

Leadership in the small moments

# *Hold the Room*

A practical guide for people leaders who want to stop dreading hard conversations and start handling them in a way that changes their leadership.

RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP  
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# Knowing what to do is not the *hard part*.

*For the manager who has the conversation on their list, and keeps moving it to next week.*

You have probably already read something about difficult conversations. You know you should be direct, clear and honest. You know avoidance makes things worse. You know emotion is not the enemy.

Even so. You still delay. You still soften it too much. You still leave the room wondering what just happened.

That is not a knowledge problem. That is a practice problem. The gap between knowing what good leadership looks like and actually doing it in a pressured moment is real. That is the space this guide lives in.

This guide works differently from most leadership resources. It is built like a coaching session, with prompts that slow you down, questions that get you honest, and language you can actually use when it matters most.

It will not make hard conversations easy. But it will make them possible, and it will give you the best chance of keeping the relationship intact while you have them.

Use it before. Return to it after. Come back to it every time.

*Brooke x*



BROOKE BAXTER

# A coaching session, on paper.

This guide moves through the full arc of a hard conversation. It covers before you go in, while you're in it, and after it's done.

Each section gives you two things. Used together, they are what closes the gap between knowing what to do and actually doing it.

## 01

### Language you can use

Phrases to anchor you in the moment. Not scripts to recite, but words that hold their shape when the conversation gets hard.

## 02

### Prompts that slow you down

Questions that ask you to think honestly before you walk in. The prompts are where the real work happens. Don't skip them.

Use it before a hard conversation to get clear. Take it into the room to find your way. Use it afterwards to learn from what happened. That is the practice, and the practice is the point.

### INCLUDED WITH THIS GUIDE

Two companion tools come with Hold the Room. **The Frustration Audit** helps you get clear on what is actually bothering you before the conversation starts. **The ALIGN One-Pager** lays out the feedback model at the heart of the Relational Leadership Method.

# The four parts of a hard conversation.

A hard conversation is not one moment. It is four. This guide walks you through each one.

01

PART ONE

## Before You Go In

Most conversations go wrong before they even start. This part gets you clear.

02

PART TWO

## In The Room

You're in it now. How to open well, stay steady, and close with clarity.

03

PART THREE

## When It Goes Sideways

Five real workplace moments, and what to do when the conversation isn't going well.

04

PART FOUR

## After The Conversation

The conversation is over. This is where the real learning happens.

PART ONE

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# Before You *Go In*

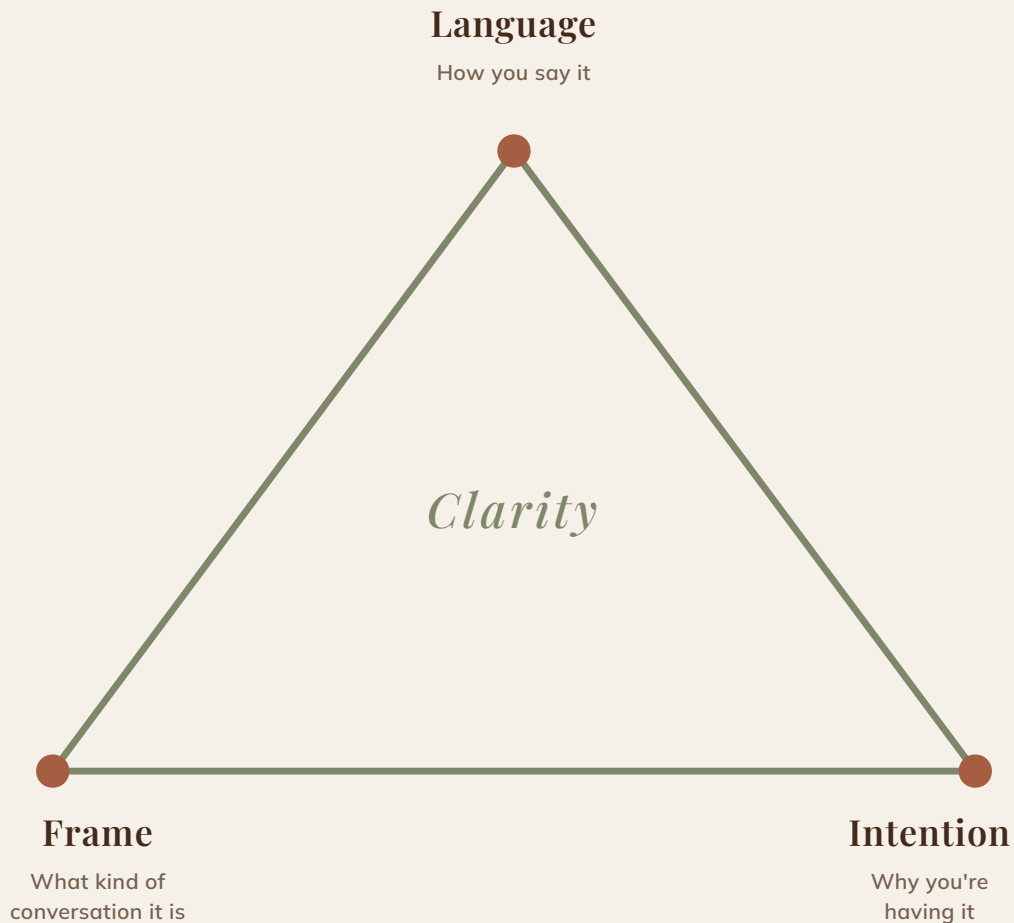
*Most conversations go wrong before they even start.  
This part gets you clear.*

