

Structure a crucial conversation

Difficult conversations are part of working with people. When something's off, whether its behaviour, delivery, tone, or expectations, it's tempting to leave it alone and hope it improves. Handled well, a tough conversation doesn't damage a relationship, it strengthens it!

Patterson's Crucial Conversations framework gives you a simple, practical way to talk about the things that matter to you in a way that feels respectful and clear rather than tense or awkward. This structure works because it keeps the focus on two things: purpose and respect. This structure allows both people to hear feedback, share perspectives and find a way forward – even in moments of discomfort.

1. Know your heart

Before you start, take a moment to check your intent. Ask yourself: “What do I really want for me, for them, for our working relationship, and for the business?” Understanding your true intent helps keep your emotions in check. Write down your intent:

2. Notice when it becomes crucial

You'll often feel it before you realise it - tension rises, or someone withdraws. That's your cue to have the conversation. Instead of reacting, pause and name what's happening.

For example: “I can sense this is feeling a bit uncomfortable, and I think it's important we talk it through.” Acknowledging tension creates space for honesty. Plan out what you will say:

3. Make it safe

People only open up when they feel safe. Establish safety before moving forward. Remind the other person of mutual purpose and respect: “I really value the work we do together, and I want to make sure we're aligned.”

Safety doesn't mean avoiding the truth - it means saying it in a way that keeps the relationship intact. Plan what you will say:

4. Focus on shared purpose

Keep the conversation anchored in what you both care about: the goal or the team or the outcome. “We both want this project to succeed, and I think we can get there faster if we’re clearer on how we’re working together.”

Shared purpose stops the conversation from becoming personal and keeps it productive.

Plan what you will say:

5. Share your path by using the STATE method

To talk through the issue, use the STATE framework to express your view with balance and respect:

S – Share your facts: Start with what you’ve observed, not what you assume.

“In the last two project updates, our timelines didn’t match up.”

T – Tell your story: Explain how you’ve interpreted what’s happening.

“It made me wonder if we’re working with different priorities.”

A – Ask for their path: Invite their perspective.

“How does it look from your side?”

T – Talk tentatively: Stay open, not absolute.

“It seems like there might be a gap, but I could be wrong.”

E – Encourage testing: Ask them to challenge or clarify. This keeps the conversation two-way.

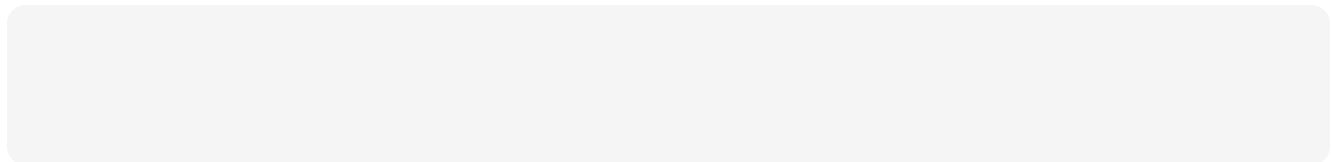
“Please tell me if I’ve misunderstood - I’d like to get this right.”

6. Move to action

A conversation without next steps just loops back later. Agree on what happens next, who's responsible, and when you'll check in.

"Let's both update the shared file weekly so we stay aligned. I'll send a quick summary after this."

Clear actions show accountability and prevent misunderstandings. Plan out what you'll say.



7. Follow through

Come back to it. A quick check-in shows the issue wasn't just a one-off discussion.

"How's the new process feeling? Anything we should adjust?"

Following up builds credibility and shows you're committed to the relationship, not just the result.