



THE RELATIONAL MANAGER'S DIARY

The Moments That Shape Your Leadership.

*How to hold the conversation in the 10
moments managers dread most.*

What social work taught me about holding hard moments at work.



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Before you read this.

Nobody prepares you for these moments.

Not the job description. Not the promotion conversation. Not the two-week induction. You get handed a team, and you're expected to hold performance, culture, conflict, tears, silence and tension, with no preparation and no script.

That's not a gap in your capability. That's a gap in how leaders get developed.

I spent years in social work, sitting with people in some of the most high-pressure, emotionally charged moments of their lives, before I moved into leadership coaching.

What that world taught me doesn't show up in mainstream leadership programs. Not even close.

Here's what I know to be true: the words you choose in hard moments either open people up or shut them down. Most managers are having the wrong conversation entirely, not because they don't care or aren't trying. It's mostly because nobody ever showed them anything different.

This guide is something different.

I'm also mindful that I have a social work lens. I want to make it clear at the start that I am not teaching people to be a social worker or therapist, but to understand how people operate in tense environments and what conversations will help a situation work better.

This guide is built for the moments that actually define trust. The ones that don't show up in a KPI but shape everything about how your team experiences you as a leader.

Use it. Keep it on your phone. Open it before a hard conversation. You don't need to be perfect. You just need to stay present.

Brooke x



Brooke Baxter

RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP

How to use this guide.

Each scenario includes five layers. Here's what they mean.

01**THE MOMENT**

What's actually happening in the room, and why it's harder than it looks.

02**WHAT MOST MANAGERS DO**

The instinctive response, and why it creates distance, even when the intention is kindness.

03**GO-TO PHRASES**

Specific language you can use right now. Not scripts to memorise: anchors to come back to.

04**THE RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP LENS**

One insight from years working with people in crisis that changes how you see the moment.

05**WHAT YOU'RE REALLY COMMUNICATING**

The message underneath your words, because that's what people actually hear.

Where this comes from.

The conversation techniques in this guide come from somewhere most leadership training doesn't go.

Before moving into leadership development, I spent years as a social worker, building relationships with people in some of the most complex, resistant, and high-stakes moments of their lives. That work taught me something no management course ever did: how you show up in a hard conversation determines whether someone moves toward change or away from it.

Motivation isn't manufactured through pressure or performance management. It grows in relationships where people feel genuinely seen.

I've taken those techniques, the ones built for crisis, for resistance, for real human complexity, and translated them for the leadership context. Because the skills that help someone take a meaningful step forward in their life are the same skills that help someone on your team do the same.

What that means in the work context:

Why people get defensive. What behaviour is actually communicating in tense moments. How to stay present without trying to fix everything. How safety, real psychological safety, not the buzzword version, changes what people are willing to say and do.

These are human skills. Relational skills that make a HUGE difference to your leadership, and they are exactly what the workplace needs more of.

This guide is grounded in a developmental mindset: the belief that leaders aren't fixed, and neither are the people they lead. Your job as a manager is not to diagnose, treat, or solve what's going on beneath the surface. Your job is to notice it, name it carefully, and respond in a way that keeps the person and the relationship intact.

The language in this guide will help you do that. Not perfectly. Absolutely not clinically or therapeutically. But humanly, and in most workplaces, that's already more than most managers are doing.

Every scenario here is an opportunity to practise something, not just read about it. These are ten of the most important ones.

When someone gets defensive

Hold the moment. Don't fix it.

THE MOMENT

You raise a concern about performance, behaviour, or a missed expectation, and the person in front of you immediately pushes back. They justify, deflect, or shut down. The conversation hasn't even started, and already the room has tightened.

WHAT MOST MANAGERS DO

Most managers either back down to avoid the conflict, or push harder to make their point land. Both responses escalate the defensiveness. The person digs in further and the real issue never gets addressed.

GO-TO PHRASES

- ✓ **"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."**
- ✓ **"I hear you're frustrated. Let's stay in this together."**

THE RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP LENS

Defensiveness is almost always a protection response, not a character flaw. When someone feels cornered or judged, they react before their rational mind can catch up. The relational leader's job isn't to break through the defence. It's to make it unnecessary. When people feel genuinely safe, they stop defending. Safety isn't soft. It's strategic.

WHAT YOU'RE REALLY COMMUNICATING

"I'm not your opponent. I'm trying to understand you."

