

CLEAR Conversation Preparation Toolkit

Use before any critical conversation to organize your approach and anticipate the dynamics you will encounter.

A Note to Decathletes

This toolkit was built for you—not borrowed from a textbook and not pulled off a shelf. CLEAR is the product of years of preparing for, succeeding in, and—frankly—failing at critical conversations in organizations like yours. Every step in this framework exists because we learned the hard way what happens when you skip it.

The leaders who handle critical conversations well are not the ones with the most natural talent for difficult dialogue. They are the ones who prepare. They walk in knowing what they want to say, who they are saying it to, what success looks like, and what could go sideways. CLEAR gives you a repeatable way to do that preparation—every time, before every conversation that matters.

Here is what the evidence shows: most leaders who fail in critical conversations are not failing because they lack the words. They knew what needed to be said. The breakdown was the choice, under pressure, not to say it. CLEAR does not give you words you did not have. It converts the decision to engage into a concrete plan — so that deliberate preparation replaces hesitation. Use it. Write on it. Bring it with you. The goal is not to follow CLEAR perfectly—it is to never walk into a high-stakes conversation unprepared again.

A note on STAR® Manager and this toolkit: CLEAR is built on the four-step preparation framework from STAR® Manager's Mission 17 (Challenging Conversations) — assess the situation, consider the other person's perspective, examine your own assumptions, ask better questions. If you have completed that mission, you will recognize the architecture immediately. What is different here is the scope. STAR® Manager's framework was designed primarily for manager-to-team conversations. CLEAR adapts it for the full range of critical business conversations you will face as a GD-OTS leader: cross-functional conflicts, upward challenges, customer and stakeholder negotiations, and peer-to-peer situations where no one has authority to decide alone.

	Step	What to Do	ETHOS Link
C	Context	What is the situation? Separate facts and data from assumptions and interpretations. What triggered this conversation? What is at stake?	<i>Honesty</i>
L	Landscape	Who are the stakeholders? What are their priorities, pressures, and motivations? What do you know about their beliefs, values, and Skill/Will on this specific issue? Use PI data where you have it — but recognize you won't always have it. What does each person need from this conversation?	<i>Trust</i>
E	Endpoint	What does success look like? Define both your minimum acceptable outcome and your ideal result. Be specific and measurable.	<i>Alignment</i>
A	Approach	Which ETHOS phase needs the most attention here? Plan your opening statement (2 sentences max) and your 2–3 key messages.	<i>Transparency</i>
R	Risk	What could derail this conversation? Identify emotional triggers, defensive reactions, information gaps, and timing issues. Plan your response to each. Also name the ETHOS failure modes most likely here: hedging or softening the opening (Honesty), withholding data or context (Transparency), dialogue shifting to defensive debate (Trust), or accepting apparent agreement when real disagreement remains (Alignment).	<i>All Four</i>

Preparation Principles

- 10 minutes of CLEAR preparation prevents 60 minutes of damage control.
- If you cannot state your Endpoint in one sentence, you are not ready for the conversation.
- The Risk step is where most leaders under-prepare. If you skipped it, go back.
- In the Landscape step, work with what you know. PI data is a powerful lens when available — but the key questions are always: What do they care about? What are they under pressure about? What do they believe about this situation?
- One avoided conversation is a choice. A pattern of them is a culture. Culture is not declared — it is accumulated, one conversation at a time. CLEAR preparation is how you make sure you are contributing to the right one.

CLEAR Preparation Worksheet

Complete this worksheet before entering your critical conversation. Bring it with you as a reference.

Your Name: _____

Date: _____

Conversation With: _____

Planned Date: _____

C – Context

What is the situation? What facts, data, and observations frame this conversation? What triggered it? Separate what you know from what you assume.

L – Landscape

Who are the stakeholders? What are their priorities, pressures, and motivations? What do you know about their beliefs, values, and Skill/Will on this specific issue? Where available, use PI data to adapt your approach – but build your picture from everything you know about this person.

E – Endpoint

What does success look like? State your ideal outcome in one sentence. Then state your minimum acceptable outcome.

CLEAR WORKSHEET (CONTINUED)

A – Approach

Which ETHOS value needs the most attention? Write your opening statement (2 sentences max). List your 2–3 key messages.

R – Risk

What could derail this conversation? Identify emotional triggers, defensive reactions, and information gaps. For each risk, write your planned response.

Pre-Conversation Checklist

- ☐ I can state my Endpoint in one sentence.
- ☐ I have separated facts from assumptions in my Context.
- ☐ I have considered the other person's perspective and pressures (Landscape).
- ☐ My opening statement is direct, honest, and under 2 sentences (Approach).
- ☐ I have identified at least 2 risks and planned my response to each (Risk).
- ☐ I know which ETHOS value will be hardest to hold in this conversation.