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NAVIGATING TOUGH CONVERSATIONS:

SKILLS EVERY LEADER NEEDS

Difficult conversations are an inevitable part of leadership, yet many leaders struggle with them due to fear of conflict and emotional discomfort. Conflict is a natural element of all relationships. Some people might fear rejection, a tendency to avoid conflicts or a dilemma discussing certain topics due to differing power dynamics. These are common when it comes to difficult conversations.

As a leader, difficult conversations might feel intimidating as you can never foresee what responses or comments you will receive from the other parties. People can always hold an opposite point-of-view or a sudden outburst of emotions throughout the conversation. If you aren't ready for it, or not sure how to handle it, you're more likely to avoid than accept the challenge to navigate through the conversation.

Here are a few strategies to prepare for managing tough conversations:

Active Listening

Effective conversation always refers to two-way communication. Besides conveying the message clearly, active listening is also an important skill for navigating tough conversations. Nobody is born a good listener, in fact, it requires effort and practice to listen to others' needs, thoughts, and emotions. You can ask questions with non-judgemental curiosity to explore the other person's perspectives. You can also repeat the key summaries you understand from the conversation. It helps to build understanding and validate emotions throughout the conversation.

Managing Emotions

Be aware of your emotions. You might be triggered strongly by a certain situation, and it's worth finding out the reasons behind it and calming yourself down before proceeding into a conversation. There are techniques to soothe yourself and manage your emotions more effectively. Once you have calmed yourself down, take a few minutes to visualise the ideal outcomes of the upcoming conversation. It not onlyhelps to shape the rational direction but also to foster a calm emotional state for the conversation to grow.

Navigating Tough Conversations

Communicate facts over opinions. Sometimes, our opinions can be bias, but facts are usually in neutral statements. Communicating facts not only refines your tone but also structures messages more constructively. Keep your message simple, clear, and direct giving no room for misinterpretation. The content of your feedback should focus more on the issue, not the person. People tend to take a conflict personally, and that's partly why the communication ended up ineffective.

Framing Feedback Constructively

Directness can be challenging to uphold, especially when it's in a situation where we need to keep empathy at the same time. When it comes to self-leadership, transparency is formed when everybody is informed of the current challenges and changes, leading to appropriate decisions. Curating your messages with a sense of empathy to navigate across the conversation. The key point is that the other person feels heard and respected.

Holding Accountability While Maintaining Trust

Difficult conversations can secure or break a deal, a connection at work, personal effectiveness, or the entire morale and team dynamics . Different leaders have different communication styles, and that's fine. Remember the above skills and use them in your communication, you might find it challenging to practice at first, but eventually, you will lay a foundation to initiate a tough conversation that leads to positive outcomes.

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Ying Yin Lee
Consultant / Senior Learning & Capacity Development Executive, Human Dynamic APAC

CONFLICT WITHOUT CASUALTIES:
RESOLVING DISAGREEMENTS

How do you respond when conflict arises at work? Do you step back, give way, push firmly, split the difference, or seek a joint solution? The Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) is widely used because it captures five common approaches in a clear and practical framework. Each style has its place, but the outcome depends on how it is applied.

01 | Avoiding – Step back to cool down

When it works best: When emotions are running high and pushing forward would make the situation worse.

Objective: Diffuse tension so people can return with a clearer head.

Micro skill – Emotion Acknowledgement: Naming feelings openly helps release tension.

Example: The manager says, *"I can hear this is getting heated. Let us pause here and pick it up tomorrow."* Pausing lowers the temperature and allows a reset.

02 | Accommodating – Preserve the relationship

When it works best: When the issue matters more to the other person than to you.

Objective: Maintain goodwill at low personal cost while avoiding silent resentment.

Micro skill – Empathic Listening + Boundary-Setting: Acknowledge their priority while keeping your own needs visible.

Example: In budget planning, you see that your colleague's need is more urgent. *"I understand this campaign is critical and I support the extra allocation this round. Next quarter, let's also revisit operations funding so efficiency improvements are not overlooked."*

03 | Competing – Be clear and firm

When it works best: When safety, ethics, or compliance are at stake and compromise is not possible.

Objective: Protect critical standards with a decisive outcome.

Micro skill – "I" Statements + Referencing Standards: Avoid accusatory "You" language. Use "I" statements and reference policies to hold the line without blame.

Example: When a team member proposes skipping a safety step, the manager states, *"I cannot approve this without the safety check. Our policy requires it, even if it delays the release."*

04 | Compromising – Find workable middle ground

When it works best: When both sides have valid needs, but progress matters more than perfection.

Objective: Reach a fair trade that moves things forward.

Micro skill – Summarizing and Clarifying: Restating both sides' needs signals fairness and prepares the ground for a balanced solution.

Example: While arguing over deadlines, one needs testing time, the other must meet an executive deadline, the manager acknowledges & then proposes a balanced option. Recognizing both interests makes the compromise feel fair.