HOLD THE ROOM

# The Clarity Triangle

Before any hard conversation, you need three things aligned.

Without all three, you'll either say the wrong thing in the wrong way, or the right thing in the wrong frame, and it won't land well.



# Three things to align *before you speak.*

## INTENTION

### Why are you having this conversation?

Be honest here. Is it because something genuinely needs to change? Or because you're frustrated and it's finally boiled over? Your intention is in the room, whether you name it or not. The person in front of you will feel it, even if you think you are doing a great job at hiding what you're thinking.

#### ● COACHING PROMPT

*What do you actually want to be different after this conversation?  
For them. For you. For the team.*

## FRAME

### What kind of conversation is this?

Is this a performance conversation? A feedback conversation? A check-in that's become more serious? A relationship repair?

If you don't know what kind of conversation it is, they won't either. When people don't know what they've been called into, they protect themselves.

#### ● COACHING PROMPT

*If they had to describe this conversation to a colleague afterwards, what would you want them to say it was about?*

## LANGUAGE

### How are you going to say it?

Not a script. An anchor. One clear sentence that names what you need to say without blame, without softening it into nothing, and without overwhelming them in the first 30 seconds.

#### ● COACHING PROMPT

*Can you say what you need to say in two sentences? Write it down. Read it back. Is it clear? Is it fair? Would you want to receive it that way?*

# The check before you walk in.

Run through these three questions before you walk into the conversation, wherever possible.

## Have you defined the problem clearly?

Can you describe the specific behaviour, not the person, not your interpretation, the actual observable behaviour?

- What have you seen or heard?
- When did it happen?
- What was the impact?

If you can't answer those three questions cleanly, you're not ready yet.

### ● COACHING PROMPT

*If you had to describe this situation in 60 seconds, with no backstory, just what happened and what it cost, could you do it?*

*If not, what's getting in the way of being that clear?*

## Do you know why this conversation matters?

Not just to you. To them. To the team. To the work. If the only answer is "because it's my job to say something", you need more reflection time to go deeper into why it matters, because that won't hold when the conversation gets hard.

### ● COACHING PROMPT

*If you don't have this conversation, what happens? Be specific. What does it cost them, you, and the people around them if nothing changes?*

## Where might you be holding yourself back?

This is the question most managers skip. Don't skip it. Are you worried about how they'll react? Carrying guilt about leaving it this long? If you don't name these before you go in, they'll show up in the room as hesitation, over-explanation, or backing down at the worst moment.

### ● COACHING PROMPT

*What's the thing you're most hoping doesn't come up in this conversation? That's probably the thing you most need to be prepared for.*

PART TWO

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# In The *Room*

*You're in it now. Here is how to open well, stay steady,  
and close with clarity.*

HOLD THE ROOM



# How to open without triggering a wall.

The first 60 seconds set the tone for everything that follows.

Most managers either over-explain the reason for the meeting, which signals anxiety, or go straight to the issue without any human acknowledgement, which triggers defensiveness before you've said anything meaningful.

