

SAMPLE SESSION GUIDE

Communication & Conflict Navigation

A full-day workshop for mid-level managers and team leaders navigating high-stakes workplace conversations

Format: Full-day workshop (7 hours including breaks and lunch)

Audience: Managers and team leaders; designed as Session 5 of a multi-session leadership development program

Delivery: Instructor-led, in-person; includes guest practitioner, structured role-play, and individual reflection

Design Approach: Experiential learning, spaced retrieval, scaffolded practice, psychological safety principles

About This Document

This guide represents a complete facilitator's blueprint for a full-day session on communication and conflict navigation — one module within a six-month leadership development program. It is shared here as a portfolio sample to illustrate how Bailey Learning Works approaches program design: with clear learning objectives, theory-grounded methodology, structured facilitation moves, and deliberate transfer mechanisms built in from the start.

What you'll find inside:

- A session overview and agenda with precise timing
- Detailed facilitator guidance for each segment, including purpose, process, and facilitation notes
- A scaffolded practice structure that moves participants from low-stakes skill-building to high-stakes real conversation practice
- Sample scenario cards used in role-play exercises
- Post-session follow-through protocols for sustaining learning after the room clears

Session Overview

Session Purpose

This session is built on a foundational premise: conflict is not the problem. Avoiding conflict — or handling it poorly — is the problem. Organizations that can navigate disagreement productively are more innovative, more resilient, and more effective than those that smooth everything over or allow tension to fester unaddressed.

By the end of this session, participants will have moved from a defensive or avoidant posture toward conflict to a grounded, strategic approach — one grounded in curiosity, self-awareness, and skill.

Learning Objectives

Participants completing this session will be able to:

- Reframe conflict as potentially productive rather than inherently negative
- Apply five core principles of clear communication in difficult conversations
- Recognize escalating versus de-escalating language and use the latter under pressure
- Select from five conflict management strategies based on the situation
- Prepare internally before entering a difficult conversation — managing emotion, clarifying intent, and opening with curiosity
- Practice navigating real workplace conversations in a scaffolded, psychologically safe environment

A note on program context

This session is designed as the midpoint of a multi-month leadership development program. By the time participants arrive here, four months of deliberate cohort-building have already occurred — shared agreements, progressive disclosure, accumulated trust. The morning's emotionally substantive work (including participants bringing a real difficult conversation to practice) depends on that foundation. The psychological safety is not assumed; it has been constructed.

If delivered as a stand-alone workshop, the opening segments would be restructured to build the necessary safety conditions within the session itself — through different warm-up sequencing, modified ground-rule protocols, and adjusted pre-work requirements. The core design and learning architecture remain the same; the on-ramp changes.

Session Agenda

Time	Activity
8:00 – 8:30	Welcome, Integration & Reframing Conflict
8:30 – 8:50	Guest Practitioner: Difficult Conversations in Practice
8:50 – 10:00	Discovering the Five Core Principles
10:00 – 10:15	Morning Break
10:15 – 11:30	Preparing for Difficult Conversations
11:30 – 12:30	Lunch
12:30 – 12:45	Reflection & Reentry
12:45 – 2:30	Scaffolded Conflict Practice Labs (Rounds 1–3)
2:30 – 2:40	Afternoon Break
2:40 – 3:00	Integration & Commitment

Design Rationale

Every structural choice in this session is intentional. A few worth highlighting:

Principle Discovery Before Instruction

The session opens by asking participants to surface what they already know from their own experience — productive conflicts they've witnessed, communication breakdowns they've navigated. The five core principles are then named in response to what the group generates, not presented cold. This is not just a rapport-building technique. Research on adult learning consistently shows that activating prior knowledge before new instruction improves encoding, reduces cognitive load, and increases the likelihood of transfer. Participants own the principles because they helped discover them.

Scaffolded Practice Design

The afternoon practice lab is structured across three progressive rounds: low-stakes, medium-stakes, and high-stakes (participants' real conversations). This scaffolding is deliberate. Asking someone to practice their most emotionally charged conversation before they've had low-risk repetitions is counterproductive — it produces performance anxiety, not skill development. The scaffold builds competence and confidence before raising the stakes.

The Pre-Work Requirement

Participants are asked one week in advance to identify a specific difficult conversation they need to have — not a hypothetical, but a real one. This serves two functions: it establishes emotional relevance before participants enter the room, and it makes the afternoon practice immediately applicable rather than abstract. Adult learners transfer skills more reliably when they can see a direct path from practice to application.