05 | Collaborating – Create a stronger solution together

When it works best: For complex, high-stakes issues requiring creativity and buy-in.

Objective: Develop a robust solution that meets core needs.

Micro skill – Reframing: Shift the focus to shared goals and invite contributions to unlock real collaboration.

Example: A leader calls for collaboration: *"Our shared goals are quality and budget control. What ideas could help us achieve both?"* Ideas flow, and the final plan blends contributions from across the team.

Ines Wong
Senior Consultant,
Human Dynamic APAC

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TRUST CAPITAL:

THE LEADERSHIP CURRENCY THAT NEVER DEPRECIATES

Trust is a leader's greatest intangible asset, often shaping outcomes more than strategy or reports. It builds influence faster than authority ever could, and when nurtured consistently, becomes the foundation for long-term success. Leaders trade daily in this currency - trust capital.

Trust grows through consistent actions, clear communication, and integrity in moments that matter. Here's how leaders can strengthen this essential asset.

THE DO'S: HOW TO GROW YOUR TRUST CAPITAL

- **Deliver on Commitments**

Every promise, big or small, is a deposit into your trust account. A sales leader committed to securing analysts for a high-value client pitch and followed through by reallocating talent, earning credibility with both team and client.

- **Be Transparent About Limitations**

Admitting what you don't know demonstrates confidence. A compliance head acknowledged being unprepared for sudden regulatory changes and laid out a clear roadmap. Leaders' candour rallied employees and reassured clients, turning uncertainty into renewed trust.

- **Admit Mistakes Quickly**

Leaders who own missteps create cultures where learning is valued. A project manager in a tech firm corrected a timeline error in a cross-functional call and shared a revised plan. Rather than losing confidence, the team appreciated the honesty and stayed aligned.

- **Protect Confidentiality**

Safeguarding sensitive information signals respect. In employee listening sessions, leaders who ensured private feedback stayed within the room saw higher participation and stronger trust over time.

THE DON'TS: BEHAVIOURS THAT DRAIN TRUST

- **Overpromise Under Pressure**

Short-term approval often leads to long-term damage. A tech leader promised aggressive bonuses without budget approval. When the truth surfaced, attrition spiked and influence waned.

- **Withhold Critical Information**

When leaders keep restructuring plans under wraps, employees inevitably hear through rumours, leading to disengagement and anxiety.

- **Shift Blame**

Passing responsibility to other departments in front of clients may protect face in the moment but erodes both credibility and teamwork.

- **Play Favourites**

A financial manager repeatedly assigned high-visibility projects to the same few, leaving others sidelined. The result: declining morale and reduced initiative.

Trust multiplies influence. It accelerates collaboration, strengthens client partnerships, and stabilizes organizations through crises. Once lost, no amount of authority can buy it back.

Divya Khanna
Ex-Director,
Client Relationship Management ,
Human Dynamic APAC

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The Human Side of AI:
MANAGING DIGITAL OVERLOAD & DECISION FATIGUE

The constant influx of AI-generated information, the need to manage new AI tools, and the pressure to adapt to rapidly evolving AI capabilities can overwhelm our cognitive capacity. Leaders play a crucial role in shaping the organizational culture and mitigating the negative impacts of digital overload. Unchecked digital overload impairs judgment, increases stress, and diminishes creativity—critical liabilities in decision-making roles. Ignoring these risks undermines organizational health and personal resilience. **Here are actionable steps to prevent AI burnout:**

1. SET BOUNDARIES FOR DIGITAL USE:
Encourage employees to establish clear boundaries between work and personal time.

2. PROMOTE DIGITAL DETOXES:
Advocate for regular breaks from technology. This could involve scheduling "digital-free" days or encouraging employees to take short breaks throughout the day to disconnect from their devices.

3. ENCOURAGE MINDFUL TECHNOLOGY USE:
Promote a culture of intentional technology use. Encourage employees to be present and focused when using digital tools.

4. PRIORITIZE ESSENTIAL TASKS:
Help employees prioritize tasks and focus on what truly matters. AI can assist with this by filtering information, but leaders should ensure that employees are not overwhelmed by the sheer volume of data.

5. PROVIDE TRAINING AND SUPPORT:
Offer training on effective use of AI tools and manage digital information.

6. FOSTER OPEN COMMUNICATION:
Create a safe space where employees can openly discuss their concerns about digital overload and AI. This allows leaders to address issues proactively and build trust.

7. LEAD BY EXAMPLE:
Leaders should model healthy digital habits. This includes setting boundaries for their technology use and prioritizing their well-being.

By implementing sustainable digital habits and promoting a culture of well-being, leaders can harness the power of AI without sacrificing the mental health and productivity of their teams. It's about finding a balance and using AI as a tool to enhance, not overwhelm, the human experience.

