



Managing difficult conversations in private office

Private office are in the middle of many moving parts and you have an important role to play in managing relationships within the department. This can lead to difficult conversations, so how can you prepare for and manage these conversations?

Because private office teams sit between ministers and civil servants, they often need to deliver difficult messages across the department. This can be particularly difficult when delivering bad news to ministers or senior officials, where power dynamics can make conversations more challenging. However, these conversations need to happen and this guide outlines why they are important, what you can do to prepare, and how you can manage them effectively.

“ I think private offices have an in-built conflict of interest because they both have to serve their department on a career level but also serve their minister, often on a very, very personal level.

– [Maria Miller](#), culture secretary (2012-14)



1. What kinds of difficult conversations might you have?

Relationships are at the heart of private office, and you will help broker difficult conversations by maintaining close working relationships across the department. Scenarios that could require a difficult conversation include:

- Managing a minister's' expectations about a policy issue or initiative based on previous experience of what has not worked and operational capacity.
- Asking your minister to change some aspect of how they work with the department.
- Delivering negative feedback from ministers and special advisers to senior policy officials.
- Articulating a change in ways of working which may upset members of the department.
- Representing the views of the department and providing constructive pushback to ministers.
- Managing cross-government relations with No.10 and other departments when there are disagreements.
- Setting expectations with special advisers about how they engage with the private office and with the department.

Decide whether you are the right person to have this conversation or if it should be escalated. Some conversations should be escalated to the principal private secretary or the permanent secretary – for instance, where they involve bullying or inappropriate behaviour.

2. Why should you not avoid tough conversations?

Having tough conversations is important and avoiding issues will simply lead to bigger problems down the line. If left unaddressed, poor performance from officials will continue to detract from the department's work, while unhelpful approaches by ministers will similarly create problems. These conversations give private office a direct way to address ministers' frustrations, raise issues and find solutions.



"If civil servants think, "I am only going to say to the minister what I think the minister wants to hear," they're not doing right by you."

Hilary Benn

International development secretary (2003-07), environment secretary (2007-10)

If problems are not addressed – for instance where officials want to avoid confrontation – it can lead to a further deterioration of trust between the political team and the rest of the department, which can create **much bigger issues**.

Where difficult conversations are handled well they can strengthen working relationships, create the conditions for airing multiple perspectives, and encourage creative collaborative solutions to problems.

3. How can you prepare for these conversations?

Not all problems will require a formal meeting or conversation to resolve – you may be able to address problems before they become too big. Former pensions minister Steve Webb recalled how it was useful to have an “experienced hand in the private office who, if I’d ruffled feathers, could quietly nip downstairs and smooth them”. You could also reach out to other intermediaries, such as special advisers, to raise issues with ministers and convey the reasoning for a decision or to explain why work is delayed.

If a conversation is required, it is worth preparing in advance. Some things to think about could include:

- **Why** am I having this conversation and what outcome do I and the person I am speaking to want to achieve?
- **What** are the facts of the situation and why might this conversation be difficult?
- **Who** is the right person/people to have this conversation and do I need to speak to senior colleagues first?
- **How** can I frame this conversation to be constructive for both parties? How can I ensure clarity and show positive intentions?
- **When** and **where** should I have this conversation so that participants feel safe and comfortable, and are not overheard?

If you are not sure about how to answer these questions, seek advice from a senior member of private office.

4. How to manage a difficult conversation

Aim for clarity when outlining what the problem is, why the conversation is taking place, what is to be discussed and what outcomes you want to reach. Clarity helps to build trust, so avoid ambiguous language that sidesteps the core issues.

End each conversation with clear outcomes and agreed next steps. Make sure to document these so that you can avoid misunderstandings and reiterate next steps to the relevant parties. Where appropriate, put processes in place to track progress and follow-up if necessary.

Questions to ask yourself:

- Am I prepared for the range of tough conversations that I may be involved in?
- Do I understand the range of roles that private office can play in holding or brokering these kinds of conversations?
- Do I have a plan for how to approach specific difficult conversations?
- Do I know who to go to if I need support with managing difficult conversations?

The IfG Academy:

The IfG also provides dedicated training for private office teams – from managing difficult conversations to other bespoke sessions to suit teams and individuals. If you'd like to find out more about our support, you can contact us at: ifgacademy@instituteforgovernment.org.uk.