

6 KEY TAKEAWAYS

Beyond Legal Expertise: Tools for Navigating High-Stakes Conversations

Kilpatrick’s [Colleen Bear](#) and [Brodie Erwin](#) joined other thought leaders at the firm’s annual In-House Counsel Summit in Raleigh to discuss “**Beyond Legal Expertise: Tools for Navigating High-Stakes Conversations.**” High-stakes conversations are where legal judgment, business acumen, and interpersonal skill converge. The core message is simple: trust and psychological safety make productive conflict possible; productive conflict improves decisions; and repeatable conversation tools turn high-pressure moments into forward progress.

Key takeaways from the discussion include:

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Make it safe first

How: Name a shared goal and mutual respect at the start of tough conversations; contrast what you intended with what you didn’t to clear up misunderstandings.

Why it helps: Lowers defensiveness, encourages collaboration, speeds alignment, and keeps dialogue productive.

Try this: “We both want a solution that protects the deal and the company. If it sounded like I was dismissing your concern, that’s not my intent—my goal is to surface risks early.”
- Build trust daily**

How: Be predictable—do what you say, when you say; listen 80/20; ask what matters most to them.

Why it helps: Faster buy-in, fewer escalations, stronger influence over time.

Try this: Start with “What’s your biggest worry about this project?” and mirror back what you heard.

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Debate ideas, not people

How: Set ground rules, invite minority views, tie arguments to client interests and decision criteria.

Why it helps: Better, more informed, decisions without collateral damage to important relationships.

Try this: Rotate a “devil’s advocate” and close with, “Once we decide, we all row in the same direction.”
- Lead with emotional intelligence**

How: Regulate your own reactions; paraphrase to demonstrate understanding; validate concerns before advocating solutions.

Why it helps: Defuses tension, keeps negotiations moving, and builds credibility.

Try this: “I hear that timeline risk is the sticking point. Let’s explore options that protect it.”

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Shift from “no, because…” to “yes, if…”

How: Offer conditions, safeguards, and alternatives that advance business goals while managing risk.

Why it helps: Positions Legal as a problem-solver and accelerates decision-making.

Try this: “Yes, if we cap liability at X and add Y oversight; otherwise, the exposure is too high.”
- Close the loop**

How: Translate dialogue into decisions—name owners, timelines, and follow-ups; send a brief recap.

Why it helps: Drives accountability, prevents rework, and keeps team moving forward toward their goals.

Try this: “Decision: proceed with Option B. Owner: Alex. Timeline: Friday. Follow-up: risk review next Tuesday.”

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