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GORE

Survival Guide for Negative Feedback & Holding Team Members Accountable

Maximizing positive outcomes in the most challenging conversations

Jason Gore

Partners

Neuberg Gore (Exec Coaching)

Saturn Leadership (Non-profit)

See the 25 minute summary [video](#)

Part 1 - Introduction

Escalating Conversations for Feedback and Accountability

Most managers start learning how to give feedback only when they are extremely frustrated with a team member, realize that they can no longer afford to tolerate the lack of performance, and are finally ready to deliver very critical feedback. This book starts here—how to recover from a bad hire, non-productive team member, or someone that is simply hard to work with.

The goal of any feedback conversation is twofold:

- Our team members understand where they are failing to meet expectations and change their behavior. Eventually, if they don't improve, they will be asked to leave the team.
- We learn how to give them the support they need to succeed by first understanding their obstacles and resentments, and then brainstorming with them how to move forward.

If they don't leave with their dignity intact, their surprise may turn into an angry departure, negative messaging to all the other team members about how unfairly they were treated, and negative online reviews about the culture. They will create as much resentment as possible on their way out the door. And it's usually the manager's fault. If they are truly surprised, the manager likely missed a few conversations or held back how dissatisfied they were.

Creating accountability is hard. Managing a team member's performance is probably the hardest thing a manager does, especially when your team member doesn't take feedback well or continues to fail despite the feedback.

The best way to manage a low performer is to:

- Give them consistent and ongoing feedback—both positive and negative.
- Support them in improving. This requires a conversation where you hear their perspective even if you disagree.
- If they continue to fail to meet objectives, let them know that they are not fulfilling their role and that things must change for them to continue to be in their role.
- Ultimately, let them go or move them to another position where they can succeed.

From my experience working with executives, it takes at least 2-3 months, and usually 5-6 months, from the time you give clear feedback that is actually heard to the time you can effectively fire a team member. When the process is done well, the team member is not surprised, understands that they were failing, and generally leaves feeling that their dismissal was a fair choice. Often, the ending goes far more smoothly than most managers expect—if they effectively gave feedback and escalated to the point of dismissal.

Here are some key guidelines in managing a team member's performance. Each will be discussed further:

1. Make sure that the commitments your team members make are totally clear. Who is doing what by when? Ensure that commitments, scope and deadline that people agree to actually have their buy-in. This means that scope and deadlines need to be clarified, negotiated, and agreed upon, and sometimes other tasks need to be re-prioritized to create capacity. If people don't agree to their commitments, it will be challenging to effectively hold them accountable. (Chapter 3)
2. Give balanced positive and negative feedback all the time, but especially upon the completion of any task. Create a relationship around two-way feedback and problem-solving. (Chapter)
3. In your own mind, own that your satisfaction as a manager, including how they communicate and collaborate, is just as important as the results they produce. Managers need to understand that the manager's satisfaction is key to the long-term success of a team member. (Chapter 5)
4. Hold them accountable with a simple set of escalating conversations with higher and higher consequences. At the end of the day, you only have three real "punishments:" change their compensation, change their role, or let them go. These all happen quite late in the accountability game. (Chapter 6)

Supporting their Success

I believe in being direct and clear. However, you also need to be curious and a good listener. Usually, low performers have obstacles that they are navigating, and one of the issues that they face is that they have unclear goals or requests—and they'll often blame their manager for the lack of clarity. There might be some truth in it—most managers aren't the best at creating clear request and setting clear expectations. Learn from the feedback and try to improve how you collaborate. At the end of the day,

Five Escalating Conversations

Holding someone accountable starts with early feedback and escalates into changing their role in some way. There are five conversations, with increasing levels of intensity:

Conversation 1 - Ongoing Task-Based Feedback (Plus/Delta): Give balanced positive and negative feedback upon the completion of EVERY task. If you make this part of your process, it will become a foundation of your team culture and make giving and receiving feedback much easier. Identities and ego might get in the way, but because the feedback is focused on the task, it is harder for people to take it personally and easier to learn together about how to give guidance.

Conversation 2 - Negative/Constructive Feedback: Start by sharing your assessment, getting to a shared reality of what they are not accomplishing, work together to discuss what's going to be different, and agree to specific next steps. Ideally, you give them ongoing support in helping them improve.

Conversation 3 - Holding a Team Member Accountable: This conversation has two parts (1) creating a shared understanding that a commitment or aspect of the role was not fulfilled, and (2) brainstorming and identifying the obstacles and what will be different in the future and (3) Creating and tracking a set of milestones to get things back on track and ensure that the situation will improve. We're still acting in a coaching capacity, but we are also conveying the importance that things need to improve.