## OPENING PHRASES THAT HELP

*“ I want to talk about something that's been on my mind. I'm raising it because I think it matters, and because I think we can work through it together.*

*“ There's something I've been sitting on, and it's unfair to be holding this back, as I'm confident this conversation will develop you in your role. Can we talk?*

*“ I want to have an honest conversation with you about something I've been observing. I'm not here to make you feel bad. I'm here because I think it's important and I know you care about your work.*

## ✘ AVOID PHRASES LIKE THIS

*“So I just wanted to have a quick chat, it won't take long...”*

Minimises it before you've started.

*“I've been getting some feedback that you need to be aware of...”*

Removes your ownership immediately.

*“I'm not sure if you think this is even an issue, but...”*

You've already lost the conversation.

# The relational conversation on *impact*.

Five steps to move through the conversation without losing the person, or the point.

## A NOTE ON THE MODEL

This page is the **conversation arc**, the full shape of the exchange from open to close. **ALIGN** is the feedback model that sits inside it: Acknowledge, Lay out the behaviour, Impact, Gain agreement, Next steps. You'll find ALIGN set out in the one-pager included with this guide.

1

### STEP ONE

## Name it clearly

Behaviour, not character. Specific, not general.

#### ◆ THE RELATIONAL LENS

*"I've noticed that over the last three weeks, three deadlines have been missed without any update to the team or me. I want to understand what's happening from your perspective."*

**NOT** "You seem disengaged lately."

2

### STEP TWO

## Explain why it matters

This is the step many people miss. You need to be clear and factual about the behaviour, and you also need to explain what impact that behaviour has had on you, the team, or the work.

#### ◆ THE RELATIONAL LENS

*"When you missed the deadline last week, our client was unable to submit their funding proposal to the board. This has had a significant impact on our client relationship."*

**NOT** "This is a key requirement in your PD."

3

### STEP THREE

## Create space, and listen before you respond

Often, people go in ready to lead the way, and their emotions get in the way of pausing and letting the other person absorb the conversation. Take a deep breath. Pause, to give both of you space for the words that follow. Whatever they say next, hear it fully before you respond. Even if it's defensive. The moment you stop listening and start defending your position is the moment the conversation becomes a standoff.

● COACHING PROMPT

*If they go quiet, let them. Silence is processing. Your job is to stay present, not fill the space.*

◆ THE RELATIONAL LENS

*Keep an anchor phrase ready. "Help me understand your perspective, as it's important to me."*

4

STEP FOUR

## Hold the thread when it gets messy

Hard conversations drift and can get messy. Your job is to steer the conversation as best you can, and thread it back to what matters.

RELATIONAL PHRASES THAT HELP

*" I want to come back to what I raised at the start.*

*" That's important, and I want to make sure we get to it. Can we just finish this piece first?*

*" I hear what you're saying. Can we stay with the original question for a moment?*

5

STEP FIVE

## Close with clarity

Don't let the conversation end in ambiguity. What was agreed? What happens next? Who does what, by when?

RELATIONAL PHRASES THAT HELP

*" I want to make sure we both leave this conversation knowing what happens next. From my side, here's what I'm committing to. What feels realistic from your side?*

*" We've covered a lot. Before we finish, can we name one thing each that we're taking from this?*

PART THREE

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# When It Goes *Sideways*

*Five real workplace moments, and what to do when the conversation isn't going well.*

HOLD THE ROOM



# 01

WHEN IT GOES SIDEWAYS

## When they get defensive

*Hold the moment. Don't fix it.*

### WHAT'S HAPPENING

Defensiveness is almost always a protective response. The person feels cornered or judged, and their nervous system responds before their rational mind can catch up.

### WHAT MOST MANAGERS DO

Push harder to make the point land, which increases the defensiveness. Or back down completely, which means the issue never gets addressed.

### WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

Make the defence unnecessary. When people feel genuinely safe, most of the time, they stop defending.

### RELATIONAL PHRASES THAT HELP

*“ I'm not here to catch you out. I want to understand what's going on.*

*“ Help me see it from your side.*

*“ I might be missing something. Can you walk me through your thinking?*

*“ I'm not going anywhere. Let's slow this down for us both.*

### ◆ THE RELATIONAL LENS

*Safety is not soft. It's a fundamental leadership skill, and a strategic one. You cannot have an honest conversation with someone whose nervous system is in protection mode. Slow it down before you try to move it forward.*

### ● COACHING PROMPT

*When they got defensive, what did you do next? Did you push, retreat, or hold steady?*

*What would holding steady have looked like in that moment?*

# 02

WHEN IT GOES SIDEWAYS

## When they shut down completely

*Hold the moment. Don't fix it.*

### WHAT'S HAPPENING

Shutdown looks like disengagement, but it's usually overwhelm at its finest. The person has hit a wall, emotionally, cognitively, or both. Most times, they're not being difficult. They're struggling to stay in the room.

