

SESSION 8: CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

BRIDGE In-Conversation Navigation Toolkit

Use during a critical conversation to maintain direction, manage reactions, and drive toward alignment.

A Note to Decathletes

No plan survives first contact. You can prepare perfectly—and the conversation will still go somewhere you did not expect. BRIDGE exists because we have been in those moments. We have watched skilled leaders lose the thread of a critical conversation because they had no framework for navigating what was happening in real time. We built this toolkit from those experiences—from the conversations that went sideways and the ones we managed to pull back.

BRIDGE is not a script. It is a set of navigation instincts—six moves that keep you grounded when emotions rise, positions harden, or new information changes everything. The best critical-conversation leaders we have worked with share one trait: they know where they are in the conversation at all times. BRIDGE gives you that awareness.

Practice it in low-stakes settings first. Use the sample language until your own words come naturally. And when a conversation goes off course—and it will—come back to “Read the room.” That single step has saved more critical conversations than any technique we know.

One more thing: BRIDGE is a tool. ETHOS is the condition that determines whether it works as designed. You can follow every step correctly while still being dishonest — that produces a managed performance, not a genuine conversation. BRIDGE at its best is ETHOS in motion: honest at Begin, transparent at Disclose, trusting at Invite, and aligned at Establish. Keep that underneath every step.

A note on STAR® Manager and this toolkit: BRIDGE draws its structural foundation from the STAR® Manager TGROW model (Mission 18) — the same sequential conversation architecture (Topic, Goal, Reality, Options, Will) used for coaching and development conversations. The enquiry-led principle at the heart of the Invite step comes directly from Mission 17’s core insight: that unchecked assumptions and a failure to genuinely hear the other person are what derail most difficult conversations before they ever get to resolution. What is different here is the context. TGROW was designed for coaching conversations between a manager and a team member. BRIDGE adapts that sequential structure for critical business conversations where alignment is at stake across functions, levels, and organizational boundaries — situations where you may not have a coaching relationship, positional authority, or even a prior relationship with everyone in the room.

CLEAR handles preparation (before the conversation). **BRIDGE** handles execution (during the conversation). Use them together.

	Step	What to Do	Key Question	ETHOS
B	Begin with the issue	State the purpose of the conversation in 1–2 sentences. No preamble, no softening. Name it.	<i>Am I being direct and honest about what this is really about?</i>	Honesty
R	Read the room	Pause. Observe body language, tone, energy. Adjust pace and approach based on what you see—not what you planned.	<i>What is this person feeling right now, and how does that change my next move?</i>	Trust
I	Invite their perspective	Ask an open question and genuinely listen — this is the enquiry-led shift that changes everything. You are moving from advancing your position to understanding theirs. Do not interrupt. Do not formulate your response while they are still talking. The quality of this step determines whether the conversation becomes a dialogue or a lecture.	<i>Have I truly heard them, or am I just waiting to talk?</i>	Trust
D	Disclose the full picture	Share all relevant data, context, and implications. If there is difficult information, put it here—not at the end.	<i>Is there anything I'm holding back that they deserve to know?</i>	Transparency
G	Guide toward resolution	Propose a path forward. Use exploratory language: “What if we...” or “One option would be...” Open negotiation space.	<i>Am I dictating or collaborating?</i>	Transparency
E	Establish alignment	Confirm the outcome, next steps, owners, and timeline. Restate the agreement aloud. Alignment is the close.	<i>Could both of us repeat back the same agreement right now?</i>	Alignment

Navigation Principles

- BRIDGE is sequential but not rigid. If the conversation shifts, return to the step that addresses what just happened.
- The most common failure point is skipping “Invite” and jumping straight from “Begin” to “Disclose.” Without their perspective, your disclosure lands as a lecture.
- If you feel the conversation going sideways, go back to “Read the room.” Stop talking. Observe. Recalibrate.
- “Establish alignment” is not optional. A conversation without a clear close will be re-litigated within a week.
- BRIDGE is ETHOS in motion. Each step embodies one value in sequence: Begin with Honesty — naming the issue directly, before you feel ready. Invite with Trust — listening with full presence, not formulating your response while they are still talking. Disclose with Transparency — sharing what weakens your position as well as what supports it. Establish with Alignment — real agreement, not polite closure. If a step feels hard, name the ETHOS value it requires and hold it deliberately.
- Think of BRIDGE as a diamond: Begin and Read are the entry point; Invite, Disclose, and Guide form the widest, most exploratory stretch; Establish brings it to a point of shared commitment. The instinct to rush to resolution collapses that diamond prematurely — and costs you alignment.