Conversation 4 - Role Underperformance (or a formal PIP): In this conversation, we are half coach and half manager. On the manager side, we are sharing that we are concerned about the lack of improvement in a specific area and stating that there are consequences if the situation doesn't improve—either they will have their scope changed, their role changed, or will be let go. Meanwhile, we are still coaching them in improving regardless of our level of optimism. This is the hardest conversation for most managers and the one that is often not done in a clear way—it's hard to support someone in succeeding while threatening their role. If a team member leaves this conversation without understanding the consequences, the manager has failed to have this conversation.

Conversation 5 - Letting them Go (or Changing their Role): This conversation is NOT a coaching conversation—it is a conversation between manager and team member. This conversation is one of delivering bad news. It's important to be empathetic, while also being clear that the decision is made and is final. Patience and listening can be helpful, but this is not the time to deliver feedback. That said, it's important to get clear on HOW the team member will leave, including the timeline and communications (if they will “roll off” slowly.)

See the CUBE model for each of these below or on the [website](#).

The number one mistake I see made by managers is that they wait too long to give feedback. As a result, when they do give feedback, it tends to be a big deal, the timeline to fix the problem is too short, and they tend to give feedback that is thematic (not task-based) so it increases the likelihood of the team member getting defensive.

From what I've seen, most managers take about 9 months to go from dissatisfaction to letting someone go. And when they finally let someone go, the other person is surprised and feels that they were never really told of the manager's level of dissatisfaction. When a team member is surprised about being let go, it's usually the fault of the manager and not being direct enough.

Over and over again, I see managers say, “I've given them feedback over and over again.” But the team member is surprised about the feedback or the intensity of the concern.

From start to finish, a team member:

- Understand the feedback
- Understand the consequences
- Not be surprised when they are let go.

The Four Major Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them

C REATE CONTEXT & OBJECTIVES

- Framing the conversation is setting up the conversation for success.
- Creating clarity about the goal of the conversation and the agenda will help everyone align and focus on the desired outcomes. Don't beat around the bush—even if it's a tough conversation, and make sure you both are willing to have the conversation.
- In most conversations, we want to establish a mood of openness, collaboration, and connection. Be soft on the person and hard on the problem.

U **NDERSTAND EACH OTHERS WORLD'S...THEIR WORLD FIRST**

- The best solutions and highest follow-through will come when there is mutual understanding of each party's underlying interests. Don't argue over the solutions--build them together.
- Most people are poor listeners, especially if they are upset or have strong opinions. Set up their listening by first understanding them. Even if they say something you disagree with, stay curious and ensure they feel heard. Paraphrasing is an extremely powerful and much underused tool.
- Also be sure to share your interests and priorities.

B **RAINSTORM OPTIONS**

- This is the time in a conversation to create value--to find ways that all the parties can be satisfied. Brainstorm together and expand ideas.
- If you get caught into narrowing into one solution too fast or critiquing solutions, it will shut down creativity and you'll likely leave value on the table.

E **ND WITH COMMITMENTS**

- Make sure everyone is clear and aligned on next steps (who is doing what by when). Often, commitments that may have seemed obvious were misunderstood.
- Commitments may be process commitments, such as having a follow-up meeting.
- Capture commitments in writing and send an email re-confirming them.

Part 2 - The Five Conversations

Conversation 1: Ongoing Task-Based Feedback (Plus/Delta)

The best way to give feedback is when a task is completed (or not completed). By offering feedback upon task completion, team members are more likely to hear and embrace the feedback. They are also less likely to take it personally.

It's best to have a regular practice of giving feedback—both positive and negative. The “feedback sandwich” is the most referenced approach. I don't like it. Some people call it a “shit sandwich.” One of the issues is that it generally encourages general, high-level positive feedback, and specific, detail-level negative feedback. People remember specifics, so this recipe doesn't work well

I like a simple T-Chart:

Plusses (Did Well)	Deltas (Do Differently)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">•••	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•••

Plusses are simply what they did well, and Deltas are what they should do differently in the future. It's straight-forward, task-based, and encourages specificity. Note that it also plays with time—The plusses are about the past (what they did well), while the Deltas are about the future—what they can do differently in the future. This forces the person giving the feedback to translate their complaints into specific requests, which is a much more effective approach.

Ideally, plus/deltas are an integrated part of how you manage others. Do a plus/delta after every task, and it will become MUCH easier to give feedback and get others used to receiving feedback. It will also encourage a culture of excellence, feedback, and accountability across all levels.

The plus/delta also takes pressure off of thematic feedback. Sometimes it's easier to give task-based feedback and start here than trying to collect a bunch of data to share a larger concern.

A quick note about second-hand info. If you received second-hand information from someone, it's hard to give constructive feedback. If it's not an HR issue or doesn't have great urgency, you may just position yourself to wait and watch for the behavior that has come to your attention. When you see it firsthand, you can offer a plus/delta.

“And” not “But”

You are giving BOTH positive and corrective feedback. When you give positive feedback, then say “BUT”, it suggests that the positive feedback is not true. Simply avoid the word but.