### WHAT MOST MANAGERS DO

Keep talking to fill the silence. Or interpret the silence as defiance and escalate.

### WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

Stay present. Don't fill the silence, and don't abandon it.

### RELATIONAL PHRASES THAT HELP

“ *Take your time. I'm comfortable sitting here.* ”

“ *I can see this conversation has been triggering for you, and I'm happy to sit with you through it so we can have an honest and respectful conversation.* ”

“ *You don't need to have an answer right now.* ”

“ *What's going on for you in this moment?* ”

“ *We can slow this right down. There's no rush.* ”

### ◆ THE RELATIONAL LENS

*The manager who can sit in silence without flinching is the one who eventually hears the truth. Your calm is the signal that it's safe to come back.*

### ● COACHING PROMPT

*What does silence bring up for you in a hard conversation?*

*Do you trust the process, or need to fill it?*

*Where did that pattern come from?*

◆ *This is the kind of moment we slow down and work through together inside a Reset Session.*

# 03

WHEN IT GOES SIDEWAYS

## When feedback never lands

*Hold the moment. Don't fix it.*

### WHAT'S HAPPENING

You have said it before. They agreed. Nothing changed. You are starting to wonder whether it is worth raising again, or whether you are doing something wrong.

### WHAT MOST MANAGERS DO

Say it louder, with more urgency. Or give up and absorb the impact quietly.

### WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

Change the approach. If the feedback is not landing, that is information. Something about the framing, the relationship, or the person's readiness is not right yet. Saying the same thing again in the same way will not change the result.

### RELATIONAL PHRASES THAT HELP

*“ I want to try something different today. Instead of me giving you specific feedback on what I'm seeing, can you tell me how you, and your work, are going? ”*

*“ I have raised this a few times, and I notice things have not shifted. I am wondering if I am missing something. ”*

*“ What would it take for this to feel different for you? ”*

*“ This matters to me because I can see what you are capable of. That is why I keep coming back to it. ”*

*“ Two weeks ago, we agreed on a specific change. That has not happened yet. Help me understand what has been getting in the way. ”*

### ◆ THE RELATIONAL LENS

*Feedback that isn't landing is not a delivery problem. It's a relationship and readiness problem. Ask whether there is enough trust in the room for this feedback to actually be heard, before you say it again.*

### ● COACHING PROMPT

*What do you think is actually getting in the way of this feedback landing? Is it about how you're saying it, the relationship, or something going on for them you don't fully understand yet?*

◆ When feedback keeps missing, this is the kind of pattern we work through together inside a Reset Session.

# 04

WHEN IT GOES SIDEWAYS

## When it gets heated

*Hold the moment. Don't fix it.*

### WHAT'S HAPPENING

The tone has spiked. Something was said that shouldn't have been. The room is activated, and neither of you is thinking clearly anymore.

### WHAT MOST MANAGERS DO

Either freeze and hope it passes, or respond with authority in a way that shuts things down but damages trust in the process.

### WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

Regulate before you resolve. You cannot have a productive conversation inside an activated room. Your first job is to lower the temperature.

### RELATIONAL PHRASES THAT HELP

*“ Let's take a breath for a moment. I can see the heat in this conversation has risen, and I want to make sure we stay in it well, as it is a conversation we have to have.*

*“ Something's shifted in the energy. Let's pause for a moment.*

*“ I'm going to name what I'm noticing. This feels tense. That's okay. I know feedback conversations are hard. Let's work through it.*

*“ I want to finish this conversation. I just need us to slow down first.*

### ◆ THE RELATIONAL LENS

*Your calm is contagious. So is your panic. The room will follow wherever you lead it. Regulation comes before resolution. Always.*

### ● COACHING PROMPT

*When the conversation got heated, what happened in your body? What did you feel the urge to do? What did you actually do? What's the difference between those two things telling you?*

◆ A conversation that runs this hot is exactly what a Reset Session is for.

