



The Toothpaste Test

A Practical Leadership Framework for Giving Feedback That Helps People Improve

Most leadership problems don't begin with a crisis. They begin with a conversation that never happened. Someone misses a deadline, standards slip or behaviour changes. Rather than addressing it, we tell ourselves it will improve on its own. Unfortunately, problems rarely shrink through neglect. They almost always grow.

Imagine this...

You're brushing your teeth and someone squeezes toothpaste onto the sink. Would you leave it there? Of course not. You'd wipe it away immediately because tomorrow it will be harder to clean. Small leadership problems work exactly the same way.

- The longer they're ignored, the harder they become to solve.
- The more emotional they become.
- The more people they affect.
- The more difficult the eventual conversation becomes.

Great leaders don't wait for problems to become concrete. They clean them up while they're still toothpaste.



Why the Toothpaste Test Works

Giving feedback is uncomfortable, so our brains create convincing reasons to delay. 'I'll mention it next week.' 'It isn't that serious.' 'I need more evidence.' Every day we delay, the conversation changes from one incident into an established pattern.

The Cost of Waiting

Lower standards: People assume silence means acceptance.

Reduced trust: High performers wonder why poor behaviour is tolerated.

Growing frustration: Small irritations become personal grievances.

Bigger interventions: A five-minute conversation becomes a formal process.

Delay creates emotion. Early conversations create improvement.



How to Use the Toothpaste Test

Whenever you notice a problem, ask yourself: 'Is this toothpaste?' If the answer is yes, deal with it early, respectfully and constructively.

1. Notice the behaviour, not the person's character.
2. Act while it is still one event rather than a pattern.
3. Be curious. Ask questions before making assumptions.
4. Explain the impact of behaviour on others or the business.
5. Agree clear next steps and follow up.

The Four Questions

- Does this need saying?
- Does it need saying by me?
- Does it need saying now?
- Can I say it in a way that genuinely helps?

Example

Instead of saying 'You're unreliable', say 'The report arrived two days late, which delayed the client presentation. What got in the way, and how can we stop it happening again?'



Teaching the Toothpaste Test

The power of this framework is its simplicity. People rarely remember complex leadership models, but they remember toothpaste.

Ways to Embed It

- Introduce the analogy during team meetings.
- Use 'Is this becoming toothpaste?' as shared language.
- Coach managers to identify one conversation they should have this week.
- Celebrate early conversations rather than crisis management.

Reflection Questions

- What small issue am I currently ignoring?
- What would happen if I addressed it this week?
- Am I avoiding discomfort or creating a better outcome?

Key Takeaways

- Small problems rarely stay small.
- Delay makes conversations harder.
- Address behaviour, not personality.
- Speak with curiosity before judgement.
- Early conversations protect relationships.