

Leadership in the small moments

What to Say When You've Been
Putting it off

For managers carrying a conversation they should have had weeks ago.

RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP
Brooke Baxter | collabbWAY

www.collabbway.com.au

Instagram: @brookebaxter_leadership .

LinkedIn: Brooke Baxter.

collabbWAY

PART ONE

Before the conversation, there's the conversation in your head.

You know the one you rehearse at 2 am.

The one where you convince yourself it's not that bad yet. That you'll raise it next week. That maybe they're having a hard time, and you should wait.

Most performance conversations don't fail in the room. They fail in the days before, when avoidance gets dressed up as kindness and silence gets mistaken for patience.

The work isn't the conversation. The work is what you bring to it.

This guide gives you the words. Twelve phrases, mapped to the four moves of a performance conversation that builds the relationship instead of breaking it.

Read it once. Screenshot the phrases that land. Take one into your next 1:1 this week.

That's how it starts.

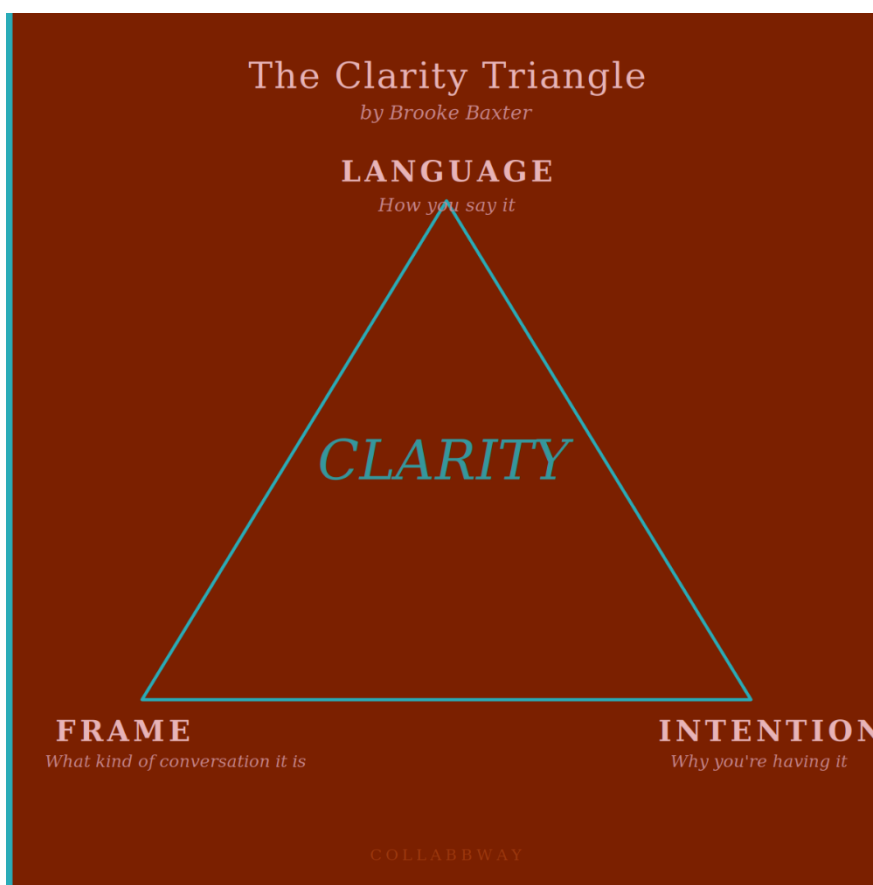
— Brooke



The Clarity Triangle

Before any performance conversation, clarity comes from aligning three things.

Miss any one of them and the conversation will either land badly or not land at all.



LANGUAGE — How you say it

The words you choose determine whether the message lands or triggers a defence response. Language grounded in specific observable behaviour gives the other person something they can act on.

FRAME — What kind of conversation it is

Both people need to understand what kind of conversation they are in. When the frame is unclear, the person in front of you cannot locate themselves in it.

INTENTION — Why you are having it

Your intention shapes your language, your tone and how you hold the silence. If your intention is to help this person succeed, the conversation will feel like that.

CLARITY

When Language, Frame and Intention are all aligned, the conversation has a chance to do what it is meant to do. That alignment is what Clarity means in practice.

PART THREE

Phrases for real conversations:

The phrases below are not scripts. They are starting points that carry the right relational weight for the most common moments in a performance conversation. Adapt them to your own voice.

OPENING THE CONVERSATION

"I want to talk with you about something I have been thinking about. I want to approach it as a conversation, not a conclusion."

Sets a collaborative tone before the content lands.

NAMING THE SPECIFIC CONCERN

"I have noticed [specific behaviour or outcome] on [specific occasion]. I want to understand what has been happening from your side."

Names the issue clearly without moving to conclusions.