When an employee cries in front of you

Hold the moment. Don't fix it.

THE MOMENT

Someone tears up in a 1:1 or breaks down after a tough conversation. Or quietly cries at their desk. The room shifts. Everyone feels it, and your next 30 seconds will shape whether they trust you or quietly close off.

WHAT MOST MANAGERS DO

Most leaders either rush to fix it, offer a tissue and move on, or say 'let's take a break', which can unintentionally feel like an exit. The person is already vulnerable. Sending them away alone with it makes it worse.

GO-TO PHRASES

- ✓ **"Take your time. I'm not going anywhere."**
- ✓ **"You don't need to explain right now."**
- ✓ **"Is it okay if I ask what's going on for you?"**
- ✓ **"I'm glad you felt you could let that out."**
- ✓ **"We don't need to fix anything right now. I just want you to know I'm here."**

THE RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP LENS

When someone cries at work, they're not being unprofessional. They're telling you something matters deeply, and they've run out of capacity to hold it together. That moment is not a problem to fix but a signal to stay present. Your calm, grounded presence is itself the response. This is what relational leaders understand that others don't. Sometimes the most powerful thing you can do is simply not leave.

WHAT YOU'RE REALLY COMMUNICATING

"Your emotion didn't make me leave. You're still safe here."

When someone loses their cool in a meeting

Hold the moment. Don't fix it.

THE MOMENT

A team member says something they shouldn't. The tone spikes. Someone snaps, raises their voice, or makes a comment that comes across poorly. The room goes quiet. Everyone is watching to see what you do next.

WHAT MOST MANAGERS DO

Most managers either freeze and hope it passes or respond with authority in a way that shuts the person down publicly. Both responses damage trust, either in you or in the psychological safety of the room.

GO-TO PHRASES

- ✓ **"Let's take a breath. I want to make sure we all stay in this well."**
- ✓ **"Something's shifted in the room. Let's pause for a moment."**
- ✓ **"I want to hear everyone. Let's slow down so we can do that."**
- ✓ **"I'm going to name what I'm noticing. This feels tense. That's okay. Let's work through it."**
- ✓ **"[Name], can I come back to you on that in a moment?"**

THE RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP LENS

You cannot resolve anything inside an activated room. Before you can address what was said, you have to slow the pace and lower the temperature. Relational leaders know that regulation comes before resolution, always. Your calm is contagious. So is your panic. The room will follow wherever you lead it.

WHAT YOU'RE REALLY COMMUNICATING

"I'm not going to let this room become unsafe, and I'm not going to make an example of you."

When an employee keeps missing deadlines

Hold the moment. Don't fix it.

THE MOMENT

It's happened again. A deadline missed, an update not given, work that was supposed to be done sitting incomplete. You're frustrated. You've had this conversation before. And you're not sure if it's a capability issue, a motivation issue, or something else entirely.

WHAT MOST MANAGERS DO

Most managers either avoid the conversation again and quietly absorb the impact themselves, or go in harder this time, which rarely produces the behaviour change they're looking for and often damages the relationship.

GO-TO PHRASES

- ✓ **"I've noticed this is a pattern. Before I make any assumptions, I want to understand what's getting in the way."**
- ✓ **"Help me understand what happened between agreeing to the deadline and it not being met."**
- ✓ **"Is there something I'm not seeing that's making this harder than it should be?"**
- ✓ **"I need us to find a way to make this reliable. What would help from my end?"**
- ✓ **"I'm not looking for an apology. I'm looking for a plan."**

THE RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP LENS

Missed deadlines are behaviour. And behaviour is communication. Before assuming disengagement or laziness, get curious about what the pattern is telling you. Relational leaders ask what's getting in the way before deciding what's wrong with the person. That shift from judgement to curiosity changes everything about the conversation that follows.

WHAT YOU'RE REALLY COMMUNICATING

"I'm not writing you off. I'm trying to understand you so we can actually fix this."

When a team member is overwhelmed

Hold the moment. Don't fix it.

THE MOMENT

They tell you they can't keep up. Or you notice it before they say anything: the quality dropping, the energy gone, the look on their face when they walk in. Something is too much, and you need to respond in a way that helps rather than adds to the weight.

WHAT MOST MANAGERS DO

Most managers offer reassurance without relief, 'you've got this', or immediately jump to problem-solving mode before the person has felt heard. Both responses make the person feel more alone, not less.