Leeann Dio
Managing Director, Human Dynamic Philippines

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Managing Transition

From THE OLD to
THE NEW

Dr. Eric Kung
Chairman & Principal Consultant
Human Dynamic Group, APAC

In leading organizational changes, business leaders will face the dilemmas of "destroying and remaking" themselves in their corporate identity and business strategy. Many business management models such as the organization development cycle, product development cycle, and the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) Grid, are used for analyzing organizations and products with reference to those cycles and developing appropriate market strategies in different stages. The old and the new are always overlapping.

We may call that *"transition"* or *"renewal"* or *"transformation"*. The old has made the company successful in the past and thus the existing corporate identity is very much attached to the old corporate image and business model. However, the environment is constantly changing, and the company has developed new products to adapt to those changes in the environment or their internal *"repositioning"* in the market.

If we look at the automobile industry, we may notice the rapid changes in the past 15 years from gasoline engines to EVs, and now to hydrogen engines. Many companies like Toyota and BMW have announced that they will not go into the EV market because it has been dominated by the Chinese EV companies, which have literally dumped their over-produced cheap EVs in Europe and North America killing the EV markets for the old-time automobile companies e.g. Nissan, Honda, Ford, and GM. Every company in whatever industry will face this question about replacing the old with the new.

For Human Dynamic we had been successful in **Work Life Coaching** markets, and we decided that we wanted to exit from CHEAP (the low-end employee assistance program market) which had become a *"red ocean"* with high competition and cut-throat price wars. We repositioned ourselves as the regional leading provider of *"Integrated Solution for Leadership and Change"*. Yet, we have gone through the *"growing pain"* or painful transition when our major revenue from the old was dropping and the revenue from the new was not increasing fast enough. There is always a temptation to go back to the old and to give up the new because transition or transformation is never easy.

Each company must ask themselves about their identity and business strategy. The future customers will decide on the future business and thus the future identity of the company. It is similar, though not the same, to our human growth process. While we may love to stay in our childhood or teenage years or university years, we have grown up and our life stages have changed. Life will go on and business will move on whether we want to change or not. It is a dynamic process, not a static position.

> **To keep balance, like riding on a bicycle you must keep moving and adapting.**
> **" To be or not to be, that is the question. "**

AI AS A LEADERSHIP TOOL

Enhancing, Not Replacing, Human Judgment

AI has become a regular part of how I work these days. I use it to speed up research, pull together insights, or help draft my communication. It's made things easier, especially when I'm working with data and different stakeholders a lot.

But even with all that convenience, sometimes it feels a bit off. The output from AI looks polished and professional, but the tone or intent doesn't always land. It misses the feeling and authenticity behind the words.

And those subtleties matter. It affects how we connect with people and how our decisions come across or are received by others.

That's why I've been paying more attention to how I use AI, especially when it comes to decisions that involve people, values, and context.

Here are a few ways I've learned to use AI more intentionally:

1. Look beyond what the data shows

AI is great at spotting patterns in the data, but it doesn't always see what's really going on. It doesn't know about the relationship history, the timing, or what's happening behind the scenes. A client might show up as "low value" in a report, but maybe they're in the middle of a transition, or quietly preparing to renew a major partnership. That kind of context doesn't appear in the dashboard, but it completely changes how we approach the decision. Sometimes it's worth slowing down to ask, "What do we know that the system doesn't?" Because often, it's the human insight that shifts the decision.

2. Use AI to brainstorm but not to define the strategy

AI can offer all sorts of suggestions such as what's trending, what competitors are doing, or what might "work" based on the data. That's useful, but it doesn't always mean the idea fits. Maybe the timing is off, maybe the team is already stretched, or maybe it just doesn't align with what really matters right now. AI is great for brainstorming, but not for deciding where we're headed. It helps to pause and ask, "Is this actually right for us right now?"

3. Stay present as AI can't sense what people need

AI can help with summarising notes or drafting messages, but it doesn't really catch the human side of things. In meetings, someone might stay quiet or hold back a little, not because they're aligned, but because they're unsure or uncomfortable. That won't show up in a summary, but it matters. Especially in culturally diverse teams, people might not speak up directly, but that doesn't mean everything's fine. Same goes for AI-written messages. They might be polished and structured, but sometimes they just don't feel right. The warmth, the intent, the little touch that shows we care, it's easy to lose that. Before moving forward, it helps to ask, "Does this feel right?" or "Does this sound like me or something I'd actually say?"

All in all, AI can be incredibly helpful, but it's still just a tool. What really shapes leadership is how we show up, how we connect, and how we make decisions with care. Let's not forget what matters most. People don't expect us to be perfect. They look to us for presence, clarity, and heart.

Xin Yuan Low
Director, Solution, Innovation & Excellence,
Human Dynamic Group, APAC

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Sonia Hillary
Editorial Team

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