

Version 1: Deceleration Navigator Conversation Guide

Introduction

This guide offers a framework for engaging in supportive and thoughtful conversations about organisational endings. While each organisation and the individuals within them are unique, certain patterns and approaches have emerged from over 200 conversations facilitated through the Decelerator Hotline.

The guidance provided reflects the experience and evolving methods of Decelerator Navigators who lead Hotline discussions. Whether you are a funder, infrastructure leader, freelancer, charity executive, trustee, or simply a supportive friend or peer, we hope this resource inspires more open, compassionate, and honest conversations about endings.

Talking about endings often brings up complex emotions, so it's essential to ensure you have adequate support as you engage in these conversations. At The Decelerator, we work with a team supervisor to help us process and manage the emotional responses that naturally arise in this work. We encourage you to consider what support systems you might need as well.

If you think the guidance or ideas in here could be strengthened, then we'd love to hear from you. Please email your comments and feedback to hotline@decelerator.org.uk. We will publish a more comprehensive guide and information in 2025 to share our practice in even more detail with all those who are committed to making space for better endings.

Credits: The ideas in here have been developed by members of The Decelerator team including: Josephine Knowles, Linda Craig, Lily Piachaud, Iona Lawrence and Max St John. And we're all continuously inspired by all the leaders who call our hotline every week.

The Decelerator Aims to Offer the Following to Someone via the Hotline

1. Space to breathe and process — Offer a safe, non-judgmental space.
2. Clarity on options — Help someone consider different paths.
3. Actionable next steps — Provide support and tools as needed to empower next steps.

Core Phases of the Conversation

1. Opening and Contracting

- Goal: Establish a comfortable, trusting space and clarify the purpose and boundaries of the call.
- Key Steps:
 - Welcome: Brief small talk to ease into the conversation.
 - Set Confidentiality: Assure confidentiality unless safety concerns arise.
 - Contracting Question: "Is there something specific you'd like from our time together?"

- Open Invitation: Encourage the person to describe their current situation and the options they're considering.

2. Active Listening

- Goal: Provide focused, compassionate listening.
- Techniques:
 - Reflect: Repeat key points to confirm understanding (e.g., "I think what I'm hearing is...").
 - Validate Emotions: Acknowledge how they may feel (e.g., "It sounds like this has been really overwhelming...").
 - Encouragement: Use affirming responses to show you're fully engaged.

3. Questions and Reflections

- Goal: Help someone gain clarity and identify insights.
- Sample Questions:
 - Clarification: "What do you think your options are from here?"
 - Perspective: "What feels hardest about this situation for you?"
 - Legacy: "What would you most want to leave behind as a legacy?"
- Reflection: Paraphrase or mirror their statements to provide new perspectives or highlight patterns.

4. Thoughtful Offerings

- Goal: Share relevant insights, models, or resources to support their journey.
- Possible Offerings:
 - Tools and Frameworks: The "Considering Closure" workbook or "Sensing an Ending Toolkit" (helpful for structuring thoughts).
 - 7 Principles for Better Endings: Discuss principles like "Find agency and determine your pace" or "Give space to emotions."
 - Personal Experiences: Share anonymised, relevant examples if it feels appropriate to do so.

5. Thanks and Winding Down

- Goal: Conclude with clarity on next steps, gratitude, and closure.
- Key Steps:
 - Summarise Next Steps
 - End with Encouragement: Express gratitude for their trust and wish them well. Sharing anything that you are taking away from the conversation or anything you have learnt is a good way of building confidence.

Endings In Motion - Locating An Ending In Time And Space

This typology provides a structured approach to understanding the nuances of endings, helping organisations clarify their current type and stage and fostering thoughtful dialogue around complex transitions. Like all frameworks and models should be held lightly - not all organisations pass through the same stages, and sometimes move forwards and backwards through different stages.

Types of Endings

1. Planned Closure

- Summary: An orderly, intentional wind-down that avoids insolvency and allows for adequate planning. Whether a proactive choice or prompted by external factors, this type ensures enough resources (financial, human, etc.) are in place to manage redundancies, close out projects, and address budget needs. Ideally, it operates on a 6-9 month timeline (rarely less than 3 months). Planned closures may also involve merging with another organisation or transferring assets and staff to a new entity.

2. Organisational Merger

- Summary: A strategic joining of two or more organisations, which may result in either a unified entity or a formalised association (group structure). Mergers can transfer organisational control of assets to another organisation (sometimes called a takeover) or establish a new entity jointly managed by both merging parties. For a deeper understanding, Eastside People's Good Merger Guide provides further insights.

3. Unplanned Closure

- Summary: An urgent, less orderly process that may have insufficient time and resources for planning redundancies, legacy, asset transfer, or learning. Some hurried mergers or asset transfers may still occur, but they often lack the thoughtful planning that characterises more orderly closures. Long-term outcomes may be unpredictable or suboptimal due to the rapid nature of the process.