Internal Preparation as a Skill

The self-preparation segment reflects a core conviction embedded in this program's design: how we show up internally determines how the conversation goes externally. Drawing on Fisher, Ury, and Patton's principled negotiation framework and Ury's later work on internal negotiation, participants are guided through a structured process of emotional check-in, values clarification, contribution mapping, and interest identification before they ever open the conversation. This is not soft skills — it is the discipline that separates reactive communicators from skilled ones.

The Five Core Principles

These principles form the conceptual backbone of the session. They are introduced through participant experience, reinforced through brief practice, and applied throughout the afternoon labs. Each principle connects to prior work participants have done in earlier sessions — building a cumulative framework rather than a one-day event.

01 Curiosity Over Certainty Shifts communication from defending a position to genuinely exploring another's perspective. Certainty closes conversations; curiosity opens them.	02 Impact vs. Intent Separates the harm someone caused from the motivation behind it. Most conflict escalates because we assume negative intent. Most harm is not intentional.
03 Contribution, Not Blame Moves from 'who is at fault' to 'how did we each contribute?' Even 5–10% ownership changes the dynamic from adversarial to collaborative.	04 Feelings as Data Treats emotional responses as information about what matters — not problems to suppress. Naming feelings de-escalates; suppressing them allows tension to build.
05 "And Stance" Holds multiple truths simultaneously. Both perspectives can be valid. Both needs can be real. The goal is not to decide who is right, but to find the path that honors both.	

Detailed Facilitator Guide

8:00–8:30 AM — Welcome, Integration & Reframing Conflict

Purpose: Bridge from prior sessions, establish psychological safety, and fundamentally reframe conflict as potentially productive.

Process

Opening & Integration (10 min): Welcome participants and explicitly connect today's session to prior work. The goal is for participants to see this not as a standalone workshop but as the culmination of months of capability-building — emotional intelligence, values clarity, resilience, and influence skills all converge in the moments where conflict exists.

Reframe Conflict (12 min): Open with a quick show of hands: 'When you hear the word conflict, what emotion do you feel first?' Acknowledge the predictable responses — anxiety, dread, frustration — and then challenge them directly.

Key reframe:

"Conflict isn't the problem. Avoiding conflict — or handling it poorly — is the problem. Research shows that organizations with healthy conflict outperform those without it. Teams that can disagree productively are more innovative. Conflict, handled well, builds trust."

Capture the productive potential of conflict on a flip chart: it surfaces problems before they become crises, brings perspectives that lead to better decisions, clarifies values and priorities, strengthens relationships when navigated well, and drives innovation.

Introduce Real Conversation Assignment (5 min): Participants were asked in advance to bring a real difficult conversation they need to have. Name it explicitly: 'That conversation represents an opportunity, not just a problem. Today we prepare you to have it in a way that makes things better, not worse.'

Establish Ground Rules (3 min): Co-create confidentiality and participation norms. A 'thumbs up / sideways / down' quick check gives the facilitator real-time data on participant readiness.

Facilitator Notes

- The reframe is critical — if participants hold 'conflict = bad' coming out of this segment, the day loses its foundation
- Watch for participants who seem highly anxious; note them for individual check-in during the morning break
- Normalize discomfort: this is hard work, and naming that builds trust

8:30–8:50 AM — Guest Practitioner

Purpose: Provide real-world grounding for difficult conversations in high-stakes, hierarchical environments.

A practitioner from a high-stakes field — healthcare, energy, operations, or similar — opens with 15–20 minutes on how difficult conversations show up in their work: navigating hierarchy, addressing performance issues, communicating across functional cultures, recovering from communication failures.

Facilitation note:

Coach the speaker beforehand to be vulnerable — share failures, not just successes. Practitioner credibility lands hardest when it includes an honest account of getting it wrong. Brief Q&A (2–3 questions) keeps momentum.

8:50–10:00 AM — Discovering the Five Core Principles

Purpose: Generate principles from participants' own experience, then teach and practice each one.

Part 1: Surfacing Patterns (20 min)

Small groups of 3–4 each share one example: a productive conflict (where disagreement led to a better outcome) and one that went poorly. Groups identify patterns: what was present when communication worked? What was missing when it failed?

In the full group harvest, the facilitator listens for the themes that map to the five principles and names them in response to what the group generated. This is not a lecture — it is facilitated discovery that gives participants ownership of the framework they will use for the rest of the day.

