

THE STANDING FOREST · CHAPTER TEN

The Hard Conversations

Chapter Ten of The Standing Forest

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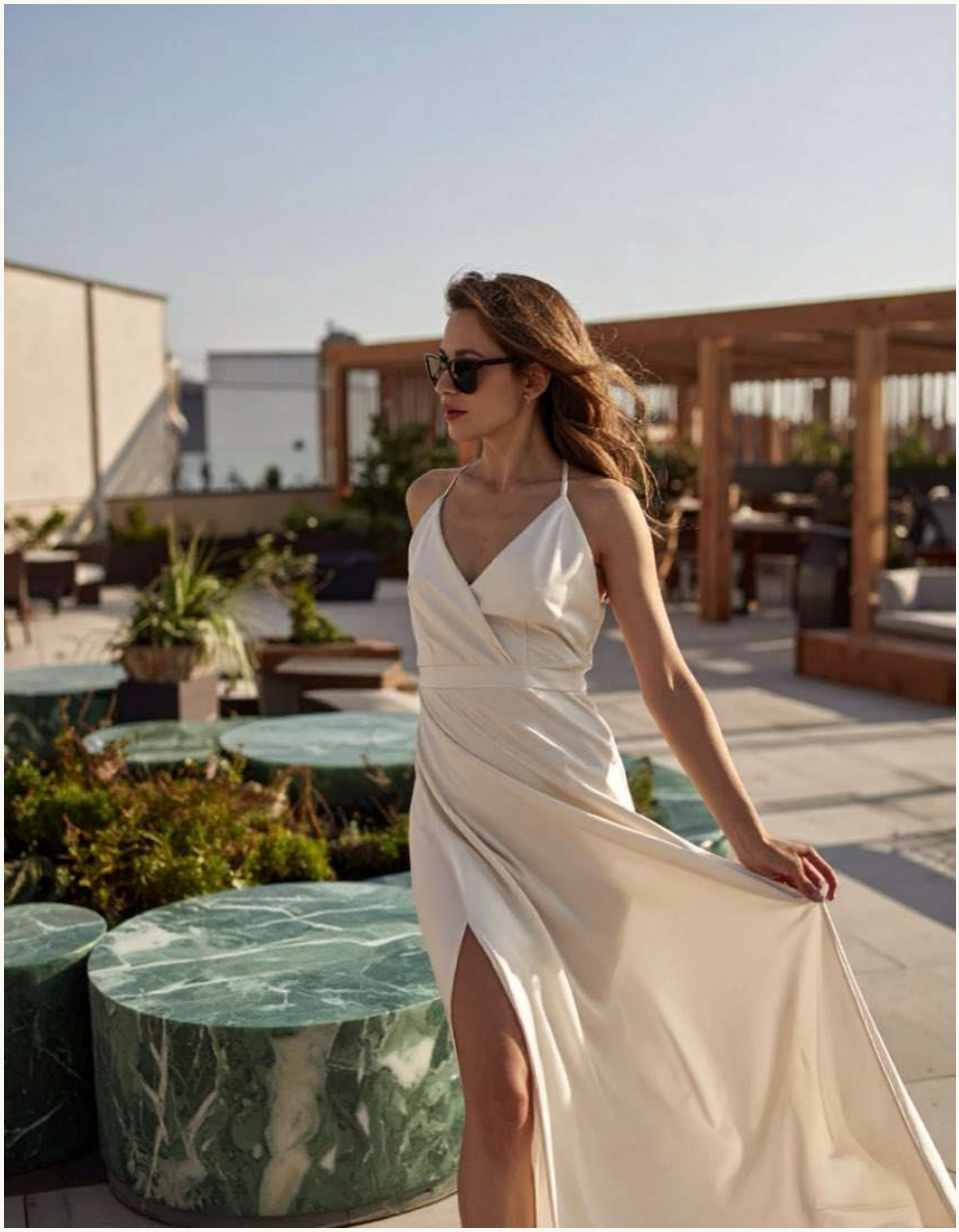
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ABSTRACT

Most organisations that begin this work do not stop because the figures are hard to find. They stop in a room. A board member says, quietly and reasonably, that this is a fashion and the shareholders did not sign up for it. A union representative says that every time management talks about sustainability, somebody's overtime is cut. A supplier says the firm cannot ask questions about wages it is not prepared to pay for. A partner at home says they would rather not discuss the car. Each of these is a good objection, made by someone who is not careless and not hostile, and each can end the work if it is answered badly. This chapter is about answering them well. It takes six conversations in turn, gives the objection at its strongest, describes what is usually going on underneath it, and offers a script: words a leader can say, adapted to their own voice. The scripts are not meant to win. They are meant to keep the person in the room, which is a different aim and a more useful one.