Conversation 2: Negative Feedback

The goal of giving constructive feedback is to change behavior. Most managers think the goal is to give feedback and that alone is not enough. The team member must hear the feedback, understand it fully, and make changes in how they are working. This requires a more generative conversation than just giving feedback.

Ultimately, it's the manager's satisfaction that is the ultimate determining factor of their success. And going into the conversations, most managers don't have full clarity of what exactly is happening. They also tend to think that they have already given the feedback. But when the team member is asked what feedback they have heard, it's usually a much softer and incomplete version of the feedback that the manager thinks they've already delivered.

So instead of "giving feedback," have a constructive conversation. Explore together what's not working—for both of you. Then problem-solve together, and ultimately agree on next steps.

Create Context and Objectives: The conversation itself needs to be supportive and in a productive mood. One of my favorite lessons learned from Roger Fisher is "Soft on the Person, Hard on the Problem." In setting context, you have to share that what is happening or what is being produced is not fully meeting your desires or expectations. You don't have to drive this point like a stake, but it should be said.

Understand each other's Worlds: The manager and the team member need to get to some level of shared reality—what's not working for the manager AND what's not working for the team member. What are the obstacles they are facing? Why aren't they succeeding? What aspects of their role aren't working? And the most difficult one: how is the manager contributing to their lack of success?

Brainstorm Options: Ideally, do some brainstorming on your own in advance. What can they do differently? What can you do differently? Try to shift your complaint into specific, behavioral requests. In the conversation, use the prep you did to start the conversation, but have a discussion on how can we improve the situation or make sure it doesn't happen again?

End with Commitments: Simply have good meeting hygiene. What have you agreed to? It's best to consolidate the next steps in an email and send it to them. I often like to write this email WITH them during the meeting and then send it out before the meeting even ends. That way there is clarity and something to refer back to.

Focus on the Behavior. Don't make it about the Team Member

In all feedback conversations, the focus should be on the behavior. If it's an attitude issue, name the behaviors that are not working, but don't generalize it into something that can be seen as a character or personal flaw. When people feel shame, they generally aren't at their best and can often react with denial, anger, resentment, etc. It simply doesn't produce results.

Avoid using the word Trust or be VERY careful when using it

I've learned that the word "trust" tends to cause a negative reaction. People generally take it personally. Instead of saying, "I don't trust that you can produce a result," instead be more clear about what's not happening or the negative downstream impact it's having.

- I feel like I can't count on the commitments and timelines you make
- This aspect of your work feels incomplete or not well-considered.
- When I receive your reports, I spend a lot of time reworking them before I feel comfortable sharing them.
- The way you are interacting with your peers is forcing me and the managers to get involved to facilitate the conflict.

In general, the more specific and the more behavioral you can be, the better.

Best Practices for Conversation 2: Negative Feedback

C REATE CONTEXT & OBJECTIVES

- The goal is for everyone to be calm, centered, and connected.
- Assume they have positive intentions around their actions and what happened.
- Share your positive intent and support for them and your commitment to their success.
- Request a conversation to give them some feedback and find ways to increase their effectiveness.
- Find a good time for you both to have the conversation.

U NDERSTAND EACH OTHERS WORLD'S...THEIR WORLD FIRST

- Be soft on the person, hard on the problem.
- Share a plus/delta--where you were satisfied and where you weren't around the tasks or projects. Do not generalize and make it about them.
- Be clear about the impact on you and the severity of the situation.
- Own your assessments. Separate facts from interpretations.
- Ask them how they see it. Appreciate the other person's view of the situation even if it's inaccurate or sounds like an excuse.
- Stay curious about what you did to contribute to the situation.
- Create a shared reality and take responsibility for your roles.

B RAINSTORM OPTIONS

- Co-create many possible solutions to resolve the situation.
- Discuss how to reduce variability in the result and increase communication.
- Also discuss how to handle it if (and when) it happens again.

E ND WITH COMMITMENTS

- Decide and fully align on clear next steps. Agree to specific actions to deal with the situation if (and when) it happens again.
- Setup a check-in to discuss changes, progress, and course corrections.
- Reconfirm your support for the other person.
- Work together to make it happen and stay in communication.

Common Mistakes for Conversation 2: Negative Feedback

C REATE CONTEXT & OBJECTIVES

- Going in off-center, in bad timing/location, or when anyone is ready to “snap.”
- Assuming negative intent or making generalizations or attributions.
- Forgetting that the goal is to collaborate around a change in behavior, not to deliver a message or beat them up.
- Not acting from a mood of support and encouragement.
- Being too nice and not naming the real intent of the conversation.
- Not being prepared.

U NDERSTAND EACH OTHERS WORLD’S...THEIR WORLD FIRST

- Waiting to address it as a theme about them, rather than addressing it as specific feedback around a task--making it about them, rather than their behavior.
- Assuming it’s “their fault” and not looking at how you contributed.
- Getting caught up in your own story and not being curious. It’s easy to want to be “right” rather than focus on the desired result.
- Not understanding or empathizing with their challenges, obstacles or other uncontrollable factors.
- Not sharing the level of impact on you or the severity of the consequences.
- Assuming what’s easy for you is easy for others.

