



## **The Harder the Conversation, the Quicker It Needs to Happen— and How to Do It Well**

*By Claudia McIntyre*

I get it. Hard conversations are hard. Even after decades of practice, I still find them difficult and dread them. But there is a harder truth to face, which is that delayed hard conversations are the absolute hardest.

Not only have so many issues accumulated that the topic becomes difficult to chisel down concisely, but risk grows in the process. Issues and complexity compound. Assumptions fill the gaps. What started as a manageable issue cumulatively becomes heavier and harder to unwind.

In family businesses, this dynamic is amplified.

### **When silence quietly erodes the system**

In one family business, a parent had been planning for years to transition ownership to their adult child, who was already working in the business. On the surface, they appeared aligned. Both assumed they wanted the same outcome and believed there would be time to work out the details later.

But there was one conversation that never happened. The parent did not know how to talk about pricing or timing because they did not have it fully figured out themselves. Rather than risk saying the wrong thing or creating pressure, they kept postponing the discussion.

The child, meanwhile, was not focused on price at all. What weighed on them was the responsibility of taking over the business and the fear of letting their parents down. They worried about the burden they were stepping into and the consequences of disappointing the people they loved most.

Out of respect, they stayed silent. Over time, that silence took a toll. At work, the child felt pressure without authority. At home, uncertainty followed them. What looked like patience on the outside became strain on the inside.

When the conversation finally surfaced, both were surprised by what they learned. There was far more alignment than either expected. But the delay had already created unnecessary stress that could have been avoided.

### **When avoidance spreads beyond the family**

In another organization, a senior leader's performance issues went unaddressed for too long. The intent was understandable. The owner wanted to be patient, supportive, and fair.

But over time, the lack of clarity sent a signal.

Standards did not fail all at once. They slipped quietly. Expectations blurred. Strong performers grew frustrated. Weaker performance went unchecked. What began as one avoided conversation eventually eroded accountability across teams and departments.

By the time the issue was addressed, the problem was no longer isolated. It had affected culture, execution, and results.

This is the hidden cost of delayed hard conversations:  
They rarely stay contained.

### **Reflection questions for leaders and owners**

If any of this feels familiar, these questions are worth sitting with:

- What conversation am I postponing because I do not yet have every answer
- Where has silence been mistaken for patience or care
- What assumptions might others be making in the absence of clarity
- If this conversation were handled earlier, what risk might actually be reduced

Hard conversations delayed do not disappear. They accumulate interest.

### **How to do hard conversations well**

Doing these conversations well does not require perfection. It requires intention. A few principles consistently matter:

- **Name the purpose clearly**  
Be explicit about why the conversation matters now
- **Separate facts from assumptions**  
Share what you know, and be honest about what is still undecided
- **Address impact, not motive**  
Focus on outcomes and effects rather than assigning intent
- **Invite perspective early**  
Ask what the other person is carrying before conclusions form
- **Close with next steps**  
Even partial clarity is better than prolonged uncertainty

Handled early, hard conversations are usually about alignment. Handled late, they become about repair.

### **The value of a third party**

In family businesses especially, hard conversations often carry emotional weight that makes clarity difficult to achieve alone. A trusted third party can help:

- Create structure for conversations that feel overwhelming
- Ask questions neither side feels able to raise
- Slow the discussion just enough to reduce defensiveness
- Ensure both the business and the relationships are protected

Strong leaders are not those who avoid hard conversations. They are the ones who handle them early, thoughtfully, and with genuine care for both outcomes and people.

If navigating a hard conversation feels heavy right now, you do not have to do it alone.

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