CHAPTER TEN

The Hard Conversations



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Where the work actually stops

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This chapter is about answering them well. It takes six conversations in turn, gives the objection at its strongest, describes what is usually going on underneath it, and offers a script: words a leader can say, adapted to their own voice. The scripts are not meant to win. They are meant to keep the person in the room, which is a different aim and a more useful one.

Santa Anna's *Ecstatic Economics* gives the principle the scripts are built on:

> *You cannot guilt or shame people into ecological behavior when their nervous systems are organized around survival.*[73]

A board member worried about the share price, a shop steward worried about jobs, a partner worried about the mortgage: each is, in the book's language, organised around survival, and each is right to be. The book also refuses to make villains of the people it disagrees with. Of the chief executive and the protester outside the building, it writes:

> *The CEO hoards because fear tells them there's never enough. The activist fights because fear tells them everything will be taken. Neither is wrong about the real dynamics at play.*[74]

A leader who walks into a hard conversation believing the other person is the problem has already lost it. A leader who walks in believing the other person is right about something, and is curious about what, has a chance.



Five habits for every conversation

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Five habits for every conversation

Lead with what is already working. Chapter 3 gave the reason: people who feel secure in what they have done can look at what they have not. Open every hard conversation with one specific thing the other person or their part of the organisation already does well inside the ring, with its figure.

Write the objection down in their words. The Objection Register from Chapter 3 exists for this moment. Saying "I'd like to put that in the register exactly as you said it" tells the person their concern will not be tidied away.

Answer from your own figures first. A study from another country persuades nobody who is worried about this country, this plant, this household. Your own ledger does.

Concede what is true. Every objection in this chapter is partly right. Say which part, aloud. A concession is not a defeat; it is the evidence that you are listening, and it makes the rest of what you say believable.

Ask for one small next step, not agreement. Nobody changes their mind in a meeting. They agree to look at a figure, to sit on a working group, to come back in a quarter. That is enough.

The board member: "This is a fashion"

The objection at its strongest. Boards have seen sustainability programmes come and go. Many produced glossy reports and little else. Some cost money that was never recovered. The board's duty is to the organisation's long-term health, and a framework drawn by an economist at Oxfam is not obviously part of that duty. If the chief executive wants to spend time on it, the board would like to see the business case.

What is usually underneath. A real fear of being made to look foolish, either by backing something that fails or by being seen to block something that later succeeds. And a reasonable impatience with programmes that have no figures.

The script.

> *"You're right that a lot of these programmes have produced reports and not much else, and I don't want to do that. So I'm not asking the board to adopt a framework. I'm asking for one quarter in which we count five things we already pay for, in their own units, alongside revenue, and bring you the figures with no targets attached. Our gas bill rose faster than our sales last year. I'd like to know why. If after one quarter the figures tell us nothing we didn't know, I'll say so and we'll stop."*

What makes it work. It concedes the history, names a figure the board already holds, removes the targets that would make the board feel committed, and offers a clear point at which to stop. It turns a question of belief into a question of evidence, which is the kind of question a board is designed to answer.

If the board member says "show me the business case." Do not invent one. Say:

> *"I can't give you an honest business case before we've counted. What I can give you is the cost of counting, which is about a day a week of one person's time for a quarter, and a date when you'll see what we found. After that, if there's a case, you'll see it in our own figures."*

The investor: "Our returns depend on growth"

The objection at its strongest. The organisation has borrowed, or raised equity, on the expectation of growing sales. Its lenders and owners are entitled to that growth. Talk of steady states and being agnostic about growth sounds, to a provider of capital, like a warning that the promise will not be kept.

What is usually underneath. Chapter 3's fifth objection, at the scale of one firm. The investor is correctly describing a structure in which the organisation's own commitments demand growth. The investor may also fear, wrongly, that ecological economics means deliberately shrinking.

The script.