B RAINSTORM OPTIONS

- Making demands rather than exploring next steps together.
- Not exploring options for offering continued support and resources.

E ND WITH COMMITMENTS

- No clear next steps or check-ins to accelerate the learning.
- Approaching this as their issue rather than your issue.
- Underestimating the possibility of a radical shift.
- Overestimating your ability to quickly replace the person.

Prep Sheet for Conversation 2: Negative Feedback

C REATE CONTEXT & OBJECTIVES

What happened—what are the facts, not my opinions/generalizations?

-

What are some good reasons why they didn't fulfill expectations? What could I have done better?

-

What additional support, clarity, prioritization, resources might they need to succeed?

-

What's the impact on me and the consequences if this is not resolved?

-

U NDERSTAND EACH OTHERS WORLD'S...THEIR WORLD FIRST

My Interests

What is my specific request—translate my complaint into a request?

-

-

Their Interests

What are their obstacles and concerns?

-

-

What open-ended questions can I ask them to confirm or disprove my guesses?

-

-

B RAINSTORM OPTIONS

Brainstorm what we both can do differently moving forward:

-

How will I stay in communication to handle the situation when it arises again?

-

E ND WITH COMMITMENTS

Who is doing what by when?

-

When will I check-in about this?

-

What will I do if this arises again?

-

Transforming Complaints into Requests

One of the hardest parts about giving negative feedback is to get clear on the specific and actionable requests—what specifically do they need to do. It takes work and thoughtful planning to shift your complaints—which are in the foreground of your mind—into specific requests, which are the essence of the conversation.

One of the major obstacles in this is that we often want people to change their character and stop doing what they are doing—stop being lazy, have more urgency, don't be so abrasive, etc. It's hard to find words to express what you do want—complete tasks on time, listen and problem-solve collaboratively. Sometimes what is obvious to us is not so obvious to the other person. As a result, it can be very helpful to talk through your complaints with a peer so that you can more clearly translate them into requests.

Conversation 3: Holding a Team Member Accountable

Introduction

The best way to train someone is with consistent positive reinforcement. Negative reinforcement is good for stopping behaviors, but positive reinforcement is essential to encourage new behaviors. This is well-documented in scientific research. So, when you see someone do something good—a half step towards the agreements you made—offer an acknowledgement. Show them that you notice and appreciate their efforts, share the impact it has, etc. You can also offer improvement opportunities, but also be encouraging. Most of us veer towards negative comments, and this is simply not the best way to improve a team member or a team.

Holding someone accountable is not about punishment or carrying a big stick. Holding someone accountable is simply having a conversation about why some commitments were not met. We want to continue to be soft on the person, and hard on the problem. We're still acting in a coaching capacity, trying to get them to improve, encouraging them to move forward where they are unstuck, understanding their obstacles and how you can help, etc.

It's a conversation that simply goes through what happened, and ends with making new commitments. Ultimately, it can escalate into a conversation about role performance, but that's not where we start.

Create Context and Objectives: Always assume positive intent and that the other person has valid reasons if a commitment is missed—including that they were unclear about the commitment that was made. So many young managers try to enter accountability conversations with lots of intensity and it can often backfire.

Understand each other's Worlds: First, make sure that there was a mutually-understood agreement. So often, there was a misunderstanding about priorities, dates, etc. Learn about their world and why the commitment was missed. Often, the issue is overwhelming, in which case, it's important to improve how commitments are made and prioritized. So often, missed commitments are a function of commitments being made in an ad-hoc manner. The conversation may result in a larger discussion of priorities.

It may also result in a conversation about getting support from other functional leaders. Often, each function may be driving towards their individual goals and metrics and not prioritizing the collaborative needs of other functions. Keep an eye open for these situations.

What you're really trying to accomplish in this conversation is to set a future where you can more readily rely on the commitments being made.

Brainstorm Options: Brainstorming in this case is a bit complex because there are actually several different conversations that are needed:

- First, is the missed commitment. Address the situation and explore what support they need to fulfill the commitment. How can you get the project back on track?
- Second is monitoring and advance notice. Discuss how you can monitor progress moving forward and how you would like to be notified if the new commitment is in jeopardy.
- The last is to discuss learnings and how to collaborate more effectively moving forward. How can you prioritize and make commitments differently in the future?

End with Commitments: As always, end with clear next steps—both for the project and how you will work together more effectively moving forward. Address the situation and explore what support they need to fulfill the commitment. If they need time to investigate and give you a new deadline, just make sure you have a follow up deadline—when will that happen? Reconfirm your support for them and how you will collaborate better in the future. Write down all the agreements made to make sure they are clear and you are aligned.

An important note about Type A people.