## 05

WHEN IT GOES SIDEWAYS

# When they say they are going to HR

*You still need to show up for the conversation. Right now.*

## WHAT'S HAPPENING

You have raised a concern, or you are about to, and the person has told you they intend to speak to HR. Maybe they have said it directly. Maybe they have used it to shut the conversation down before it starts. Either way, the feedback you need to give is still sitting on the table, and the conversation has suddenly become more complicated than you planned for.

## WHAT MOST MANAGERS DO

Back off and retreat. They assume the mention of HR means the conversation has to pause, that they need to wait for a process to take over, or that continuing now would somehow compromise things. So they retreat, the feedback goes unsaid again, and the moment passes.

## WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

Hold both things at once. Going to HR is the person's right, and you will support that process. The feedback conversation still needs to happen today, if possible. These two things are not in conflict. The conversation you are having is not a disciplinary process. It is a leadership conversation, and it does not require HR's permission to take place. Name it clearly, and without defensiveness.

## RELATIONAL PHRASES THAT HELP

*“ Going to HR is absolutely your right, and I will support that process. That conversation and this process can both happen. What I am raising with you today is important to discuss, and I do not want to leave it unsaid.*

*“ I want to make sure you know I am not trying to prevent you from speaking to anyone. I also want to be honest with you about what I am observing, because that is my responsibility as your manager, regardless of what else is happening.*

*“ If you would like HR involved in a formal conversation, we can arrange that. Today's conversation is about the feedback I have observed. Not raising it now affects how we handle the next steps.*

## ◆ THE RELATIONAL LENS

*The mention of HR is sometimes a genuine step, and sometimes a way of creating distance from a difficult conversation. Your job is not to decide which one it is. Your job is to stay present, stay clear, and not use it as an excuse to avoid what you came to say. A manager who retreats the moment things get complicated is telling the other person that the feedback was negotiable. It was not.*

## ● COACHING PROMPT

*What did you feel when they said they were going to HR? Was it relief, defensiveness, fear?*

*That feeling is worth examining. If your first instinct was to back away, ask honestly: was that about their rights, or about your discomfort?*

PART FOUR

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# After The *Conversation*

*The conversation is over. This is where the real learning happens.*

HOLD THE ROOM

# You've had the conversation. *What now?*

The conversation is done. What you do in the next hour matters more than you think. You have three options.

## 1 Sit with it

Some conversations need time to land. Give this one room before you do anything else with it.

## 2 Debrief it solo

Use the workbook on the next page to learn from what happened, while it is still fresh.

## 3 Debrief it with me

Book a 90-minute Reset Session. We take one real conversation and work it through together, start to finish.

**The Reset Session · \$450**

*Book within 30 days and \$50 comes off, bringing your Reset Session to \$400.*











# This is a skill. You're *building it*.

The managers who handle hard moments well are not braver than you. They have simply learned to stay in the room, even with the discomfort, with the silence, with the other person's reaction, without running from it or shutting it down.

That is a skill. Not a personality trait. Not something you either have or you do not. A skill, and you are building it. Every conversation, even the ones that do not go perfectly. Especially those.

*“Getting clear on the problem is only half the work. The other half is getting clear on what you might be holding onto that's making it harder than it needs to be.”*

*Brooke x*

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# One conversation away from *clarity*.

The Reset Session is 90 minutes. You bring the conversation. We work through the exact words, the exact sequence, and the order to say them in. You leave ready to have it this week.

## BOOK YOUR RESET SESSION

# \$450

Book within 30 days and \$50 comes off, bringing it to \$400. One conversation, worked through together, start to finish.

[Book a Reset Session](#)

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# Brooke Baxter

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COLLABBWAY

## LEADERSHIP & ORGANISATIONAL DESIGN

Brooke Baxter is a leadership consultant and organisational development specialist, with 20 years in social work settings and 15 years in leadership and organisational design contexts.

She is the founder of collabbWAY and the developer of the Relational Leadership Method (RLM) and the ARCA+ Professional 1:1.

Brooke works with managers and senior leaders in community, health, education and people-centred organisations across Australia, helping them lead in a way that is sustainable, clear, and human.

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*Leadership is relational, not just operational. It is built, or quietly eroded, in the small moments. This guide is one of those moments, in your hands.*

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*Leadership in the small moments.*



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