> *"I want to be clear about what we're not doing. We're not planning to shrink and we're not abandoning growth. We're separating two things: growing in revenue and value, which we intend to keep doing, and growing in tonnes and kilowatt-hours, which we'd like to stop. Where we can grow the first without the second, everyone is better off, including you, because our costs fall. I'll report both, side by side, every quarter, so you can see whether we're managing it."*

What makes it work. It uses Daly's distinction from Chapter 2, growth and development, in the investor's own terms. It promises transparency, not outcomes. And it is honest: Chapter 3 showed that absolute decoupling is rare, and the script commits only to reporting whether it happens.

If the investor asks about the risk of not growing. Say what Chapter 3 suggested a firm should do:

> *"We're also looking at which of our own commitments only work if we keep growing, so that a flat year isn't a crisis. That should make us a safer borrower, not a riskier one."*



The union representative: "This is a pay freeze in green clothing"

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The union representative: "This is a pay freeze in green clothing"

The objection at its strongest. Workers have learned to be wary when management introduces a new framework. Efficiency programmes have meant redundancies. Cost-cutting has been described as sustainability. Wellbeing initiatives have meant mindfulness sessions instead of more staff. The union's job is to protect pay, jobs and conditions, and it has seen enough to be suspicious.

What is usually underneath. Experience, and a reasonable suspicion that the floor of the ring, the needs of the organisation's own people, will be talked about and the ceiling acted on, because cutting energy saves money and raising pay costs it.

The script.

> *"I understand why you'd be suspicious, and I'd be suspicious in your place. So here's what's different. The first thing we're counting is our own floor: how many of our people are paid below the living benchmark, how many take their leave, how many leave each year, by team. Those figures go on the same page as our energy and our waste, with the same weight. I'd like you, or someone you choose, on the working group that draws that page. And I'll put this in writing: nothing we find will be used to justify a redundancy without coming back to you first."*

What makes it work. It concedes the history, puts the floor first rather than last, offers a place in the work rather than a briefing about it, and makes a specific written commitment. It is only honest if the leader can keep the commitment. A leader who cannot should not make it, and should say instead what they can commit to.

If the representative asks for the vitality measures to be dropped. Take it seriously. Chapter 4 warned that felt aliveness can be misused by an employer who would rather improve morale than wages. Say:

> *"That's a fair worry. The signs we're counting are things like leave taken and turnover, not a happiness survey. They'll never be used to judge an individual, and they'll never be reported without the pay figures beside them. If you think any of them could be misused, put it in the register and we'll talk about it at the next review."*

The supplier: "You can't ask about wages you won't pay for"

The objection at its strongest. A small supplier receives a questionnaire about wages, safety and environmental practice from a customer that pays at sixty days and negotiates hard on price. The supplier's margin is thin. The questions feel like a compliance burden imposed by a larger firm that wants credit for its supply chain without paying for it.

What is usually underneath. The supplier is right. Chapter 5's composite furniture maker found it was paying its smallest suppliers slowest, the reverse of what reciprocity would ask. Chapter 7 showed that a stewardship payment works only if it arrives on time and can be relied on.

The script.

> *"You're right, and we've looked at our own figures. We've been paying you at sixty days while we pay our largest suppliers at thirty. That's the wrong way round, and we're changing it from next month. The questions aren't a test. We'd like to understand what it costs you to keep the standards we'd both like to keep, and whether there's anything we can do, in price, terms or timing, to make that easier. Could we visit, and talk it through?"*

What makes it work. It concedes the specific point with a figure, acts on it before asking for anything, and reframes the questions as a conversation about shared cost. It is the opening of a Stewardship Contract from Chapter 7.

The sceptic in the working group: "The science is too uncertain"

The objection at its strongest. Chapter 3's third objection. The planetary boundaries are estimates with wide error bars, several have been redefined, and a global figure says nothing about this factory. Building plans on such numbers is building on sand.

What is usually underneath. Often a person with technical training who has seen bad science used to justify bad decisions, and who is protecting the organisation from being made foolish.

The script.

> *"You're right that the boundaries are uncertain, and the scientists who drew them say so; they describe them as zones of rising risk, not cliff edges. That's why we're not starting from them. We're starting from our own figures, which aren't uncertain at all: what we burn, what we buy, what we throw away, measured from our own bills. Where we do use a global figure, I'd like you to be the person who checks how we've used it and writes down the assumptions. Would you?"*

What makes it work. It agrees with the sceptic on the science, moves the conversation to figures that are not in dispute, and gives the sceptic a role that uses their scepticism. A sceptic who is asked to check the work becomes its most valuable member.