Let's split a team into low-performers, mid-performers, and high-performers. Each one will react differently to feedback.

Low-Performers are generally unaware that they are low-performers. They overestimate their contribution and they underestimate the negative impact that they have. Sometimes they think they are really good at what they do and blame the environment or other obstacles for making their jobs hard. As a result, they don't take the feedback well, don't take ownership of the desired outcomes, and blame external factors. As a result, you'll spend a lot of time working with them to clear obstacles and issues, and may need to be involved in the nitty-gritty of things to help them move forward effectively and either succeed or fail.

Mid-Performers can be producing mediocre results for a number of reasons. Often, some things simply don't come easily to them. The more you can understand their obstacles and create support mechanisms, the more likely they will find a way to succeed. For example, a designer might be a brilliant designer but have terrible project management skills. What can you do to improve those skills, hand-hold them through prioritizing, getting them project management support, partnering them with another design with those skills, etc. You may need to get into the nitty-gritty of helping them understand the issue and find ways to resolve it.

High-Performers tend to notice all the mistakes they make and overestimate everyone else's abilities or expectations. Often, they miss deadlines because they are trying to be overly-involved or do things too well, and then fail in other areas. Most managers misunderstand that their Type A team members often carry a lot of self-preservation focus and anxiety. While giving them tough feedback and sharing

the consequences, you also have to be kind and help them navigate the uncertainty. You want them to leave with a sense of optimism that with focus, they will make the changes necessary.

Best Practices for Conversation 3: Holding a Team Member Accountable

C REATE CONTEXT & OBJECTIVES

- Share your support for the other person's success and your commitment to a powerful working relationship.
- Assume positive intent.
- Request a conversation to discuss a commitment that you believe was missed and to collaborate more effectively.

U NDERSTAND EACH OTHERS WORLD'S...THEIR WORLD FIRST

- Get shared reality about the commitment that was made and whether it was missed.
- Ask them to share what happened. Listen and paraphrase. Appreciate the other person's view even if it's inaccurate.
- Take responsibility for any role you might have had in the outcome.
- Ask them to take responsibility for their role.
- Share the impact of missing the commitment and the importance of next steps.
- Share your assessments and concerns.

B RAINSTORM OPTIONS

- Address the situation and explore what support they need to fulfill the commitment.
- Discuss how you can monitor progress moving forward.
- Discuss learnings and how to collaborate more effectively moving forward.

E ND WITH COMMITMENTS

- Decide and fully align on clear next steps. What will be different?
- Agree to corrective actions and support structures to ensure it is not repeated.
- Create a clear timeline to get back on track and how you will communicate. Ensure that you feel confident about the commitment and communication moving forward.
- Reconfirm your support for the other person. Work as a team to be successful.

Common Mistakes for Conversation 3: Holding a Team Member Accountable

C REATE CONTEXT & OBJECTIVES

- Assuming the issue will get better with time.
- Coming into the conversation with a one-sided story without checking your assumptions.
- Creating a mood of blame, anger or a poor mood, rather than a future-looking mood of support.

U NDERSTAND EACH OTHERS WORLD'S...THEIR WORLD FIRST

- Not checking your assumptions.
- Sharing interpretations as if they were facts.
- Making generalizations about the person's attitude, performance, etc.
- Assuming it's all them and you haven't contributed.
- Not empathizing with their perspective, obstacles or views.

B RAINSTORM OPTIONS

- Not putting any measures in place for support.
- Not discussing how to collaborate more effectively moving forward.

E ND WITH COMMITMENTS

- Ending the conversation without clear agreements.
- Ending without expressing support and appreciation.

Preparation Sheet for Conversation 3: Holding a Team Member Accountable

C REATE CONTEXT & OBJECTIVES

What happened—what are the facts, not my opinions/generalizations?

-

What are some good reasons why they didn't fulfill expectations? What could I have done better?

-

What additional support, clarity, prioritization, resources might they need to succeed?

-

What is the level of impact and consequences if this doesn't change? What's the timeline?

-

U NDERSTAND EACH OTHER'S WORLDS...THEIR WORLD FIRST

My Interests

What is my specific request—translate my complaint into a request?

-

-

Their Interests

What is their story, concerns, and obstacles?

-

-

What open-ended questions can I ask them to confirm or disprove my guesses?

-

-

B RAINSTORM OPTIONS

Brainstorm what I can you do differently moving forward:

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-

How could I handle the situation when it arises again?

-

-

E ND WITH COMMITMENTS

Who is doing what by when? When will I check-in about this?

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Conversation 4: Role Underperformance (or a formal PIP)

Intro

The key difference between this conversation and a feedback conversation is simply that you are adding a new consequence: if they don't improve, you'll have to make changes to make sure the role can be completed effectively.

The goal here is to accelerate what needs to happen—they either improve or they leave. As a result, you need to be ready for their departure and plan ahead about your staffing options if they leave.

The more direct you are about the situation and the more supportive you can be, the more likely it is that they will either improve or leave.