GO-TO PHRASES

- ✓ **"I can see this is a lot right now. I'm not here to add to it."**
- ✓ **"Tell me what feels most unmanageable right now."**
- ✓ **"Let's look at this together. You don't have to figure it out alone."**
- ✓ **"What would give you the most breathing room this week?"**
- ✓ **"I'm going to be honest with you about what can move and what can't. But first, how are you actually going?"**

THE RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP LENS

Overwhelm shuts down the part of the brain responsible for planning, prioritising, and problem-solving. Which means asking someone who is overwhelmed to immediately prioritise or make a plan is counterproductive, neurologically and relationally. Relational leaders know that connection has to come before correction. Presence before plan. You have to slow it down before you can move it forward.

WHAT YOU'RE REALLY COMMUNICATING

"I see how much you're carrying. And I'm not going to pretend I don't."

When giving feedback that isn't landing

Hold the moment. Don't fix it.

THE MOMENT

You've said it before. You've tried different ways of framing it. But the feedback isn't changing the behaviour. The person either agrees in the moment and then reverts, or pushes back every time. You're starting to wonder if it's worth raising again.

WHAT MOST MANAGERS DO

Most managers either give up and stop giving the feedback, or deliver it with more force, more detail, more emphasis, more urgency. Neither works. One abandons the person. The other puts them further on the defensive.

GO-TO PHRASES

- ✓ **"I want to try something different today. Instead of me telling you what I'm seeing, can you tell me how you think it's going?"**
- ✓ **"I've shared this a few times, and I notice it's not shifting. I'm wondering if I'm missing something."**
- ✓ **"What would it take for this to feel different for you?"**
- ✓ **"I'm not going to keep saying the same thing. I want us to figure out together why this isn't moving."**
- ✓ **"This matters to me because I can see what's possible for you. That's why I keep coming back to it."**

THE RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP LENS

Feedback that isn't landing is information. It's telling you something about the relationship, the framing, or the readiness of the person in front of you. Relational leaders don't escalate when something isn't working, they review it. Is this the right approach? The right timing? Is there enough trust in the room for this feedback to actually land? These are the questions worth asking before saying the same thing louder.

WHAT YOU'RE REALLY COMMUNICATING

"I haven't given up on you. I'm just trying a different door."

When there's silence in a difficult conversation

Hold the moment. Don't fix it.

THE MOMENT

You've said something hard or asked something direct, and they've gone quiet. The silence stretches. It feels uncomfortable. Every instinct tells you to fill it, to explain more, soften it, add context, or move on.

WHAT MOST MANAGERS DO

Most managers fill the silence immediately with reassurance, with over-explanation, or by moving on too quickly. In doing so, they take away the very space the person needed to actually process what was said.

GO-TO PHRASES

- ✓ **"Take your time. I'm comfortable sitting here."**
- ✓ **"There's no rush. I want to hear what's coming up for you."**
- ✓ **"You don't need to have an answer right now."**
- ✓ **"I'll wait."**
- ✓ **"What's going on for you in this moment?"**

THE RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP LENS

Silence is not emptiness. It is processing. The relational leader who can sit in silence without flinching is the leader who gets to hear the truth. Rushing to fill the silence communicates that you are uncomfortable with what the person is carrying, and that discomfort becomes their problem to manage. Stay. Wait. Trust the silence to do its work.

WHAT YOU'RE REALLY COMMUNICATING

"I can handle whatever you're about to say. Take the time you need."

When a 1:1 goes flat

Hold the moment. Don't fix it.

THE MOMENT

They say everything is fine. The conversation feels transactional. You run through the updates, tick the boxes, and leave feeling like nothing real was exchanged. This keeps happening, and you're not sure how to change it.

WHAT MOST MANAGERS DO

Most managers either accept it and move on, or push harder with direct questions that feel interrogative rather than inviting. The person closes further, and the 1:1 becomes a status update meeting neither of them looks forward to.

GO-TO PHRASES

- ✓ **"Before we get into the work, how are you actually going?"**
- ✓ **"What's been on your mind this week that's had nothing to do with the task list?"**
- ✓ **"What's something you're proud of from the last couple of weeks that nobody's really noticed?"**
- ✓ **"Is there anything you've been hesitating to bring to me?"**
- ✓ **"What do you wish I understood better about your role right now?"**

THE RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP LENS

When a conversation stays surface-level, it almost always means the person doesn't yet trust that going deeper is safe. The way to build that trust isn't to push for depth or ask more probing questions. It's to consistently show up with genuine curiosity, without judgment, until they start to believe you mean it. Relational leaders understand that trust is built in the ordinary moments, not just the hard ones.