The partner at home: "I'd rather not talk about the car"

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The partner at home: "I'd rather not talk about the car"

The objection at its strongest. A household's money and habits are bound up with work, health, children, ageing parents and a great deal of tiredness. A partner who has read a book about the doughnut and comes home wanting to measure the family's energy, review its spending and talk about what enough means can feel, to the other person, like a new form of judgement in the one place they hoped to be free of it.

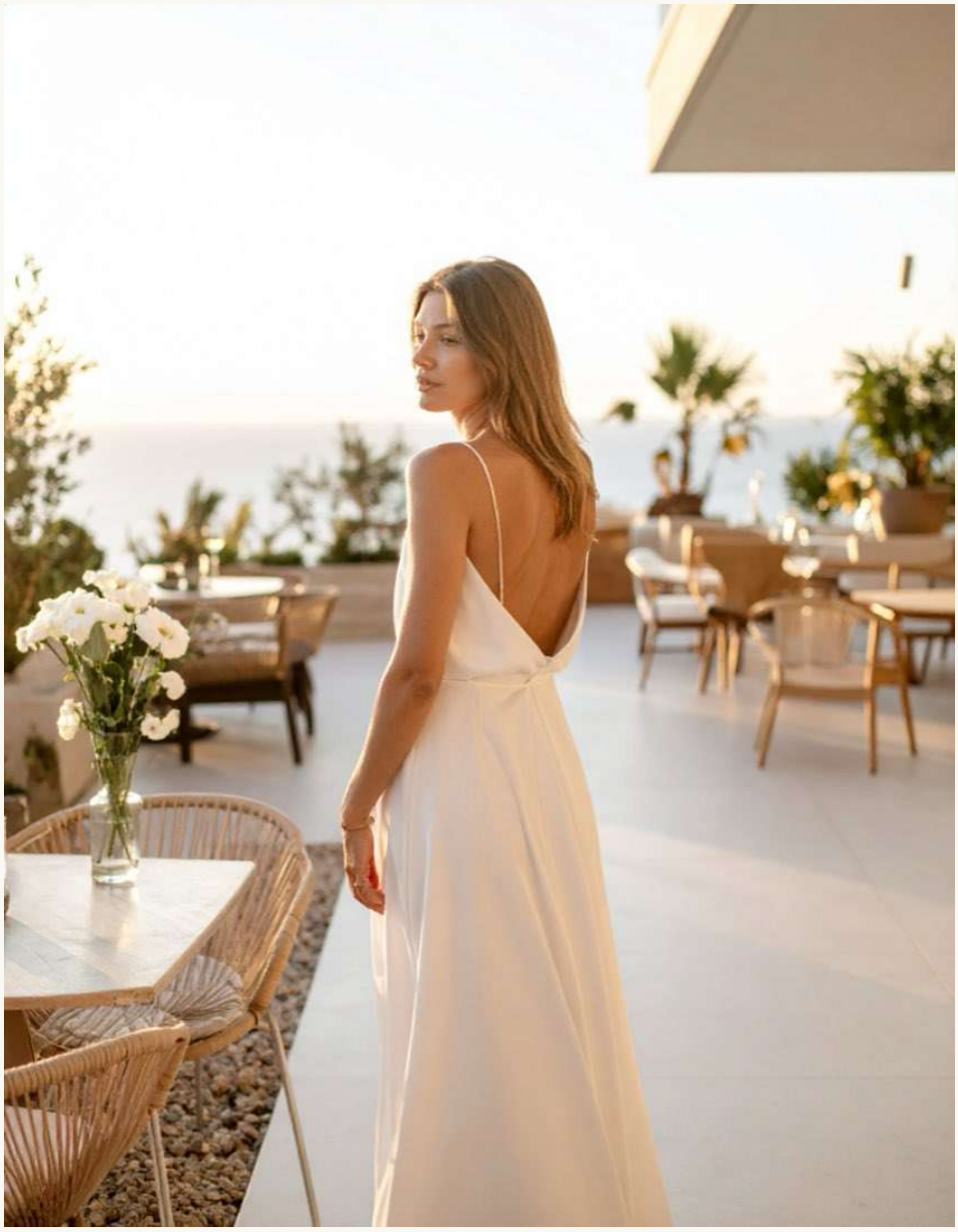
What is usually underneath. Tiredness, and a fear that the conversation is really about who has been doing something wrong. Sometimes a real constraint: the car is the only way to reach a parent, the job is the only one available, the heating is on because someone is ill.