If you have a clear deadline, you can share it, but what is more important is that their effectiveness in their role now becomes a central theme in how you manage them. Every 1:1 has to include feedback about how they are doing in the required improvements and you have to be actively tracking their progress to give them that feedback.

Ideally you give them a series of milestones to achieve. The more supportive you can be in helping them achieve these milestones, the more likely it is that they will either improve or willingly accept the role change or departure.

There are three key mistakes I see managers make in this conversation.

- A. Not having the conversation. When you start having serious conversations about role underperformance, there is a threat being made to their role, their status, and their income—including their ability to support their lifestyle and their family. This means that it increases the likelihood that they might leave. For this reason, most managers avoid this conversation—they skip it altogether—and when the team member is let go or layered, they are justifiably surprised and perhaps angry.
- B. Not being clear about the consequences: It's scary to clearly state that if someone does not change, that their current role will change or they will be asked to leave. These kinds of conversations are uncomfortable, and there is no way to make them comfortable. So, most managers try to take the edge off by not being clear. This is a mistake. When you're ready to have the role conversation, have it right. Otherwise, just stick to a feedback conversation while you are assessing your options, creating a backup plan, etc. and then have this conversation correctly.
- C. Not being supportive and helping the team member succeed. When you don't think the team member is likely to succeed, it's hard to spend time supporting them. In some ways, managers who are not optimistic tend to withdraw and watch the team member fail from a distance. That's a mistake. At the end of the day, you want them to succeed, even if it's temporary. A job needs to be done and the better they can do, the better it will be for the team result. If you want to fire them in the future for attitude or other issues, you can, but don't sabotage them while they are attempting to improve.

There are a lot of negative consequences to skipping this conversation, not being direct, or not being supportive. First, you miss out on any possibility of improvement or short-term results. Second, when the team member is let go, they will:

- Be surprised and likely share with others that being fired was “out of the blue.” This will sow fear in other team members—especially the mid and higher performing type A folks.
- Be resentful and less likely to participate in a smooth transition, pass the baton to someone new, or exit smoothly.
- More likely to sue the company for wrongful termination, even if the lawsuit has no teeth.

Create Context and Objectives: As always, be soft on the person, hard on the problem. The ideal context is to be committed to their success, regardless of your level of pessimism around whether they will succeed or not.

Understand each other’s Worlds: Start with your concerns about their role performance—be straightforward and don’t soft-punch. You can share the negative impact that is happening, but don’t make it personal. Then, stop talking and listen. Spend a lot of time understanding their world, their challenges and complaints. Even if what they are sharing sounds like excuses, don’t roll your eyes out of frustration, instead get curious about the world as THEY see it. Understanding their concerns does not equate with agreement. And be sure to own any role you’ve had in their challenges, though that might sound scary or antithetical to what you are trying to accomplish. Remember, the goal here is ultimately to brainstorm solutions and take next steps that could work. Right now, you are collecting all the information to make that happen.

Brainstorm Options: Of course, you are brainstorming how they can remove obstacles and meet their goals. You might also discuss options for what happens if they don’t. Most people will assume that a role change is holistically negative and will harm their career, but that may not be the case. For example, some amazing individual contributors simply aren’t good managers and don’t enjoy being a manager. Often, we just have to find the role that they love where they can shine—whether that’s on our team or somewhere else. When mid- and high-performers are failing, they know it, and they aren’t enjoying it, so there may be more alignment in this conversation than you might otherwise expect.

End with Commitments: It’s important to be clear about what the next steps are, how you and others will support them, and when you will meet again to discuss progress. No matter what, make sure you have the next conversation in the schedule to continue the conversation—you want to have a regular cadence of conversations to support them in their success and give them continual feedback. You want them to leave feeling clear about next steps, what they need to do to succeed, and a sense of your support and willingness to help however you can.

You have to remember that as long as they are on your team, you are responsible for their success. When people are failing, you need to step-in and help, not step-back and watch them fail so you can fire them. The conversation really is just the beginning of a partnership to get them succeeding, into the right role, or to leave the organization in a good way.

Best Practices for Conversation 4: Role Underperformance (or a formal PIP)

C REATE CONTEXT & OBJECTIVES

- Share your commitment to their success.
- Ask for a conversation to discuss what is not working, how to better support them, and to create a plan to move forward.

U NDERSTAND EACH OTHERS WORLD'S...THEIR WORLD FIRST

- Be objective and straight-forward about the results that are not being achieved or what's not working.
- Ask for them for their perspective and to share what happened, obstacles that they are facing, and how you can support them better. Listen and paraphrase.
- Appreciate the other person's view even if it's inaccurate.
- Take responsibility for any role you might have had in the outcome.
- Share the impact of the commitment or role not being fulfilled.
- Share your perspective on why things are not working. Be straightforward.

