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Most senior managers know exactly which conversations they are avoiding.

A number that doesn't add up. A decision that has quietly been wrong for two quarters. A question nobody wants to ask because of where it might lead. Talk to them about it and the real reason comes out: they are worried it will look like an attack, or worse, as a risk to their own position. After years of coaching people through exactly this, I've landed on one conviction – **a challenge raised the right way is never a risk**; raised the wrong way, it can be.

The difference comes down to preparation. Walk in with the other person's own **data** – their dashboard, their team's numbers, the system they themselves rely on – and "I don't recognize this" stops being an option. Bring in an outside benchmark or something you "heard," and it is.

From there, ask rather than tell. Nobody gets defensive about a conclusion they reached themselves. The best version of this conversation I've seen barely feels like a challenge at all, more like **a discovery**. It feels like the other person thinking out loud, with **you just asking the next good question**.

At least two more things matter as much as the technique.

First, pick your moments – save this for **what actually matters**, because if you challenge every small thing, people stop listening the moment you open your mouth. Spend it only on **what genuinely moves the business**, and people start to trust the weight of your questions.

Second, position yourself as a facilitator, **be visibly neutral**. I often explicitly say so – that I'm not arguing a side, I'm here to make sure every angle gets a fair hearing, even the ones I don't personally hold. Sometimes that means I argue the opposite case on purpose, just so nothing gets waved through unexamined. The **thoroughness** is what gets a hard topic taken seriously instead of personally.

None of this makes difficult conversations comfortable. It makes them impactful. Senior roles are paid well precisely because they require this: the willingness to surface what others won't, prepared well enough that it sounds as insight rather than ambush. That is not a soft skill bolted onto the job. **For anyone in a leadership role, it is the job.**