

# Piercing the Bubble: A Leader's Guide to Having Difficult Conversations



**March 20, 2026 | 9:00 - 10:30 a.m.**

# What problem are we trying to solve?



**HELLO**  
my name is

**Name**  
**Role**  
**Organization**

Please share one **common reason** we hesitate to have difficult conversations.

**i.e. Why do we tend to avoid them?**

**Fear of  
conflict**

**A previous  
bad  
experience**

**Lack  
of  
skill**

**Lack  
of  
will**

**Uncertainty on where  
to begin and what  
words to use. And the  
fear of paralysis if the  
conversation doesn't  
go well.**

**Lack of time or energy  
to set up the  
conversation and  
follow-through.**

**Hope that  
someone  
else will  
do it**

**Hope that  
it will  
resolve  
itself.**

**A strong belief  
that the  
conversation  
won't change the  
behavior, and  
thus not worth  
the time.**

# What problem are we trying to solve?



Please share **common mistakes** we make in addressing these situations.

**i.e. How do we mess them up?**

**Scold everyone via a group email.**

**Address it at a group meeting.**

**Text them.**

**Rush it.**

**Tell yourself a story, let emotions control you, and/or begin the conversation with either fear or frustration.**

**Talk to 3-5 other people about the situation and garner their favour.**

**Delegate  
Ignore  
Avoid  
Regret**

**Wrong time or wrong place**

**Change administrative procedures, policies, and start-of-day processes for everyone.**

# The Costs of Avoidance

- Lost sleep
- Stress
- Erosion of trust or credibility
- Culture challenges
- The drama or the bubble burst



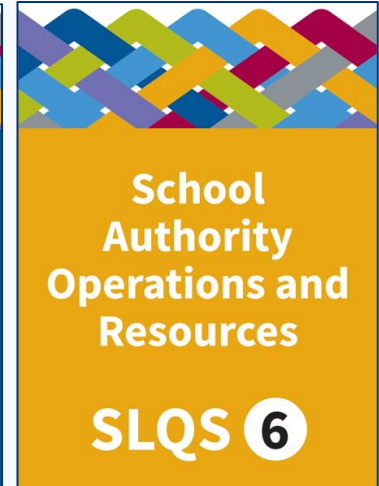
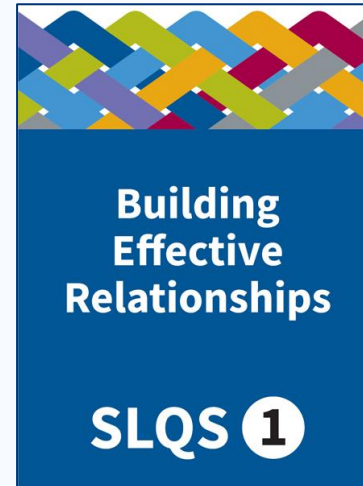
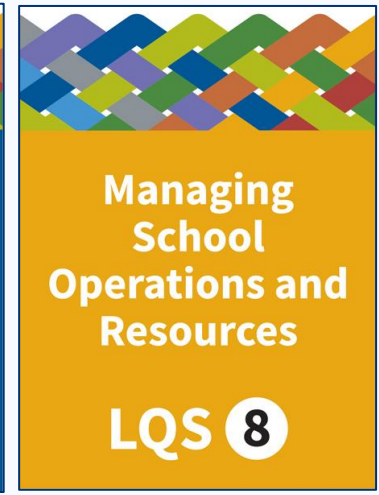
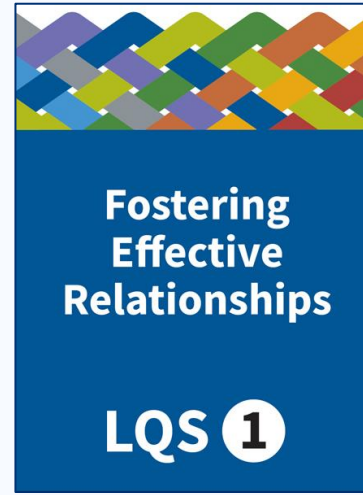
# What's The Plan - 90 minutes

- 9:00 - Welcome & setting the stage
- 9:05 - What stops us from having them?
- 9:15 - How do we mess them up?
- 9:20 - A difficult conversations guide
- 9:40 - Tuning our difficult conversations
- 10:00 - Take your best shot
- 10:15 - Reflections & take-aways
- 10:28 - Reflections | Out the gate by 10:28



# Outcomes & Deliverables

- Engage in real-life scenarios
- Consider common challenges
- Hear our lessons learned
- Share practical strategies
- Connect with good people
  
- Share **one idea** you're leaving with



# Norms For Our Time Together

- We might be sharing experiences that we don't want leaving the room.
- We are designing this to share the air, equal talk time for everyone.
- We want to borrow great ideas, please let the sharing begin.



# Guessing Game - Verbal and non-verbal



Albert Mehrabian proved that, in emotional or sensitive situations, we convey 7% of our meaning through words, but 93% of our meaning through **tone and body language**. This means that emails or texts can only convey 7% of our meaning, but in-person conversations can approach 100%.

**What percent of our meaning is conveyed through a phone call?**

# Remembering That People Matter



- How do I want to be? vs What I want to say? vs What to anticipate?
- Do people who behave badly still deserve to be treated with dignity?
- Are you really there to help? Or is it about power and control?
- What will “leak out of you”?

# 1. Remember that everyone matters.

- Regardless of the situation, everyone deserves dignity.
- Are you ok to move forward and help the other person?
- Relationships & trust are 100% foundational.
- How you would approach the situation if it was your relative or a loved one?

**They may forget  
what you said —  
but they will  
never forget how  
you made them  
feel.**



**- Maya Angelou**

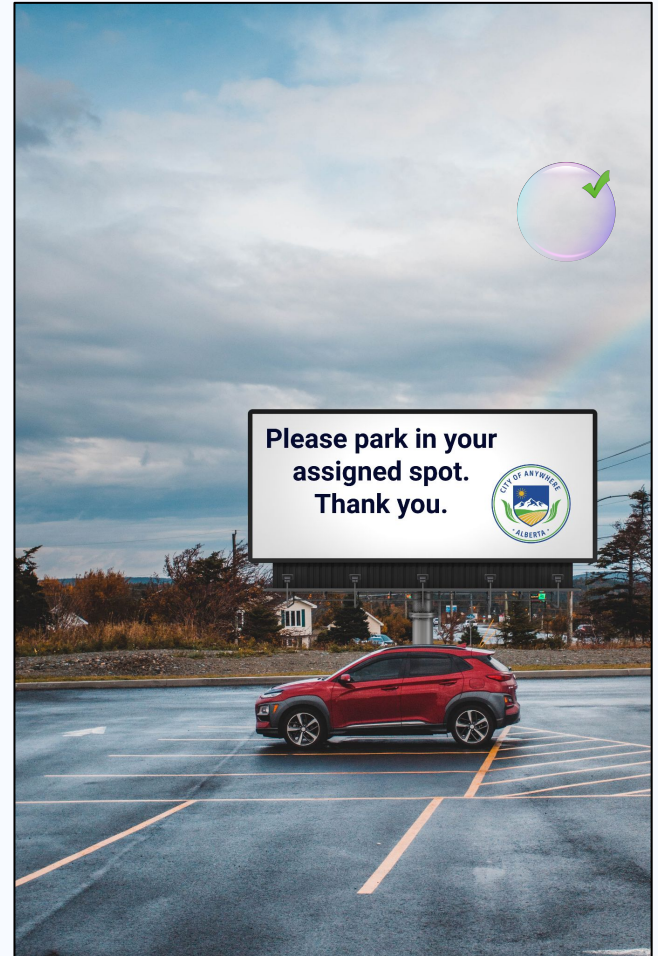
## 2. Decide if it's necessary.



- If either of you are losing sleep, it's your responsibility to address it.
- Would you want to know if you were in their shoes?
- What's the Frequency, Intensity and Time (F.I.T) of their action or actions?

### 3. Avoid storytelling.

- Avoid telling yourself a story about the other person.
- Ignore the noise around you and in your own head.
- Rather, treat them like a loved one.
- Take an empathetic approach. Consider your own story first.



## 4. Seek confidential advice.



- Ask one highly trusted leader for confidential advice or support.
- Only share what is necessary.
- Do not share details or your intentions with other coworkers or colleagues.
- Once again, how might you want to be treated, if someone needed to talk to you?
- Leader | People Services | HR

## 5. Plan the conversation.

- Where and when will you have the chat?
- How will you set it up?
- Could you just sit down with them for five minutes at the end of the day, 1-on-1 in their space?
- I couldn't ever make weekend talk, sandwich feedback, or future innuendo's work for me.

**Speak when you  
are angry and  
you will make the  
best speech you  
will ever regret.**



**- Ambrose Bierce**

## 6. Create safety from the start.



**7% Words**  
**93% Tone & Body**  
**Language**

**- A. Mehrabian**

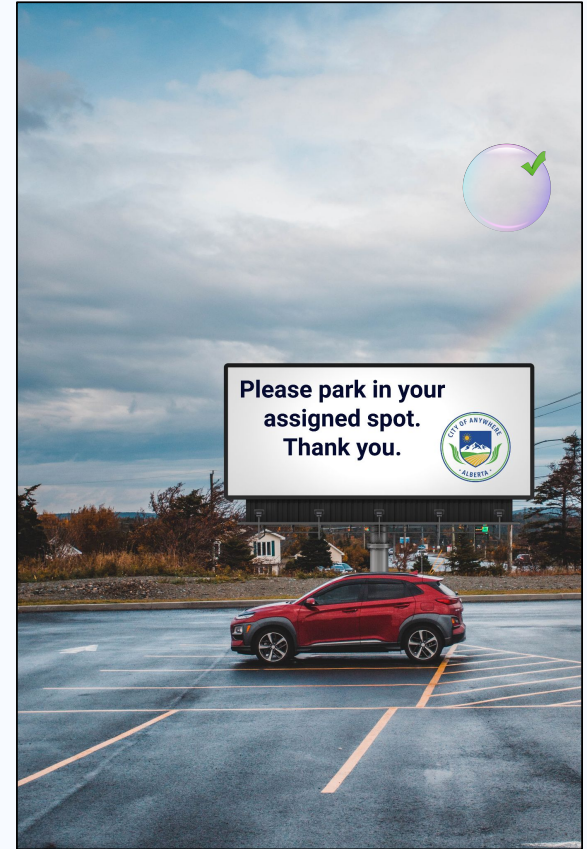
- Be clear, honest & kind.
- If they feel unsafe, (fight or flight) bring them back to safety with a calm tone, open body language & acknowledged feelings.
- You may have to go slower if safety is an issue.
- Breathe. (3 second rule)
- Take responsibility.

## 7. Describe the issue or gap clearly.

- In simple terms, explain the issue at hand.
- Calmly use data or facts as opposed to emotions or judgment.

## 8. Ask for their perspectives.

- Find out their perceptions of the situation. By listening, you'll gain meaningful insight. You may learn things that you were unaware of. You might be wrong.



## 9. Agree on resolution and action.

- Co-create a plan to address the issue.
- Help & support.
- Differentiate between gaps in:
  - Will (motivation);
  - Skill (ability); or
  - Structures (rules & tools).\*



\* Patterson, K., Grenny, J. et al. (2013). **Crucial accountability: Tools for resolving violated expectations, broken commitments, and bad behavior** (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill.

# 10. Return to safety and close the loop.

**There are always  
two messages:  
the one you send  
and the one they  
receive.**



**- P.S. Perkins**

- Before you leave, bring them back to safety.
- Speak positively about the plan.
- Schedule a specific time to check back and follow-up.
- Ask if they have been treated fairly?

# Difficult Conversations - Bonus Points



- Use A.I with caution - we don't love guessing games in difficult situations. "Do you know what this is about?"
- You deserve safety as well. Do not accept abuse. You can always delay until everyone is safe.
- In response to ridiculousness: "Perhaps"
- Instead of the word "but", consider "and"
- If they deny and deflect...move on.
- These are 10 times easier with a regular structure for conversations

# Triad Tuning (4 min x 3 participants)



Think of a difficult conversation that you know you need to have and that you can discuss in the safety of our group.

- Presentation (1 min)
  - *Presenter is the only speaker*
- Warm & cool feedback (2 min)
  - *“I really like...” & “I wonder...”*
- Reflection from the presenter (1 min)
  - *“I learned...”*

# Tuning Protocol - why we like it

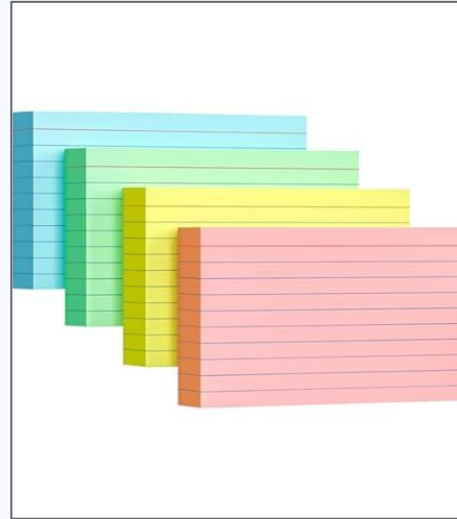


- Efficient use of valuable time
- Equity of talking and listening
- You find solutions you wouldn't normally think of on your own
- Cool feedback is delivered safely (e.g. niceness)
- Teammates are better able to support each other.
- What do you think would have happened if you brought it forward without the protocol?

# Take your best shot



As a table, take 3 minutes to come up with one question for Kurt and Ray.



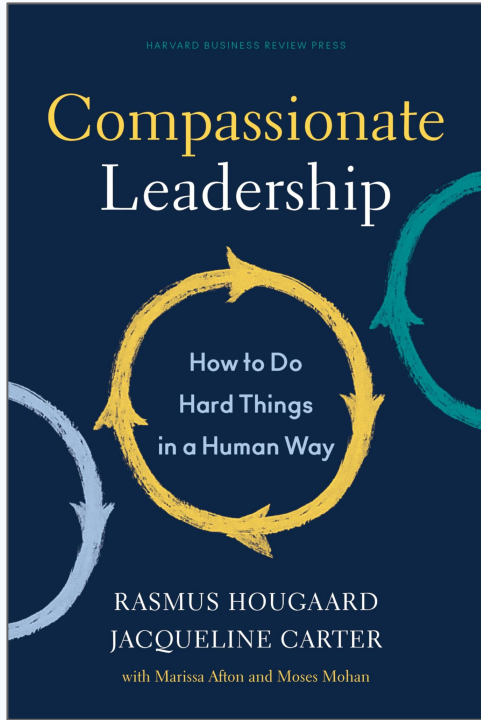
# Wrap-Up and Discussion

What's **one take-away** that you are leaving with today? It could be:

- Something you learned;
- A concept that you are thinking about;
- An idea worth borrowing;
- One question you have;
- One action item you are looking forward to;
- Just something that you'd like to share with the table.

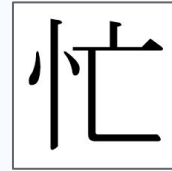


# Compassionate Leadership

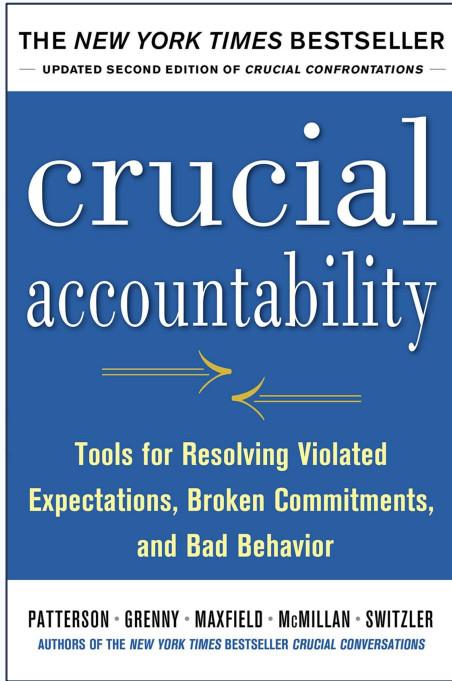


Hougaard, R., & Carter, J. (2022). Compassionate leadership: How to do hard things in a human way. Harvard Business Review Press.

- Connect with empathy
- Lead with compassion
- Be here now-“to be list” vs “to do list”
- Busyness (kills the heart)-frantic?
- Courage over comfort/Two prequel books



# Crucial Accountability



Patterson, K., et al. (2013). *Crucial accountability: Tools for resolving violated expectations, broken commitments, and bad behavior* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill.

