

A PRIVATE REFLECTION FOR SENIOR LEADERS

On the conversations that drain you before you have them, and the negotiation running underneath every message.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

You already know how to communicate.

This guide isn't about whether you can. It's about what it costs inside you before you hit send.

From the outside, it looks easy. You send the email, you hold the huddle, you move on. Inside, a negotiation starts before the first word. It's fast, it's quiet, and it usually sounds like being careful.

Nothing in these pages asks you to communicate better. The work here is noticing where the message is coming from. A negotiation you can see has a lot less power than one running in the background.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Choose one message. An email you rewrote, a team conversation you rehearsed, a reply you sat on. Keep it in mind on every page.

Go slowly. Twenty quiet minutes will tell you more than an hour of skimming.

Write by hand if you can. Rehearsing in your head is the habit you're interrupting.

Keep it private. This is for you. No one needs to see it.

START HERE *The message I'm holding in mind is:*

Who it's going to:

The conversation you haven’t had yet.

It’s 5 a.m. Your phone lights up. Two lines from your boss: the results came in, and they weren’t good. Before you finish reading, you’ve drafted ten replies in your head. Then you start on the one to your team, and you can already hear how it will land. Here he goes again. You haven’t typed a word, and you’re already exhausted.

Rehearse it, have it, replay it. That’s three conversations to get one said. Check any that showed up with your message.

- ☐ I drafted a reply, deleted it, and drafted it again.
- ☐ I tried softer words, then firmer words, then another tactic.
- ☐ I sat on it because I wasn’t sure which version of me should send it.
- ☐ I rehearsed it in the car, sometimes out loud.
- ☐ I ran their objections, and my answers to their objections.
- ☐ I replayed it on the drive home.

REFLECT *How many conversations did this one message take?*

What did it cost you in energy, sleep, or focus?

02 · NAMING

The negotiation on two fronts

The email doesn't drain you. Two lines don't drain anybody. The negotiation does, and it runs in more than one direction. Each voice sounds reasonable. Read all four, then notice which one is loudest for you.

01 · UPWARD

"How do I explain this so it doesn't sound like an excuse?"

It sounds like professionalism.

You know what happened. The real question is how much to own and how much context to give before context sounds like defending yourself. That's not answering a question. It's managing a verdict.

What was I trying to keep them from thinking?

02 · DOWNWARD

"Here he goes again."

It sounds like reading the room.

Before you say a word, you've decided how they'll hear it. You're negotiating with a version of your team that only exists in your head, and you're losing.

What line did I write for them?

03 · REPETITION

"If I'm saying it again, it didn't work."

It sounds like accountability.

Every repeat carries a small verdict about you. That's the hidden tax: you're not just delivering the message, you're defending yourself against what it seems to say about you.

What does repeating it seem to say about me?

04 · TRANSLATION

"How am I supposed to sound?"

The one that may have gotten you promoted.

Many leaders, especially those with ADHD, spend years translating how they think into how a leader is supposed to sound. It works most of the time. It's also expensive, and at 5 a.m. the bill comes due.

Where am I translating myself before I speak?

03 · UNDERNEATH

Where are you saying it from?

Picture a translator at a summit, standing between two delegations. You soften what comes down so it doesn't sting. You shape what goes up so it doesn't look so bad. The message gets delivered. *The translator is wiped out.*

MANAGING RECEPTION	OWNING THE MESSAGE
Attention on how it lands and how I'll be judged	Attention on what's true and what I mean
An explanation built to protect me	An account of what happened
Every word goes through a filter	I still care how it lands. I'm just not negotiating with it.
Replying at 5:15 because I can't stand the waiting	Replying when I'm actually ready to lead

The problem isn't how you say it. It's *where you're saying it from.*

A perfect template won't stop you from writing the reply ten times in your head. Same facts, same results, same team. One version costs you the whole morning. The other costs you almost nothing.

When you pass a message down as *the boss wants this,* you hand your team the pressure but not the reason.

Of course it sounds like harping. You're repeating someone else's sentence. When the standard is yours, repeating it doesn't feel like failure. It feels like leadership: saying the important thing again until it lives in the room without you.

04 · HONEST ANSWERS

What was I actually asked?

REFLECT *What was the question? What verdict did I add to it?*

My account, in four sentences or fewer: what happened, what I own, what happens next.

Passing pressure down, or holding a standard?

Your team can hear the difference, whether they know it or not. Circle where you've been operating.

PASSING PRESSURE DOWN	HOLDING THE STANDARD
"My boss wants this, so we need to fix it."	"This standard matters to me, and here's why."
Repeating someone else's sentence	Saying the important thing again until it lives in the room
Bracing for the "same old thing" look	Asking what they see that I don't
Framing the team as the problem	Framing the team as the solution
Owning their thinking for them	Owning the outcome, and standing behind them

The left column delivers the message. The right column leads. It isn't harder. It's lighter.

Clarity isn’t something you add.

You take the negotiation out one piece at a time, so the message can move. Choose one practice for this week. Use the space to note what happened when you tried it.

1 **Separate the question from the verdict.**

Before you reply, ask what you were actually asked, and answer that. A 5 a.m. email doesn’t require a 5 a.m. reply. Choosing when you respond is part of your authority.

2 **Write the account, not the defense.**

A defense tries to control what someone thinks of you. An account tells the truth. If your reply is running long, check whether you’re answering the question or arguing with the verdict.

3 **Decide what you believe before you decide what to say.**

Do you believe this standard matters, or are you relaying pressure? If you believe it, say it as yours and say why. If you don’t, that’s worth knowing too.

4 **Stop arguing with your team in your head.**

You won’t find out what they think by rehearsing it. Open a different door: “We’ve talked about this before. It’s not where we want it. What are you seeing that I’m not?”

5 **Remember who you already chose to be.**

Under pressure, it’s easy to reach straight for doing: drafting, explaining, defending. You can’t do your way into being a trusted leader. You can only be one. Start there, and the message gets lighter.

06 · CARRY THIS INTO YOUR WEEK

Four questions

Bring these to the next message that makes your shoulders tense. Notice whether your answers change by Friday.

01 *What was I actually asked? And what verdict did I add to it?*

02 *Who am I negotiating with right now: the real person, or the one in my head?*

03 *Do I believe what I'm about to say, or am I passing pressure down?*

04 *Who do I want to be in this conversation, no matter how it lands?*

GO FURTHER

The Leadership Friction Assessment

If you recognized yourself in this negotiation, it's worth seeing where else it shows up. Twelve questions. A few minutes. It shows you where internal negotiation is showing up in how you lead, including how you communicate.

ryanwattscoaching.com/friction

From The Private Leadership Reset Podcast with Ryan Watts · privateleadershipreset.com
The message was never the heavy part. The negotiation was.