4. Insolvency

- Summary: A disorderly shutdown where financial and human resources are insufficient to meet the obligations of a planned closure, including redundancies. Charities that find themselves insolvent have specific options (as outlined by firms like Begbies Traynor) to address their financial realities.

5. Leadership Succession Planning

- Summary: The transition from one leadership period to another, marking the end of one phase and the start of the next. This could involve a founder, CEO, chair, or long-standing staff member and often necessitates thoughtful planning to maintain continuity.

6. Programme or Project Funding Conclusion

- Summary: The close of a specific part or component of an organisation, such as a program, service, campaign, or network. This ending affects only part of the organisation's work but may still require careful attention to mitigate its impacts.

Stages of Endings

The Sensing an Ending Toolkit outlines the following stages, offering a roadmap for where an organisation might be in its transition process. It's common for organisations to reach out at any of these stages. These stages are different lengths and progress in different orders in different organisations. So hold these stages especially lightly!:

- Pre-Decision ⇒ Early consideration of the potential need for an ending
- Taking a Decision ⇒ Active choice to pursue an ending
- Committing to the Ending ⇒ Firmly resolving to follow through on closure
- Designing the Ending ⇒ Intentionally planning the details of the closure process
- Implementing the Ending ⇒ Executing the steps necessary for the transition
- Beyond the Ending to New Beginnings ⇒ Looking toward future possibilities after closure

Examples of Navigating the Stages

1. Straightforward Planned Closure:

Someone may approach with a clear plan, saying, “Our trustees have decided to close, and I’d like to talk through the details.” This often progresses in a structured way, where guidance on communications planning, funder engagement, and legacy considerations is valuable.

2. Complex Underlying Needs:

A person may express initial uncertainty, like, “I think we might need to consider closing and want to discuss how to bring this to our trustees.” In conversation, it might become clear that they are actually experiencing leadership burnout, suggesting that succession planning is as critical as discussing closure.

3. Revised Realities in Urgent Scenarios:

An organisation may believe they’re preparing for an orderly closure but lack the reserves or planning to make this feasible, discovering instead that insolvency is a likely outcome. This is especially common in organisations that have grown quickly without adequate financial safeguards and are now in a survival mode that limits closure options to a narrow timeframe.

Tips for Navigating the Stages of Endings

- **Avoid Surface Assumptions:** The “presenting” ending may only be part of the story. Be open to exploring additional layers or types of endings.
- **Recognise Overlapping Endings:** People may be managing multiple endings simultaneously, even if they don’t immediately realise it.
- **Assess the Stage with Perspective:** Organisations often identify themselves at a particular stage, but through conversation, they may discover they’re actually further along—or in a different stage altogether.

Conversation Patterns and Possible Responses

Below are common conversational shifts that can occur and corresponding prompts, reassurance, and guidance to help navigate these shifts.

From Brain Fog and Confusion to Clarity

- **Signs:** someone may appear scattered, jumping between topics, or apologise for not making sense.
- **Prompt:** “This is all very normal to feel foggy when talking about difficult endings. Saying things out loud can feel confusing.”
- **Reassurance:** Paraphrase key points simply to help them focus.

From Feeling Isolated to Connection

- **Signs:** someone uses “I” instead of “we,” expresses feelings of loneliness in their role.
- **Prompt:** “Who might you be able to share this with, even if it’s just to ease the weight a little?”
- **Reassurance:** “You don’t need to work this out on your own—funders, peers, and networks are often willing to listen and support.”

From Shame and Failure to Possibility and Impact

- Signs: someone expresses guilt, fear of judgement, or shame.
- Prompt: "What feels like the hardest part about this for you? Sometimes, shifting the focus to a legacy can help us see beyond current challenges."
- Reassurance: "It's natural to feel this way, and many have faced similar feelings. Your mission and purpose can live on, even if the organisation changes."

From Disempowerment to Agency

- Signs: Expressions like "I feel at a loss" or "I don't know what to do."
- Prompt: "What options do you see, even if they feel small or far-off?"
- Reassurance: "There's always something we can do to start building toward a better ending, however small the steps may feel."

From Blaming Others to Nuance and Self-Reflection

- Signs: someone may speak negatively about specific individuals or groups.
- Prompt: "To play devil's advocate, how might your trustees see this situation?"
- Reassurance: "It's completely understandable to feel frustrated, and sometimes a step back can show us different angles."

Key Do's and Don'ts

- Do:
 - Offer reassurance, encourage connection, and share useful resources.
 - Use humour or lightness to ease tension where appropriate.
 - Make affirming responses during their speaking to show engagement.
- Don't:
 - Feel pressured to have all answers; admit if you need to follow up.
 - Invoke shame or make accusatory statements.
 - Interrupt unless absolutely necessary.

Stewarding Loss Principles for Better Endings

Encourage consideration of the following principles to guide reflection and planning:

- Root in Mission: Focus on the mission beyond the organisation's structure.
- Acknowledge Cycles: Endings are part of change and renewal.
- Design the Ending: Take intentional steps toward closure.
- Embrace Emotion: Allow space for emotional processing.
- Build Legacy: Reflect on what the organisation leaves behind.