The script.

> *"I'm not trying to change anything yet, and I'm not saying we're doing anything wrong. I'd just like to write down one number a week for a month, how much electricity we use, and look at it together at the end. And I'd like to start by saying what I think we already do well, because I think there's quite a lot. If after a month it doesn't feel useful, we'll stop."*

What makes it work. It removes judgement, starts with what works, chooses a flow that is unlikely to be the sore point, and offers a clear end. It leaves the car alone. If the car matters, it will come up by itself, in its own time, from the person who knows why it matters.

Santa Anna's book draws a boundary here that the script respects. It says plainly that the inner work it describes is for people who already have enough material security to examine their relationship with scarcity, and is not a substitute for food, shelter, healthcare or safety.[75] A household under real material strain needs material relief before it needs a ledger. Chapter 11 takes this up.



The family business: "My father built this"

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The family business: "My father built this"

The objection at its strongest. In a family firm, the person who built the business is often still in it, and often on the board. Every practice the portrait questions, the timber bought from the cheapest mill, the supplier paid at sixty days, the yard paved over in 1987, was a decision somebody made, frequently the founder, for reasons that were good at the time. A daughter or son who brings the doughnut into that room can be heard as saying that the founder did it wrong.

What is usually underneath. Pride, which is earned, and a fear that the next generation will spend what the last one saved. Sometimes also a real knowledge the newcomers lack: why the yard was paved, which mill once saved the firm by extending credit in a bad year.

The script.

> *"Most of what this portrait shows is things the business has done well for forty years, and I'd like to start there: we've kept every one of the people who started with you, and we've never missed a payroll. What I'd like to understand is the history behind three rows I don't know the story of. Why the yard was paved. Why we buy from the mill we do. Why the small suppliers are on sixty days. You'll know, and I'd rather hear it from you than guess."*

What makes it work. It starts with the founder's achievement, with figures, and turns the questionable rows into questions of history the founder is best placed to answer. Often the answers change the plan: the mill may deserve loyalty, and the yard may have been paved for a reason that still holds. Where they do not, the founder has been part of seeing it, and a change the founder helped to see is a change the founder can approve.