Part 2: Teaching All Five Principles (50 min)

Each principle follows a consistent 10-minute structure:

- Teach the core idea with concrete language examples (3 min)
- Connect to a story from the room (2 min)
- Link to prior program learning (1 min)
- Brief paired practice (3 min)
- Quick debrief: what did you notice? (1 min)

Sample practice for Principle 1 — Curiosity Over Certainty: In pairs, one person states a certainty statement ('This approach won't work') and the partner rewrites it as curiosity ('I'm wondering what concerns you see with this approach'). Roles rotate. Simple, fast, repeatable.

The consistency of structure across all five principles is intentional — it reduces cognitive load, builds a rhythm the group can follow, and reinforces that these are not five separate ideas but five facets of the same discipline.

10:15–11:30 AM — Preparing for Difficult Conversations

Purpose: Build participants' capacity to prepare internally and strategically before entering a difficult conversation.

Part 1: Self-Preparation Protocol (37 min)

Participants work through a structured self-preparation worksheet with a partner, examining their real conversation across six lenses: emotional awareness, values at stake, resilience mindset, relationship dynamics, contribution mapping, and opening statement. Partners serve as coaches, asking questions to push depth rather than simply listening.

This segment is emotionally substantive. Some participants will realize mid-exercise that the conversation they've been avoiding is about something much deeper than the surface issue. The worksheet is scaffolding for that discovery, not a form to fill out.

Part 2: Principled Negotiation Framework (33 min)

Drawing on Fisher, Ury, and Patton's *Getting to Yes*, participants are introduced to four elements of interest-based problem-solving: separating people from the problem, focusing on interests rather than positions, inventing options for mutual gain, and using objective criteria.

Each element connects explicitly to a principle from the morning session — the framework is positioned as the operational structure that makes the five principles actionable in real conversations, not as a separate model.

A brief paired practice on 'interests vs. positions' gives participants experience with the core shift: from 'I refuse to change the timeline' to asking 'What matters most to you about that deadline? What need are you trying to protect?'

Part 3: Opening the Conversation (15 min)

Participants learn and practice a single, memorable opening structure:

"I noticed... I'm wondering... Can we talk about...?"

This structure embeds: observable behavior (not judgment), curiosity (not certainty), de-escalating language, and an explicit invitation rather than a demand.

Participants draft their own opening using their real conversation. Partners give feedback on one question: does this invite dialogue, or does it sound like an accusation?

12:45–2:30 PM — Scaffolded Conflict Practice Labs

Purpose: Build skill through progressively higher-stakes practice, culminating in participants rehearsing their real difficult conversation.

The afternoon is structured as three rounds of role-play practice in triads (Speaker / Responder / Observer), each round increasing in complexity and personal stakes.

Round 1: Low-Stakes Practice (25 min)

Scenario-based role plays with minimal emotional charge. Both participants read the same scenario; the goal is technique without the added complexity of information asymmetry or personal stakes. Four scenario options are provided — participants choose. Observer provides structured feedback: which principles were used, what escalating or de-escalating language appeared, what worked.

Round 2: Medium-Stakes Discovery Practice (35 min)

Workplace scenarios where Speaker and Responder each receive only their own perspective — they do not see the other's card. Observer holds both perspectives and tracks whether the parties discover each other's interests or remain stuck in positional bargaining. This is Getting to Yes made experiential: participants feel the difference between arguing positions and exploring interests.

Round 3: High-Stakes Practice — Their Real Conversation (30 min)

Each participant practices the actual difficult conversation they identified in pre-work and prepared in the morning session. The responder role-plays the real person based on the speaker's worksheet description. This round receives closest facilitator attention — it is emotionally substantive and where the day's learning either consolidates or breaks down.

Participants are never required to share their real situation with the full group. Feedback and debrief stay within each triad. After Round 3, the facilitator acknowledges what just happened: 'You just practiced the conversation you've been most afraid to have. That takes courage.'

Design note on scaffolding:

The three-round structure is not incidental. Asking participants to practice their most charged conversation before they have built low-risk repetitions produces performance anxiety, not skill. The scaffold earns the right to go to high stakes. It also gives the observer role genuine purpose — each round asks observers to look for increasingly sophisticated features of the conversation.

2:40–3:00 PM — Integration & Commitment

Purpose: Anchor learning, create accountability, and close with clarity about what happens next.