WHAT YOU'RE REALLY COMMUNICATING

"I'm here for you, not just the work. And I'm going to keep showing up until you believe that."

When someone is underperforming

Hold the moment. Don't fix it.

THE MOMENT

The gap between what's expected and what's being delivered has become impossible to ignore. You know you need to address it formally. But you also know this is a human being sitting across from you, and you want to handle it in a way that's honest without being crushing.

WHAT MOST MANAGERS DO

Most managers either avoid the conversation until it's critical, or go in with such a formal tone that the person feels like they're already being managed out. Neither approach creates the conditions for genuine change.

GO-TO PHRASES

- ✓ **"I want to be honest with you because I think you deserve that."**
- ✓ **"I'm going to tell you what I'm seeing, and I want to hear what's going on from your side."**
- ✓ **"This isn't about catching you out. It's about figuring out what's getting in the way."**
- ✓ **"I'm not here to tell you you're failing. I'm here to have the conversation we should have had earlier."**
- ✓ **"What I'm about to say comes from wanting this to work, for both of us."**

THE RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP LENS

Honesty without compassion is cruelty. Compassion without honesty is negligence. Both matter, and relational leaders hold both at the same time. Holding someone in a role they cannot do is not kindness. It is its own kind of harm: to them, to their confidence, and to the team carrying the weight around them. The most humane thing you can do is tell the truth early, clearly, and with genuine care for the person in front of you.

WHAT YOU'RE REALLY COMMUNICATING

"I respect you enough to tell you the truth. And I care enough to stay in it with you."

When avoidance has become the pattern

Hold the moment. Don't fix it.

THE MOMENT

Something needed to be said weeks ago. Maybe months ago. And it wasn't. Now the dynamic has shifted, resentment has quietly built, or the behaviour has worsened, and you have to go back in and have the conversation you should have had earlier. With the added weight of 'why didn't you say something sooner?'

WHAT MOST MANAGERS DO

Most managers either continue avoiding, or overcorrect and go in too hard, making up for lost time with an intensity that overwhelms the person and damages the relationship further. Neither recovers the situation.

GO-TO PHRASES

- ✓ **"I want to acknowledge something. I should have raised this earlier, and I didn't. That's on me."**
- ✓ **"I've been sitting on this and that wasn't fair to you. Let me be direct now."**
- ✓ **"I didn't name this sooner because I was hoping it would resolve. It hasn't, and you deserved to know earlier."**
- ✓ **"I want to have the conversation I should have started weeks ago."**
- ✓ **"This is overdue. But it's important, and I don't want to keep avoiding it."**

THE RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP LENS

Avoidance is a form of communication. When we don't name something, we are telling the other person implicitly that it's either not important enough to discuss or unsafe. Both messages erode trust over time. Relational leaders name the dynamic before trying to change it. Acknowledging the avoidance openly, including your own part in it, is often what makes the real conversation finally possible.

WHAT YOU'RE REALLY COMMUNICATING

"I should have been braver sooner. I'm being brave now."

One last thing.

The managers who handle hard moments well aren't necessarily more empathetic by nature.

They've learned that staying calm and staying present is itself the response. They've stopped trying to fix the moment and started learning how to hold it.

That's what relational leadership actually is. Not a soft skill. Not a personality trait. A learnable set of behaviours that changes how your team experiences you, and how you experience yourself as a leader.



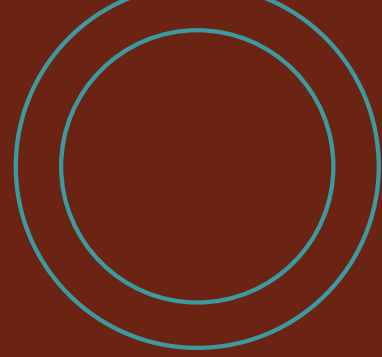
*“Trust isn't built in the big conversations.
It's built in the small ones nobody thinks matter.”*

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Find me at @brookebaxter_collabbway. Tell me which scenario you needed most. I read everything.

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Want to go deeper?

For managers and leaders done guessing their way through hard conversations.

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It's built in the small ones nobody thinks matter."*