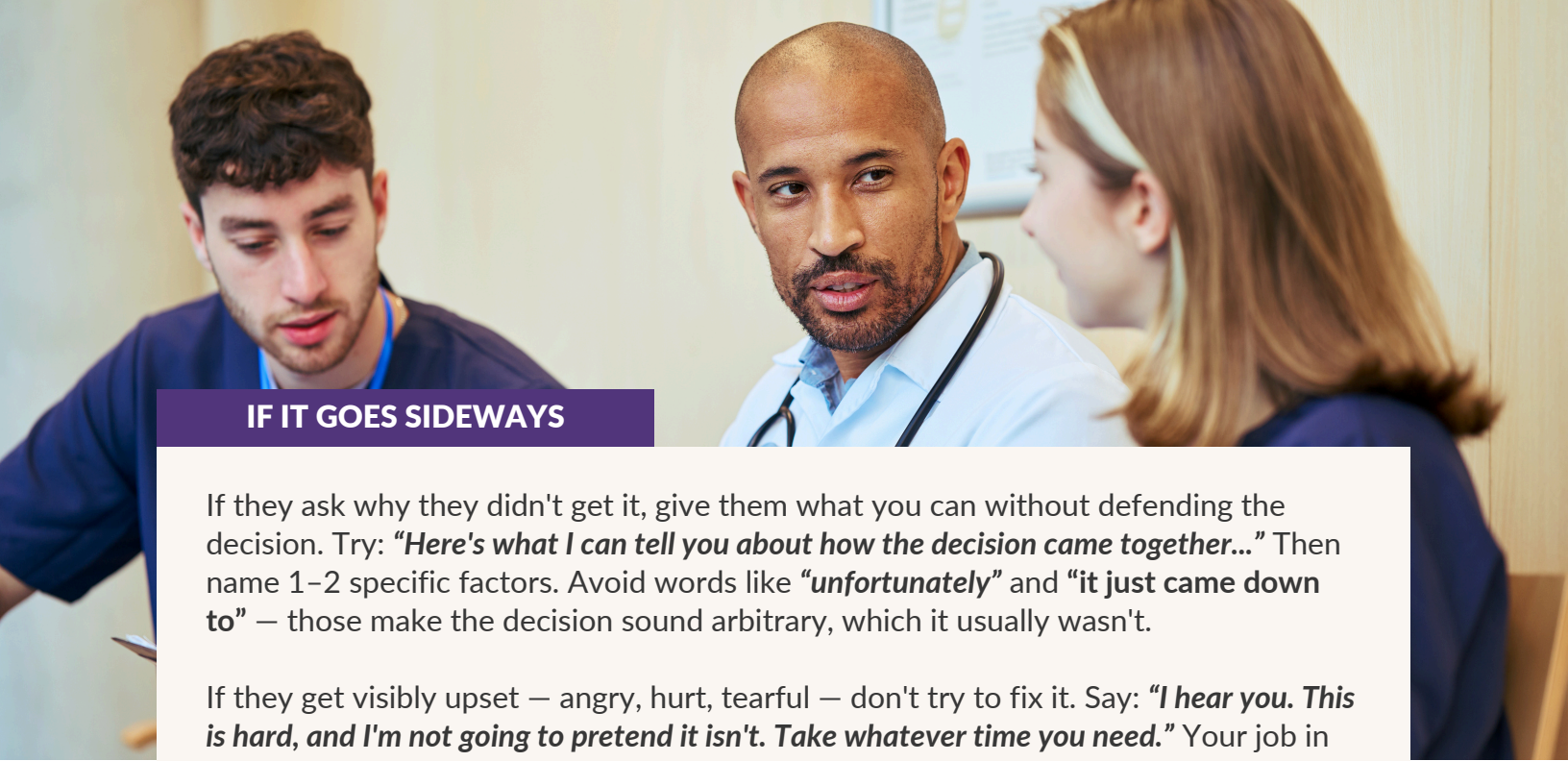
"I want to talk with you about [the decision], and I want to tell you directly because I respect you and the work you've done. The decision was [the outcome], and I know that's not what you were hoping for. I want to give you a clear picture of how the decision was made, and then I want to make space to hear how you're processing it."