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BRIDGE Sample Language & Phrases

These are starter phrases, not scripts. Adapt them to your voice and the specific situation. The goal is to internalize the intent of each step, then express it naturally.

B — Begin	<i>"I want to talk about [specific issue]. It's important to me that we address this directly."</i> <i>"I've been thinking about [situation], and I want to share my perspective and hear yours."</i> <i>"There's something we need to work through together. Here's what I'm seeing..."</i>
R — Read	<i>"[Pause after opening. Observe. If you see tension:] I can see this might be unexpected. Take a moment."</i> <i>"[If defensive:] I notice this is landing differently than I intended. Help me understand what you're hearing."</i> <i>"[If engaged:] Good—I can tell you've been thinking about this too. Let's dig in."</i>
I — Invite	<i>"Before I go further, I want to hear your perspective. How do you see this situation?"</i> <i>"What's your read on what's happening here?"</i> <i>"I have my view, but I know I'm missing context. What am I not seeing?"</i>
D — Disclose	<i>"Here's the full picture as I understand it, including the parts that are uncomfortable..."</i> <i>"I want to be transparent about [data/constraint/concern] because it affects the options we have."</i> <i>"There's something I haven't shared yet that's relevant: [information]."</i>
G — Guide	<i>"One path forward would be... What if we tried [option]?"</i> <i>"Here's what I think could work, and I'm open to adjusting: [proposal]."</i> <i>"I see a few options. Let me lay them out, and we can decide together which makes the most sense."</i>
E — Establish	<i>"Let me make sure we're aligned. Here's what I'm hearing we agreed to: [restate]."</i> <i>"So the next steps are: you will [action] by [date], and I will [action] by [date]. Does that match your understanding?"</i> <i>"Before we wrap up—can you walk me back what we just committed to? I want to make sure we're on the same page."</i>

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BRIDGE Observer Feedback Rubric

Use this rubric when observing a peer's practice conversation. Circle or note the score for each step, then share specific behavioral examples during debrief.

Observer: _____	Speaker: _____
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BRIDGE Step	Strong (5)	Developing (3)	Needs Work (1)
Begin	Named the issue directly in the first 30 seconds. Tone was clear and confident.	Got to the issue but used excessive preamble or softening language.	Danced around the issue. Counterpart was unclear on the purpose.
Read	Paused, observed, and visibly adjusted approach based on the other person's reaction.	Showed some awareness of the other person's state but did not adjust.	Plowed ahead without noticing or responding to the other person's cues.
Invite	Asked a genuine open question and listened without interrupting. Trust was built through genuine inquiry.	Asked a question but answered it themselves or interrupted the response.	Skipped this step entirely. Went from opening straight to disclosure.
Disclose	Shared all relevant information transparently, including difficult parts.	Shared some information but held back key data or framed it misleadingly.	Withheld important information or was evasive when asked directly.
Guide	Proposed a path forward using collaborative language. Opened negotiation space.	Proposed a solution but presented it as the only option. Limited discussion.	Dictated the outcome or failed to propose any path forward.
Establish	Restated the agreement with specific next steps, owners, and timeline.	Ended with a vague sense of agreement but no specifics.	Conversation ended without any confirmed alignment or next steps.

Overall ETHOS Assessment

Which ETHOS value was strongest in this conversation?

Which ETHOS value was hardest to hold? What made it difficult?

One specific thing the speaker did well:

One specific thing to try differently next time:
