

5 STEPS TO MASTERING A CRITICAL CONVERSATION AT WORK.

A practical playbook for leading hard conversations to successful outcomes.



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CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS MATTER MORE THAN EVER.

Some of the most important moments in leadership don't look significant at the time.

They're conversations – often brief, often uncomfortable – that shape how people think, act, and perform.

When those moments are handled poorly, the impact is rarely immediate. It shows up later: priorities drift, frustrations go unspoken, work slows down, and people start to disengage.

Not because of a single decision, but because of how that decision was communicated.

Most leaders recognise these situations, but few handle them well. Under pressure, it's easier to push through a message, avoid the tension or close the conversation down too quickly.

This is where strong leaders separate from the rest.

The ability to handle high-stakes, emotionally charged conversations is more than a soft skill – it's a driver of execution, alignment, and trust inside teams.

In our rapidly evolving business context, *how* a leader communicates matters as much as *what* they decide. This playbook focuses on those moments.

It introduces Alchemist's 5-step Critical Conversations model through a scenario many organisations are navigating now: the introduction of AI into day-to-day work.

It reveals what actually happens when conversations start to break down, how quickly positions harden, and what a leader can do differently to change the direction.

Let's start by looking at what makes a conversation "critical."

WHAT IS A CRITICAL CONVERSATION?

Some conversations carry more weight than others.

You can usually sense it early. The conversation requires more care and there's more at stake if it goes wrong.

These moments shape how people interpret decisions, how they see their role, and how they respond afterwards.

Three factors tend to be present when a conversation moves into this territory:

- **The stakes are high**
- **Emotions are strong**
- **Views are not aligned**

The Stakes Are High

The impact of the conversation extends beyond the immediate topic. It affects how work gets done, how people view each other, and what happens next.

What makes this more complex today is that the stakes are rarely shared equally.

A decision that feels operational to one person can feel deeply personal to another. Introducing a new system, changing a process, or reallocating responsibilities can easily be interpreted as a signal about someone's future, not just their workload.

That shift changes the nature of the conversation as it's no longer just about the task at hand.

Emotions Are Strong

In these situations, people are not only reacting to what's being said, they're responding to what they believe it implies.

Uncertainty and pressure tend to fill in any gaps quickly. If someone feels at risk or overlooked, they'll start to protect their position.

That might come across as resistance, withdrawal or challenge.

At that point, the conversation becomes harder to navigate. Not because the topic is unclear, but because the emotional response is already shaping how it's being received.

Views Are Not Aligned

Even when people are working towards the same outcome, they often have different views on how to get there.

Leaders tend to enter these conversations with a clear perspective on what should happen next. The risk is assuming that clarity is shared.

When others see the situation differently and don't feel they have space to question it, they disengage. Sometimes subtly, sometimes directly.

Either way, alignment does not come from explanation alone.

WHAT DOES A BAD CONVERSATION LOOK LIKE?

Most leaders can describe how a conversation should go. That's rarely the problem.

The difficulty is recognising when it starts to go wrong while you're in it and knowing how to get it back on track.

From the inside, it doesn't feel like a breakdown. It feels like you're being clear, moving things forward, or addressing the issue directly. The shift usually happens in small moments: when something is dismissed too quickly, when a concern isn't fully explored, or when one person moves on before the other is ready.

By the time it becomes obvious, it's already a problem.

The following scenario demonstrates a manager and her direct report discussing the use of AI into day-to-day work.

Naomi, a senior manager, is introducing a new tool designed to improve efficiency and increase capacity. From her perspective, the case is straightforward.

Emily, a junior paralegal, hears something different. For her, the change raises questions about her role, her development, and her future at the firm.

They're discussing the same decision, but not the same problem.

This is where many critical conversations fail. Not through confrontation, but through misalignment that isn't resolved.

In this exchange, the underlying conditions are already in place.

The stakes feel personal for Emily with an emotional response sitting just below the surface.



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UNDERSTANDING THE CONFLICT CYCLE.

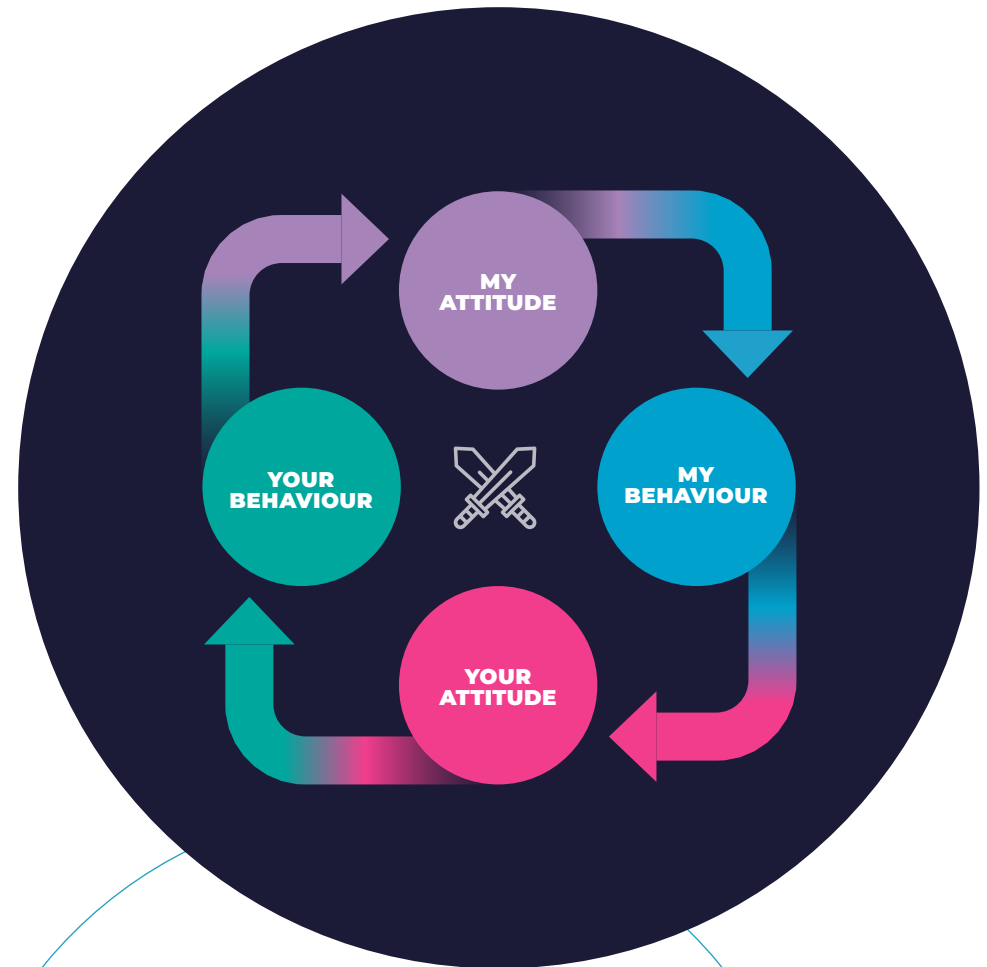
Most difficult conversations don't break down because of the topic. They break down because of how people show up to them. Before anything is said, each person brings an underlying attitude – about the situation, the other person, and what they expect will happen. That attitude shapes how they behave, and that behaviour is quickly interpreted, often more strongly than intended.

From there, it's a vicious cycle.

One person's tone, phrasing or level of openness influences how the other responds. That response then reinforces the original assumption. What started as a small signal becomes a pattern.

Left unchecked, the conversation starts shutting down rather than opening up.

This is how many conversations escalate. Not through open conflict, but through a series of small, reinforcing reactions.



The important point is not to analyse the other person's behaviour, but to recognise your own role in shaping it.

You can't control how someone interprets a situation, but you can influence the conditions they're responding to.

Small adjustments in how you approach the conversation – your level of curiosity, how you respond to challenge, how much space you create – can change how the other person engages.

That shift is often enough to interrupt the cycle.

We describe each part of the cycle in more detail on the right.

Once you can see the cycle, you can start to influence it by being deliberate about how you show up and how you respond in the moment.

That is where critical conversations start to shift.

MY ATTITUDE

The starting point is how you frame the situation before the conversation even begins. Whether you're open, impatient, certain, or dismissive will influence everything that follows.

MY BEHAVIOUR

The other person forms a view based on what they experience. Whether they feel heard, respected, or dismissed will shape how they engage from that point on.

YOUR BEHAVIOUR

That internal response shows up in how they act. They may lean in, hold back, challenge more directly, or disengage altogether. That behaviour then feeds back into how you interpret the situation.

YOUR ATTITUDE

That attitude becomes visible through how you communicate – your tone, the questions you ask, how you respond when challenged, and how much space you give the other person to contribute.

REVISIT THE SCENE.

In the earlier scenario, Naomi sets the conflict cycle in motion.

She enters the conversation with a fixed view of the outcome and little room for discussion.

That shows up in how she communicates: direct, certain, and focused on moving forward.

Emily picks up on that quickly. Instead of feeling involved, she starts to question what the change means for her. Her response becomes more guarded. She pushes back, but not fully.

Naomi interprets that as resistance.

From there, both are reacting to each other's behaviour, rather than addressing the underlying concern. The conversation continues, but it becomes narrower and more difficult to change direction.



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example conversation**

5 STEPS TO NAVIGATING CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS.

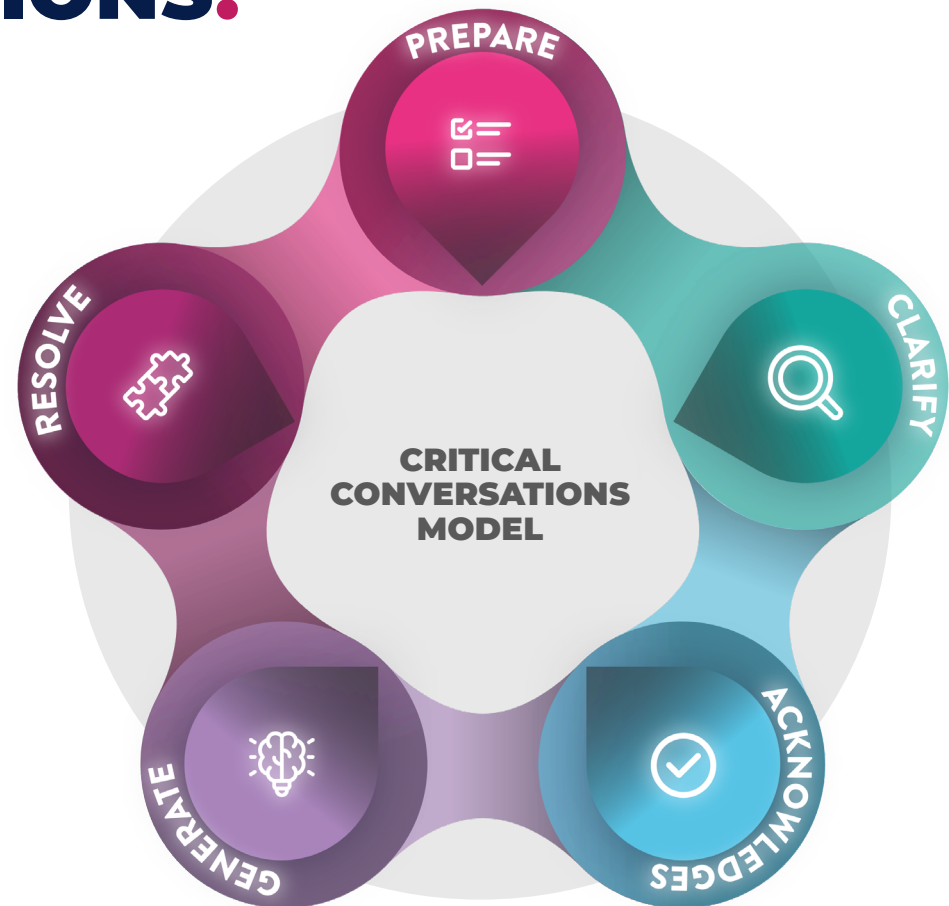
Once you recognise the conflict cycle, the next question is what you should do about it.

In the moment, it's not enough to notice that a conversation is narrowing or becoming harder to shift. Without a way to intervene, most people fall back into the same patterns: pushing their point, holding back, or moving the conversation on too quickly.

This is where a framework becomes useful.

The Critical Conversations model breaks the interaction into five parts, giving you a way to stay deliberate as the conversation unfolds. It starts before anything is said and carries through to how you reach agreement and move forward.

Each step focuses your attention on a different aspect of the conversation. Together, they help you recognise what's happening and adjust your approach in real time.





STEP ONE

PREPARE.

How the conversation starts determines how much room you have to move later.

If you go in with a fixed position, assumptions about the other person, or untested frustration, those will show up quickly – usually before the real issue has been explored.

Preparation is less about planning what to say and more about being clear on how you want to show up.

Start with your intention.

Be specific about what you're trying to achieve. There's a difference between addressing an issue to improve performance and raising it to release frustration. The conversation will follow that intent, whether you state it or not.

Then look at your own position.

What are you assuming about the situation or the other person? Where might you already be closing the conversation down without realising it?

If your view is fixed before the conversation begins, it's unlikely to open up once you're in it.

It's also worth recognising your emotional starting point. If you feel under pressure, frustrated, or certain you're right, that will shape how you listen and respond. You don't need to remove that reaction, but you do need to be aware of it.

Finally, consider how the situation may look from the other side.

What matters to them in this conversation? What might they be concerned about but not say directly? Where are they likely to see the situation differently?

The goal is not to predict their response, but to avoid assuming your perspective is the only one in play.

REVISIT THE SCENE.

In the earlier scenario, Naomi enters the conversation focused on explaining the benefits of the new tool. What she doesn't account for is how the change is likely to be interpreted by Emily.

She enters the conversation with a fixed view of the outcome and little room for discussion. That shows up in how she communicates: direct, certain, and focused on moving forward.

Emily picks up on that quickly. Instead of feeling involved, she starts to question what the change means for her. Her response becomes more guarded. She pushes back, but not fully.

Naomi interprets that as resistance.

From there, both are reacting to each other's behaviour, rather than addressing the underlying concern. The conversation continues, but it becomes narrower and more difficult to change direction.

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PREPARE YOURSELF FOR CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS.

- What is my purpose in having this conversation?
- What assumptions am I making about the situation or the other person?
- What is my starting position? Am I open to being influenced or already decided?



STEP TWO **CLARIFY.**

Once the conversation starts, your priority is to understand how the other person sees the situation before moving too quickly to explain your own point of view.

In many conversations, this step is shortened or skipped. One person sets out their position, the other reacts to it, and both assume they understand what the other means. In reality, they're often working from different interpretations of the same situation.

Clarify is about slowing that down.

It starts by drawing out how the other person is thinking. Not just what they think, but how they've reached that view and what sits behind it. That requires more than a single question. It often takes a few attempts, especially if the other person is unsure how much they can say or how their response will be received.

What matters here is not agreeing or disagreeing quickly, but instead making sure the full picture is understood before the conversation moves on.

This is also where your own assumptions are tested.

What you expected to hear may not match what the other person says. If you move on too quickly, you risk responding to your assumption rather than their reality.

Clarifying works both ways.

Once you have a clearer view of their perspective, you need to explain your own as a position that can be explored, not as a forgone conclusion. Being explicit about how you see the situation – what matters, what concerns you, and what you're trying to achieve – gives the other person something concrete to respond to.

REVISIT THE SCENE.

In the earlier scenario, Naomi moves quickly to explain the benefits of the new tool. What's missing is a clear understanding of how Emily is interpreting the change.

If Naomi had taken the time to explore that first, she would have surfaced the concern that sits underneath Emily's response. That would have changed not only what Naomi said next, but how the conversation unfolded from that point.

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STATEMENTS TO HELP **CLARIFY** YOUR POSITION.

- As I see it...
- From my perspective...
- What I'm trying to achieve is...
- Where I'm still unsure is...



STEP THREE

ACKNOWLEDGE.

This is where conversations either progress or become stuck.

Acknowledging is about making the other person's position explicit and showing that it's been properly heard. That doesn't require agreement, but it does require accuracy. If someone feels their point has been simplified or missed, they will repeat it – often with more force.

Taking a moment to reflect their view back in a way they recognise removes that friction.

It also creates space to address where views differ.

Avoiding those differences rarely helps. If anything, it pushes them further into the conversation, where they become harder to resolve.

Being clear about what you see differently, while recognising what makes sense in their perspective, keeps the discussion grounded and reduces the risk of talking past each other.

This is also the point where your own position may need to shift.

New information or a better understanding of the other person's thinking can change how you see the situation. Holding onto your original view without adjusting for that will usually reinforce the gap rather than close it.

The same applies on the other side. When someone feels understood, they're more likely to reconsider their own position.

Before moving on, it's worth checking that your view has been understood in return. If it hasn't, the conversation will carry that misalignment forward.

REVISIT THE SCENE.

In the earlier scenario, Emily's concern isn't fully surfaced or acknowledged. Naomi responds to the surface-level objection, rather than what sits underneath it.

If that concern had been recognised early, the conversation would have had a different starting point. Instead of defending positions, both sides would have been working from a clearer understanding of the underlying problem.

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ACKNOWLEDGE CHECKLIST.

- Reflect their viewpoint in a way they recognise.
- Be clear about where you agree and where you see it differently.
- Adjust your position if new information changes your view.
- Check that your perspective has been understood before moving on.



STEP FOUR

GENERATE.

With a shared understanding in place, the conversation can turn towards what to do next. The aim is not to land on a perfect solution immediately, but to **Generate** options that take both perspectives into account.

How those options are explored matters.

If ideas are judged too quickly, the conversation will narrow again. People will default back to defending their original position. Keeping the discussion open for long enough to properly explore what could work creates more room to find a viable path forward.

Invite suggestions and give the other person space to work through them. Early ideas are often incomplete. Rather than correcting or dismissing them, it's more effective to explore them further – what they would involve, where they might work, and what challenges they might create.

This allows the other person to see the strengths and limitations of their own thinking rather than having it pointed out to them.

Your role is to guide that process.

You can do that by testing ideas in a practical way: what needs to happen first? What constraints exist? What will the impact be? This keeps the conversation grounded without closing it down.

If the discussion starts to move towards options that don't make sense, that's often a signal that something hasn't fully been understood. In those cases, it's worth stepping back to **Clarify** and **Acknowledge** again before moving forward.

Alongside this, you should be contributing your own ideas. Position them as options to be explored, not decisions that have already been made. That keeps the conversation balanced and makes it easier to build towards something both sides can support.

REVISIT THE SCENE.

In the earlier scenario, once Emily's concerns are surfaced, Naomi has an opportunity to explore what the change could look like in practice.

Rather than focusing only on efficiency, she could work with Emily to map out how her role might evolve, where her expertise remains critical, and what support she would need to adapt. That shifts the conversation from reacting to the change to shaping how it's implemented.

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QUESTIONS TO **GENERATE** IDEAS.

- What might this look like in practice?
- What would need to happen first?
- Where could this create challenges?
- How might we work around that?
- What are we not considering yet?



STEP FIVE **RESOLVE.**

Once both perspectives are on the table, the conversation can still stall if either party doesn't feel understood or if differences haven't been addressed directly.

Once options have been explored, the conversation needs to move into clear agreement on what happens next.

This is where many discussions feel complete but fall short in practice. There is a general sense of alignment, but no shared clarity on what will be done, by whom, and when.

Resolve is about turning a direction into something concrete.

That means being explicit about the outcome. What has been agreed? What will change as a result of this conversation? Where are there still limits or conditions that need to be recognised?

It also means defining responsibility in terms of who's doing what and what progress looks like. Vague commitments create room for different interpretations, which can quickly undo the alignment that's been built.

Where appropriate, there should be a sense of exchange.

Not in a transactional way, but in recognising that both sides are contributing to making the outcome work. When someone can see how the agreement supports them – as well as what's expected of them – they're more likely to follow through.

REVISIT THE SCENE.

In the earlier scenario, once Emily's concerns are surfaced, Naomi has an opportunity to explore what the change could look like in practice.

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RESOLVE TO MOVE FORWARD TOGETHER.

- I will focus on:

- And you will arrange for:

- To complete:

THE CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS MODEL IN ACTION.

Now let's return to the conversation between Naomi and Emily.

The context hasn't changed. Naomi is still introducing the same AI tool and Emily is still weighing what that change means for her role.

What changes is how Naomi handles the conversation.

In the first exchange, she moved quickly to explain her position. The discussion stayed at the surface, and Emily's concerns were only partially explored. The conversation continued, but they left with different interpretations of what had been discussed.

Following the Critical Conversation model, Naomi takes a different approach from the outset. She creates space to understand, addresses what's really behind Emily's response and involves her in shaping what happens next.

The conversation moves differently: concerns surface earlier, the tone stays open and curious, and the discussion leads to clear next steps that both understand and can act on.

That shift is what the model enables.

Watch how the conversation changes when each step is applied in practice.



Click to watch the example conversation

IN YOUR NEXT CONVERSATION.

The value of this model shows up in real conversations, not a playbook.

Over the coming weeks, there will be moments where something needs to be said – where expectations need to be reset, change needs to be addressed, or performance needs to be challenged.

Those are the conversations that'll determine how your team responds and what happens next.

Before you go into them, take a moment to **Prepare:**

- Where are the stakes higher than they first appear?
- Where might the other person be interpreting the situation differently?
- Where could the conversation shut down if it isn't handled carefully?

In the moment itself, ask:

Are you taking the time to **Clarify** before moving to your position?

Have you **Acknowledged** what sits underneath the other person's response, not just what they've said?

Are you using the conversation to **Generate** possible ways forward rather than narrowing too quickly to one direction?

Have you **Resolved** what happens next clearly enough that both sides know what they're doing after the conversation ends?

You don't need to apply every step perfectly, but small shifts in how you approach these moments will change how the conversation unfolds and what happens as a result.

WORK WITH ALCHEMIST.

Critical conversations shape how teams perform.

Handled well, they accelerate change, strengthen alignment, and build trust. Handled poorly, they slow execution and leave issues unresolved.

Most organisations recognise this. Few have a way to build the capability consistently across their leaders.

The ability to handle critical conversations sits alongside a broader set of leadership behaviours: how performance is managed, how feedback is given, how change is led, and how people are developed and retained. Together, these determine how teams execute and perform.

But closing the capability gap requires more than traditional training or theory.

Leaders need the opportunity to practice through roleplay and simulations so they can test their approach, make mistakes in a low-risk environment, and refine how they respond. That's how confidence builds and how new behaviours start to hold under pressure.

If you're looking to scale behaviour change and embed these capabilities across your organisation, Alchemist can help.

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