WHEN THEY BECOME DEFENSIVE

"I am not here to catch you out. I am raising this because I want us to work through it together."

De-escalates without backing down from the conversation.

MAKING SPACE FOR THEIR PERSPECTIVE

"Before I say anything more, I want to hear what has been going on for you."

Opens the conversation two ways before drawing any conclusions.

WHEN YOU NEED TO HOLD THE LINE

"I hear that [reflect their response]. And the concern I have raised still needs to be addressed. Here is what I need to see change."

Holds both empathy and clarity at the same time.

NAMING THE EXPECTATION GOING FORWARD

"What I need to see is [specific observable shift] by [specific timeframe]. I want to check in with you again on [date]."

Creates shared understanding and accountability without ambiguity.

CLOSING THE CONVERSATION

"I want to check you are clear on what we have agreed. Is there anything you need from me to make this shift possible?"

Ends with shared understanding and an open door.

FOR DEVELOPMENTAL CONVERSATIONS

"I can see what you are capable of, and I want to help you get there. This conversation is about that, not about what has gone wrong."

Frames the conversation as an investment, not a correction.

WHEN FEEDBACK NEEDS TO BE ONGOING

"I am going to keep raising this with you as we go, not because I am watching you, but because I want you to know where you stand."

Normalises feedback within the working relationship.

A space for you to prepare for any conversations you need to have

The specific concern in one sentence

What I need to see change

When I will follow up with next

Seven questions to ask yourself

Use these in the hour before your next performance conversation. They are not a test. They are a calibration.

01 Can I name the specific concern in one clear sentence?

02 Is my intention genuinely developmental, or am I relieving my own discomfort?

03 Does this person know this is coming, or will it be a surprise?

04 Do I know what a good outcome looks like by next week?

05 Am I regulated enough to hold this conversation well right now?

06 Do I know what kind of conversation this is, and have I framed it that way?

07 Have I made space to hear their perspective before I draw conclusions?

The 9-Point Relational Standard

A performance conversation done well sits inside a relational standard. Use this to prepare before you go in, and to reflect honestly on how it landed afterwards.

<p>01 Direct, not harsh <i>How you say it</i> Says what needs to be said clearly and without shaming or harmful language.</p>	<p>02 Names the gap clearly <i>What you say</i> Specific about what has happened and what needs to change.</p>	<p>03 Specific, not personal <i>What you focus on</i> Focuses on behaviour and outcomes, not identity or character.</p>
<p>04 Preserves dignity <i>How the person feels</i> The person leaves feeling respected, not diminished.</p>	<p>05 Forward focused <i>Where it leads</i> Acknowledges the past and moves toward what comes next without dwelling.</p>	<p>06 Shared understanding <i>How it ends</i> Both people leave knowing what was agreed and what happens next.</p>
<p>07 Two-way <i>How you listen</i> Space to hear their perspective before drawing conclusions.</p>	<p>08 Growth centred <i>What you believe</i> Rooted in the belief that this person is capable of more.</p>	<p>09 Clear, fair and human <i>The through-line</i> The conversation holds all three at once. That is the relational standard.</p>

You can be a caring, relational leader and still have the hard conversation.

These are not opposites.

you've been carrying

Most managers don't struggle with performance conversations because they are bad at their job. They struggle because no one ever taught them how to hold a real conversation when the stakes are high and the relationship matters. It is a skill, not a personality trait, and it can be built.

The phrases and the **Clarity Triangle** in this guide are drawn from a larger body of work called the **Relational Leadership Method (RLM)**. It is the framework that I use with managers and workplaces who are tired of carrying on conversations that should have happened months ago.

Two ways to go further with me

ONE-TO-ONE COACHING

If you want to work on a specific conversation you are having right now, I run one-to-one coaching for managers in exactly this position.

We meet, you bring the conversation, and we work it through using the method.

Most managers do three to six sessions.

SMALL-GROUP LEADER2LEADER

If you would rather build the skill alongside other managers in similar roles, I run small-group coaching cohorts a few times a year called **Leader2Leader**.

Six managers, six sessions, real conversations practised in a room where it is safe to get it wrong.

BOOK A 30-MINUTE DISCOVERY CALL TO SEE WHICH FITS

Email hello@collabbWAY.com.au or book through [Calendly](#)

LinkedIn: Brooke Baxter | www.collabbway.com.au | Instagram: [brookebaxter_leadership](#)

Or simply stay on my email list. [Subscribe now.](#)

Each month, I send one short email with practical thinking on the harder parts of leading people. No pitch. Just the work.



ABOUT

Brooke Baxter

Leadership consultant and organisational development specialist. 20 years in social work settings. 15 years in leadership and organisational design contexts. Founder of collabbWAY and developer of the Relational Leadership Method (RLM) and ARCA+ Professional 1:1.

Brooke works with managers and senior leaders in community, health, education and people-centred organisations across Australia.