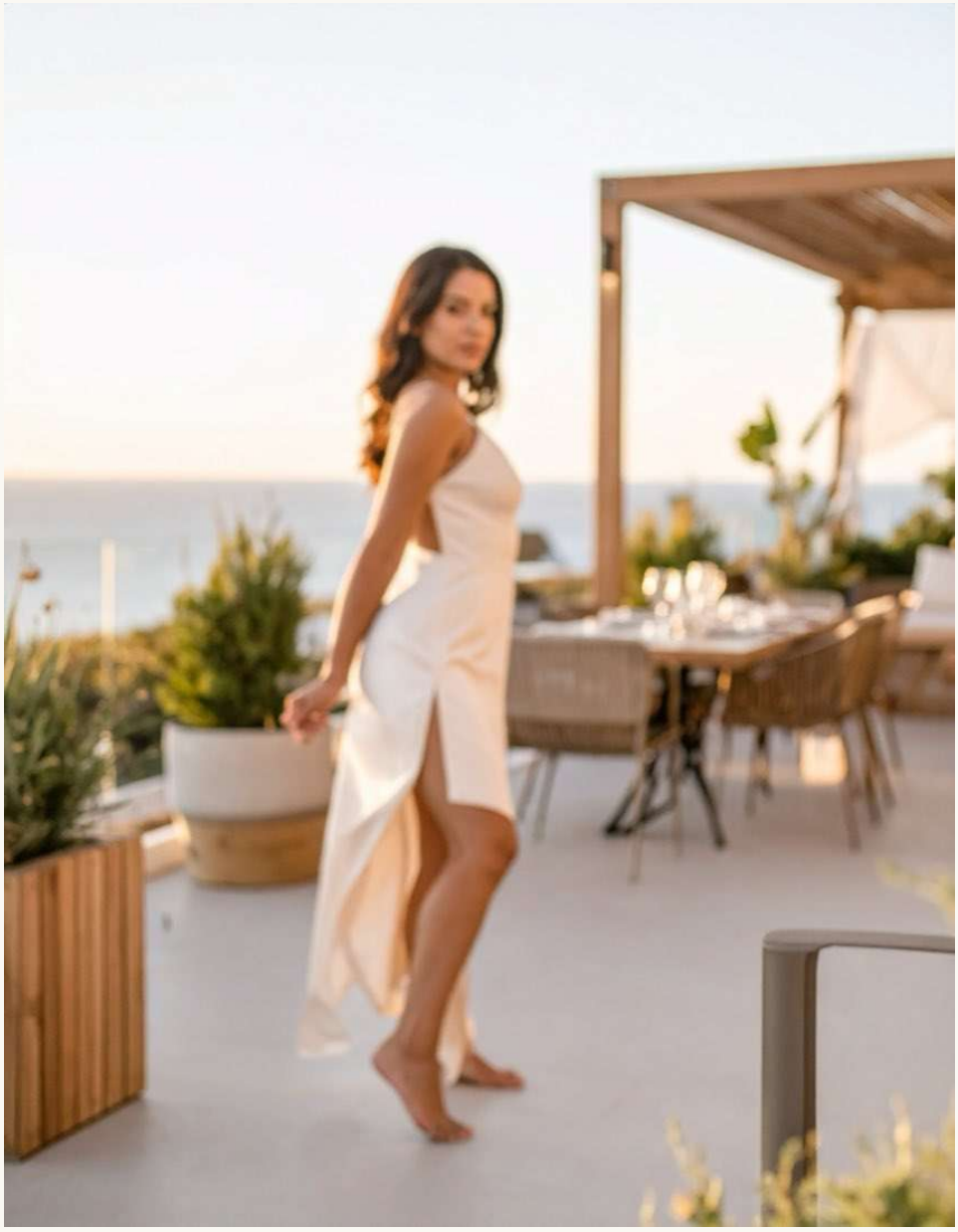
When the conversation goes badly

Some conversations will go badly however they are handled. The board member will not be persuaded; the union will decline the place on the working group; the partner will say no. Three things help.

Record it. Put the objection in the register, in the person's words, marked *open*. It has not been lost and it has not been won.

Do not escalate. The pull, after a bad meeting, is to find a stronger argument or a more senior ally. Usually the better move is to go on counting, quietly, and come back with figures. An objection that was about belief often softens when it meets evidence it helped to shape.

Look for the part that was right. Nearly every hard conversation contains a concession the leader did not make. Find it afterwards, and make it next time.



What this chapter cannot do

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What this chapter cannot do

Scripts are scaffolding. Said without meaning, they sound like what they are, and an experienced board member or union representative will hear the difference at once. The words above work only if the leader believes the other person is right about something, has looked at the figures, and can keep the commitments the scripts contain. Where a commitment cannot be kept, the honest move is to say so and offer a smaller one. No script in this chapter has been tested in a controlled study. Each is built on the principles of the preceding chapters, and each should be rewritten in the voice of the person who will say it.

The Tool: The Conversation Card

One card, prepared before any hard conversation, and kept afterwards in the Objection Register.

Before.

1 · *Who, and what they are responsible for.* One line.

2 · *What they already do well inside the ring, with its figure.* One line. This is how you open.

3 · *Their objection at its strongest, in words they would recognise.* Two or three lines. Write it as their best advocate would.

4 · *What is probably underneath it.* One line. Name the fear without judging it.

5 · *What part of it is true.* One line. You will say this aloud.

6 · *The figure from our own ledger that bears on it.* One line, with its source.

7 · *The one small next step I will ask for.* One line. Not agreement: a step.

8 · *The commitment I can keep.* One line. If you cannot keep it, do not write it.

After.

1 · *Their words, exactly, for the register.*

2 · *What I conceded.*

3 · *What they agreed to.*

4 · *What I said I would do, and by when.* Do it.

References

1. Santa Anna, A. *Ecstatic Economics*, manuscript `ch02.md`. Luminous Prosperity Inc., 2026.
2. Santa Anna, A. *Ecstatic Economics*, manuscript `ch02.md`, the section preceding "Naming the Wound Without Demonizing Its Carriers". Luminous Prosperity Inc., 2026.
3. Santa Anna, A. *Ecstatic Economics*, manuscript `ch02.md`, "Common Pitfalls: What This Chapter Is Not Saying". Paraphrased, not quoted.

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