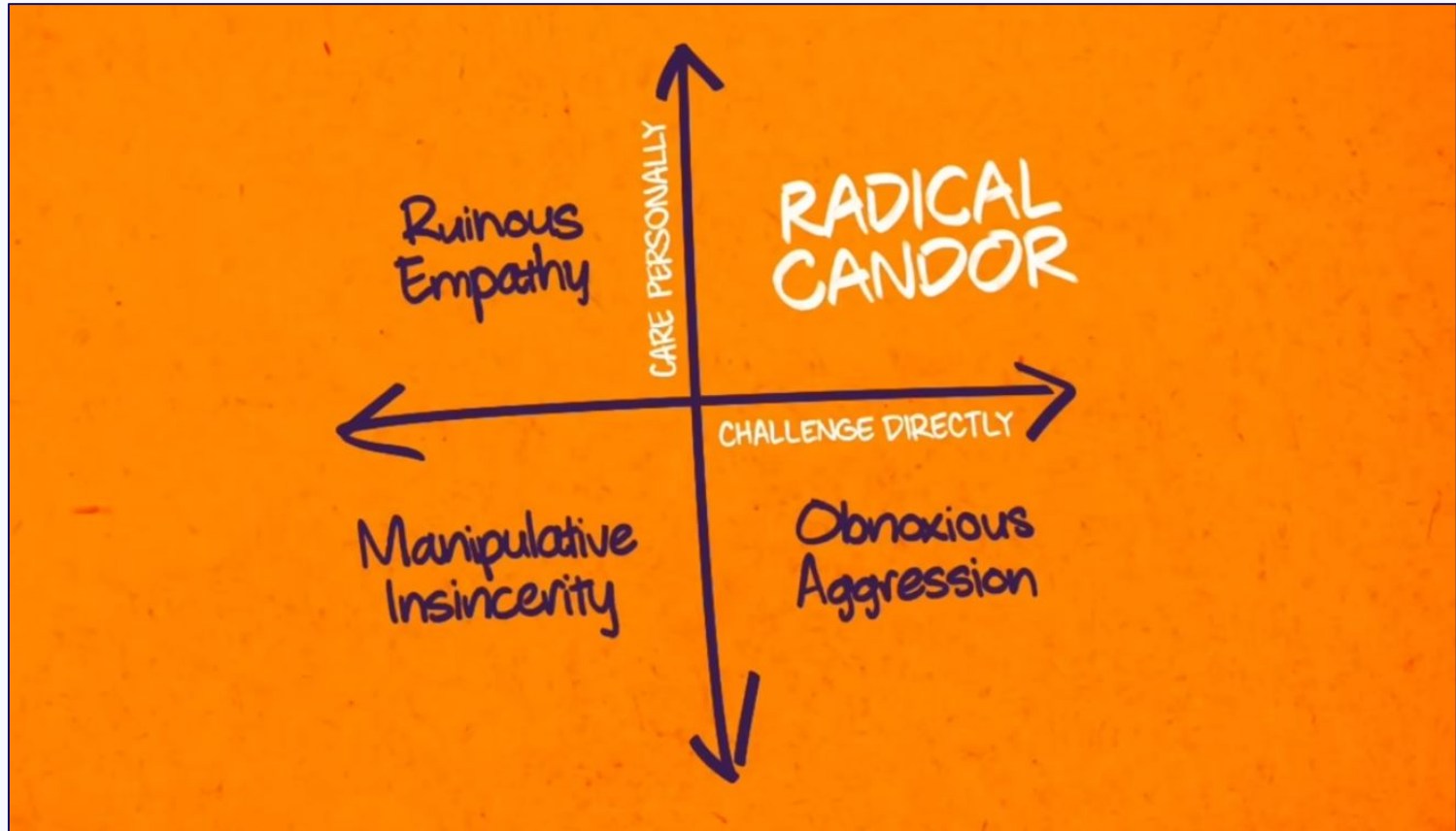
- Will
- Skill
- Structures
- Personal, social and structural factors

# Confidence in Conflict - Kwame Christian



**KWAME CHRISTIAN**  
FINDING CONFIDENCE IN CONFLICT

# Radical Candor - Kim Scott



# Thank you!!

## Questions or Follow-up:

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