Why it works: It leads with respect, names the outcome plainly without hiding behind euphemism, and acknowledges the disappointment before they have to. The phrase **"I want to make space to hear how you're processing it"** signals that you're not going to flee the moment they react — which is what most people quietly fear in this conversation.

BEFORE THE CONVERSATION

Decide in advance how much you can say about the why. Some decisions you can fully explain; some you can only partially explain because of confidentiality, board decisions, or other constraints. Know your limits before you walk in. **"I can tell you about [X], and there are parts of the decision I'm not able to share, and I want to be honest with you about both"** is a respectful way to name that boundary.

Prepare to sit with the silence. Most people in this conversation rush to fill the quiet after delivering the news, which signals discomfort and often turns into over-explaining or premature reassurance. Plan to say what you came to say, then stop talking. Let them respond first.



IF IT GOES SIDeways

If they ask why they didn't get it, give them what you can without defending the decision. Try: ***"Here's what I can tell you about how the decision came together..."*** Then name 1-2 specific factors. Avoid words like ***"unfortunately"*** and ***"it just came down to"*** — those make the decision sound arbitrary, which it usually wasn't.

If they get visibly upset — angry, hurt, tearful — don't try to fix it. Say: ***"I hear you. This is hard, and I'm not going to pretend it isn't. Take whatever time you need."*** Your job in that moment is to be steady, not soothing. Soothing too quickly reads as ***"please stop being upset so I can leave."***

If they ask ***"What could I have done differently?"*** — take it seriously. Don't deflect with ***"You did everything right."*** If there's something specific they could work on for next time, name it concretely and offer to help them work toward it. Honest growth conversations after disappointment are how trust gets rebuilt.

AVOID THIS

Don't lead with the decision-making process. The temptation is to walk them through how the decision was made first, hoping the explanation softens the blow. It doesn't — it just delays the news they're already bracing for. Tell them the outcome first. Explain second.

Don't promise something you can't deliver. ***"Next year for sure"*** / ***"You're at the top of the list"*** / ***"We'll make it up to you"*** feel kind in the moment but corrode trust later when circumstances change. Be honest about uncertainty, even when honesty is uncomfortable.

Don't avoid them after the conversation. The week after delivering disappointing news is when many leaders quietly distance themselves from the person they had to disappoint — it feels safer than facing them. Do the opposite. Show up the next day, ask how they're doing, treat them the way you treated them before. The post-conversation silence is louder than the conversation itself.

The skill underneath all of this

Here's something nobody told me in clinical training, and probably nobody told you either:

Hard conversations don't get easier when you have better words. They get easier when you can stay in one without flinching.

Most of us know what to say. We've thought about it. We've rehearsed it in the car.

The problem isn't the words. The problem is what happens to us once we're sitting across from the person and the moment is real.

We feel them flinch, and we soften. We feel our own throat tighten, and we hedge.

We hear our voice trail off into *"but you're doing such a great job overall,"* and we walk out of the room knowing the message didn't land, again.

That's discomfort doing the talking. Our discomfort, theirs, both — and it pulls the message off-course before we even hear ourselves doing it.

The leaders I've watched get genuinely good at this have something in common, and it's not their vocabulary.

They've learned to stay in the conversation when every part of them wants to bail out. They've made peace with a hard moment now in exchange for clarity later. They've stopped trying to protect anyone from a message that needed to land — including themselves.

The scripts in this sheet will help you start. The skill underneath is what makes them work.

You'll build it the same way you build any clinical skill: **by doing the thing, noticing what happened, and trying again.**

A note from Dr. Laura Suttin

If these felt useful, that's not an accident — it's the exact kind of practical, in-the-moment leadership work I wish someone had taught me from day one.

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