

HOLDING THE LINE

Responding to Difficult Behaviour with Composure, Courage and Connection

In every team, leaders will eventually face challenging behaviour. These situations can feel uncomfortable and emotionally charged, yet how a leader responds often shapes the culture of the entire team.

Holding the line means protecting standards, maintaining psychological safety, and addressing behaviour that undermines the team—while still recognising the humanity of the other person.

Avoiding difficult behaviour rarely makes it disappear. Instead, it often spreads frustration, confusion and disengagement across the team.

This guide complements the Behaviour Breakthrough Blueprint and the TLC Difficult Conversations Roadmap and helps leaders decide when and how to step in when behaviour crosses the line.

Effective leaders respond with three core leadership capabilities used across TLC Leadership Group programs:



• **Composure** –
regulating emotions
before responding



• **Courage** –
addressing behaviour
and holding people
accountable



• **Connection** –
maintaining respect
and dignity in the
conversation

1. TRIAGE

What Are You Dealing With?

Before reacting, pause and diagnose the issue. Not every behaviour challenge requires the same response.

Performance – The person can do the job but is not meeting expectations.

Incapacity – The person is struggling due to capability gaps or personal circumstances.

Misconduct – Behaviour that breaches standards, values or policies.

2. BOUNDARIES

When Leaders Must Hold the Line

Leaders sometimes hesitate to address behaviour because they want to maintain harmony or avoid conflict. However, avoiding the issue can unintentionally signal that the behaviour is acceptable.

Leaders must hold the line when behaviour:

- undermines trust
- damages psychological safety
- repeatedly violates expectations
- impacts team performance or culture

A helpful leadership question:
“If I allow this behaviour to continue, what message does that send to the team?”

3. COMPOSURE

Regulate Yourself First

When behaviour triggers strong emotions, our instinct may be to react quickly. Effective leaders pause and respond intentionally.

Know Your Triggers

Common triggers include feeling disrespected, lack of accountability, being challenged publicly, or feeling ignored. Triggers are not the problem—unmanaged reactions are.

TOOLS FOR COMPOSURE

S

Stop: Pause before reacting.

N

Notice: Observe what you are feeling.

A

Accept: Acknowledge the emotion without letting it control your behaviour.

P

Proceed: Choose a deliberate response.

C

Centre yourself: Pause and breathe.

A

Acknowledge: Show you are listening.

L

Listen: Seek to understand their perspective.

M

Move forward: Guide the conversation constructively.

Respond, Don't React

When someone makes a strong statement, slow the conversation down.

Example: "You are bullying me."

Response: "Just so I understand, you feel that I am bullying you?"

This approach slows the conversation, reduces defensiveness and creates space for dialogue.

4. COURAGE – Your Mindset

Courage in leadership is not about confrontation, it is about responsibility. Leaders set the tone for what behaviour is acceptable in their teams.

Holding the line recognises that:

- accountability protects the team
- clear expectations create fairness
- addressing behaviour supports growth

Instead of asking 'Will this conversation make them uncomfortable?' ask 'Will avoiding this conversation harm the team?'

5. CONNECTION – See the Human

Holding the line does not mean becoming harsh or punitive. Leaders can be both firm and respectful.

Helpful language examples:

- 'I want to discuss something important because I value working well together.'
- 'I noticed something that concerns me and I'd like to understand your perspective.'
- 'My goal here is to make sure we can move forward constructively.'

Final Leadership Reminder

Strong leaders pause before responding, hold people accountable, protect team culture and lead with composure, courage and connection.

Holding the line is not about control. It is about creating a culture where people and teams can thrive.

Holding the Line Phrases

1. When someone interrupts

Finish First → Invite Next

- “I’d like to finish my thought.”
- “Let me complete this, then I’ll come to you.”
- “Hold that—I want to hear you in a moment.”

Calm

Direct

Keeps control without shutting them down

2. When someone dominates the conversation

Acknowledge → Redirect

- “You’ve raised some important points—let’s hear from others as well.”
- “I’m going to pause you there so we can bring others in.”
- “Let’s open this up—I’d like to hear a few different perspectives.”

Validates without rewarding over-talking
Rebalances the room

3. When someone constantly challenges (pushes back)

Acknowledge → Anchor → Move Forward

- “I hear your concern. Here’s the direction we’re taking...”
- “That’s one perspective. This is what we’ve agreed to do.”
- “I understand the challenge—what would make this workable from your side?”

Doesn’t get defensive
Keeps leadership authority

4. When someone takes over / goes off track

Interrupt → Refocus

- “I’m going to bring us back to the point.”
- “Let’s stay with the original question.”
- “That’s useful, and we need to come back to...”

Clean reset

Keeps the conversation purposeful

5. When someone butts in / speaks over others

Name the Behaviour → Reset the Standard

- “Let’s allow one person to speak at a time.”
- “I want to make sure everyone gets space to finish.”
- “Let’s not talk over each other—go ahead, [name].”

Sets a clear norm
Depersonalises (focus on behaviour, not person)

6. When energy escalates (bonus—very useful)

Slow Down → Ground the Conversation

- “Let’s pause for a moment.”
- “I want to reset the tone so we can have a productive conversation.”
- “Let’s slow this down and focus on what matters here.”

Brings in Composure (C1)
Prevents escalation