Participants complete a brief personal commitment card: which one principle will they apply first, in which conversation, by when — and who will hold them accountable. Accountability partners (established earlier in the program) check in at the two-week mark.

The session closes not with summary but with intention. The point is not to have learned about conflict navigation. The point is to have that conversation.

Post-Session Transfer Protocol

Session design does not end when participants leave the room. The following protocols are built into program operations and treated as non-negotiable — because if learning doesn't transfer, it didn't work.

Same Day

- Facilitator debrief: what landed, what needs adjustment, which participants may need follow-up

Within 48 Hours

- Thank-you email to participants acknowledging the courage the day required
- Follow-up packet: key principles summary, de-escalating language reference, accountability partner check-in prompt, and encouragement to have their identified conversation

Two Weeks Post-Session

- Mid-month check-in: 'Have you had your difficult conversation yet?' — brief reminder of one core principle, accountability partner nudge

Before Next Session

- Informal feedback collection: which principles are participants using? What's working? What's hard?
- Session 6 content adjusted based on what's being heard

Why this matters:

Research on transfer of training consistently shows that post-event support structures have greater impact on behavior change than session design alone. The follow-through protocol is not a courtesy — it is the mechanism that determines whether today's learning becomes a lasting shift in behavior, or a memory that fades by Friday.

Sample Scenario Cards — Round 1 (Low-Stakes)

The following scenario cards are used in Round 1 of the practice lab. Participants select which scenario to practice. Each card is printed on cardstock, one per card. Three to four sets are prepared per session.

SCENARIO A: The Meeting Time

THE SITUATION

Two colleagues have exchanged three emails trying to schedule a weekly one-hour standing meeting. Agreement hasn't landed.

SPEAKER

You strongly prefer morning meetings (8–10 AM). Your focus and energy are sharpest then. Afternoon meetings leave you sluggish and unproductive.

RESPONDER

You strongly prefer afternoon meetings (2–4 PM). Mornings are reserved for focused solo work — meetings disrupt your concentration at exactly the time you need it most.

YOUR CHALLENGE

Practice curiosity over certainty and 'And Stance' — both preferences are valid. Find a solution using de-escalating language without either person simply conceding.

SCENARIO B: The Temperature War

THE SITUATION

Two colleagues share an open office space. For months, they have been quietly adjusting the thermostat without directly addressing it with each other.

SPEAKER

You are frequently cold. You wear layers and still can't focus. You have previously asked your colleague to dress lighter.

RESPONDER

You are frequently overheated. You can't remove more clothing professionally. You've asked your colleague to wear more layers.

YOUR CHALLENGE

Practice contribution mapping — how have both parties contributed to this standoff? Use de-escalating language to explore creative solutions rather than relitigating who started it.

SCENARIO C: The Parking Spot

THE SITUATION

One desirable parking spot is near the building entrance. Two colleagues arrive at similar times most days and both want it.

SPEAKER

You have a knee injury that makes the long walk painful. You've parked there for two months and consider it an informal accommodation. Yesterday your colleague took 'your' spot without knowing.

RESPONDER

You didn't know about the knee injury. You have young children in daycare and that spot saves five minutes off a tight morning schedule. Time is genuinely precious.

YOUR CHALLENGE

Practice impact vs. intent — they didn't mean to cause harm. Separate the impact you felt from their motivation. Practice opening with: 'I noticed... I'm wondering... Can we talk about...?'

SCENARIO D: The Team Lunch Routine

THE SITUATION

A team has ordered from the same restaurant every Friday for six months. One team member wants to change it; others are resistant.

SPEAKER

You're bored with the same menu. You've raised other options and been shut down. You've started skipping team lunches, which is affecting your relationships with the group.

RESPONDER

The current restaurant is affordable, reliable, and has options for everyone's dietary needs. New places feel like a gamble when what you have works. Why fix what isn't broken?

YOUR CHALLENGE

Practice 'Feelings as Data' — your boredom is information, not a complaint. Their preference for reliability is also valid, not obstruction. Use 'And Stance' to hold both truths and move toward something that works for both.

Let's Talk About What This Could Look Like for Your Organization

Every program Bailey Learning Works designs begins with a conversation about your specific context: the audience, the performance problem, the organizational constraints, and what success actually looks like six months after the room clears.

This session guide is one example of the level of design rigor and facilitation detail that goes into every engagement — whether that is a single workshop or a multi-month curriculum. If what you have seen here raises questions or opens a possibility worth exploring, I would welcome the conversation.

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