B RAINSTORM OPTIONS

- Address the specific situation and explore how you can support them. Discuss learnings and corrective actions to be taken.
- Discuss options for possible role changes or layering them with a more strategic or experienced executive. Is there another role that might be a better fit for this person? Or what aspects of their role do they love? Sometimes, there is more alignment around this than you might expect.

E ND WITH COMMITMENTS

- Decide and fully align on clear next steps. Agree to corrective actions and support structures to allow the person to bring their best.
- Ensure you schedule another meeting with specific milestones to be achieved by a specific time. A clear timeline is essential.
- Write an email together and send it to them to ensure clarity.
- Reconfirm your support for the other person and work as a team to succeed.
- Get into agreement around the consequences if they don't succeed.

Common Mistakes for Conversation 4: Role Underperformance (or a formal PIP)

C REATE CONTEXT & OBJECTIVES

- Waiting to give negative task-based feedback until things have gotten this bad.
- Avoiding or delaying the conversation.
- Not being clear about your dissatisfaction.
- Not having this conversation in a mood of support with hopes that things will get better.
- Not getting clear about the consequences if things don't improve.

U NDERSTAND EACH OTHERS WORLD'S...THEIR WORLD FIRST

- Not asking for their story.
- Not taking responsibility for your role.
- Softening your truth to avoid discomfort.

B RAINSTORM OPTIONS

- Not exploring options for how to support them and get them back on track.
- Not exploring options for other roles.

E ND WITH COMMITMENTS

- Lack of clarity of next steps and check-ins.
- Lack of a clear path to success and the timeline for it.
- Lack of sense of support and engagement.

Preparation Sheet for Conversation 4: Role Underperformance (or a formal PIP)

C REATE CONTEXT & OBJECTIVES

What happened—what are the facts, not my opinions/generalizations?

-

What are some good reasons why they didn't fulfill expectations? What could I have done better?

-

What additional support, clarity, prioritization, resources might they need to succeed?

-

What is the level of impact on me and consequences if this doesn't change? What's the timeline?

-

-

U NDERSTAND EACH OTHERS WORLD'S...THEIR WORLD FIRST

My Interests

What is my specific request—translate my complaint into a request?

-

-

Their Interests

What is their story and their obstacles?

-

-

What open-ended questions can I ask them to confirm or disprove my guesses?

-

-

B RAINSTORM OPTIONS

Brainstorm what we can both do differently moving forward:

-

-

Discuss options for milestones, check-ins, and support:

-

-

E ND WITH COMMITMENTS

Who is doing what by when? What are the commitments and the timeline?

-

-

Conversation 5: Letting them Go (or Changing their Role)

Letting someone go is never easy. The goal is to be both compassionate and clear.

First, make sure you understand the HR rules in your organization whether an HR leader or someone else needs to be present. Know their severance package and the next steps, e.g. they will get an email and a release document. Make sure you understand their severance package, including health insurance and other perks that are being lost, when they will lose email or slack, what happens to their computer, etc. Be prepared if they want to negotiate that package, e.g. keep the computer, so that you know what is available or how to handle the situation. Think about the questions they will ask and know the answers, e.g. be clear about references—will you support them moving forward?

Second, be sure you know what has been decided and what is open for discussion. Be ready to discuss how and when they will depart—can they say goodbye to their team, how can they connect to their friends if their email was turned off, etc. Of course, a lot of this will be decided based on their reaction in the meeting, but know your options going in.

Finally, be patient in the conversation. People will react in many different ways. Be ready to “hold space” if they start crying or get upset. The only time you should raise your voice, hold a boundary, or escalate the conversation, is if there is a physical or verbal attack, in which case you need to know how to handle it. That’s why some HR policies want another person in the room.

It’s OK to bring heart and compassion. They are losing their job. However, this is NOT a time to give feedback or share more details about what wasn’t working. Any negative feedback that you give them in this conversation will be remembered and mulled over many times, so it’s best not to deliver negative feedback.

You want to preserve their dignity and help them leave in a good way. You should share the news in private and in a way that they have time to process. It also means that you usually can’t tell other people on your team why you let that person go, which is hard. It’s one of the places that you simply can’t be fully transparent as a manager.

In terms of timing, I think it’s best to let someone go early and have their last day be early in the week—Monday or Tuesday mornings. It gives them a few work days to think about what they will do next and start making phone calls, rather than brooding over the weekend when business calls are harder to make. It also allows the rest of the team to adjust and normalize.

If someone is on a vacation or going on a vacation, I think it’s best to deliver the news before they go or while they are away. It’s never a good time, but doing it right when they come back can sometimes cause more harm, e.g. I would have stayed, there was another job offer that was made to me, my wife and I decided to get pregnant, etc.

For the conversation, be compassionate and be clear.

Create Context and Objectives: Bring your humanity and be real, but also be clear. Let them know what has been decided and what is still to be decided. The rest of the conversation is about understanding their reaction and then brainstorming how they depart and the next steps.

Understand each other's Worlds: They might have a lot of emotional reactions. It's best to listen and to bring empathy. There is no reason to offer disagreement, argue with what they are saying, or give more feedback. They will renumerate on everything you say, so it's best to say as little as possible about why they are being let go, and focus more on next steps.

Brainstorm Options: Discuss what is still to be decided. Executives who respond professionally generally are included in the discussion of how they will announce their departure to the team. Explore options for how to make the transition smoothly, how the departure email/speech will be reviewed, etc.

End with Commitments: Be clear on next steps, but if they are transitioning slowly, schedule a follow up meeting for the next day to check-in. Appreciate how the person is handling this and let them know what other people will learn so that you can be aligned in your message.

The first time you let someone go is the hardest. Over time, you'll be more comfortable having a very uncomfortable conversation.

Best Practices for Conversation 5: Letting them Go (or Changing their Role)

C REATE CONTEXT & OBJECTIVES

- Ideally have this conversation in the morning early in the week, e.g. Tuesday at 9:00 or 10:00. It gives everyone more time to reset and adjust to the new reality.
- Share any important context or emotions, e.g. “I consider you a friend and this is a difficult conversation.”
- Name the elephant. “John, I am asking for your resignation, want to discuss why, and talk about how to part ways in a way that works for both of us.”
- Clarify that the decision has been made and own the decision if it is yours.
- Outline what is still to be decided, e.g. the transition, etc. Prepare your offer.

U NDERSTAND EACH OTHERS WORLD’S...THEIR WORLD FIRST

- You can appreciate them for their contributions if it’s authentic.
- Take responsibility for your role, e.g. insufficient resources.
- Ask them if there is anything that they want to share with you.
- Listen to and appreciate their view even if it’s inaccurate.
- The general rule of thumb is to be honest about why you are letting them go, but not to share their deficiencies (please check with HR). This is not a good time to give them advice.

B RAINSTORM OPTIONS

- Identify what is still to be decided, e.g. severance, timing, etc.
- Explore options to make the transition smooth.
- If you already hired someone to replace them, tell them (they are going to find out anyway).

E ND WITH COMMITMENTS

- Decide and fully align on clear next steps.
- Give them a timeline to sign a severance agreement.
- If they are transitioning slowly, schedule a follow up meeting for the next day to check-in. Otherwise ask them to be out of the office by a specific time the same day--2 hours max.
- Apologize for company security policy, e.g. logins, door pass, etc.
- Appreciate how the person is handling this. Discuss what they will tell other people.

Common Mistakes for Conversation 5: Letting them Go (or Changing their Role)

C REATE CONTEXT & OBJECTIVES

- Not getting clear up front with the fact the decision has already been made.
- Not being clear about whether you'd like this person to transition out slowly or depart immediately.
- Not having a communication plan in place to update the rest of the team.
- Having the conversation at the wrong time or in the wrong place.
- Waiting until someone returns from vacation rather than just telling them.

U NDERSTAND EACH OTHERS WORLD'S...THEIR WORLD FIRST

- Not taking responsibility for any role you may have had in their failure.
- Not empathizing with their emotional response even if you disagree with their perspective.
- Thinking that they will be logical and be able to hear your reasoning.
- Not being able to tolerate their anger or upset.
- Thinking you already said it and they heard everything you said. They'll likely remember only the bad comments.

B RAINSTORM OPTIONS

- Not be willing to explore options for how to make this departure easier for them, e.g. letting them announce it, letting them resign, etc.

E ND WITH COMMITMENTS

- Not letting them know you support them on the personal level even if their role is ending.
- Not being clear about next steps, logins not working, etc.

Preparation Sheet for Conversation 5: Letting them Go (or Changing their Role)

C REATE CONTEXT & OBJECTIVES

What will I say to open the conversation?

-

What's the package that I am offering them?

-

U NDERSTANDING EACH OTHERS WORLD'S...THEIR WORLD FIRST

Your Interests

What are my interests and concerns for how they depart?

-

-

Their Interests and Perspective

What is their story about being let go and my role in this?

-

-

What can I say to empathize with their perspective even if I don't agree?

-

-

What are their interests and concerns for how they depart or transition?

-

-

B RAINSTORM OPTIONS

What are the options for how to handle the transition, severance, announcement, etc.?

-

-

E ND WITH COMMITMENTS

Who is doing what by when? (Communication, departure, etc.)

-

-

Conversation 5B: Layering a Team Member

Layering someone is a tricky conversation—you want them to be a part of onboarding their new manager and be motivated to work under them. For this to work, your team member needs to believe that the new leader will be able to do a better job AND teach them how to do it, so ultimately the new role will be a benefit to their long-term career success. From what I've seen, the expectation is that they will work under the new leader for a period of time and then find a new role in the company or leave the company to get the role they had.

It's important to discuss the future, how you will hire the new person, and how you will support their transition to another role in the future or give references externally if they choose to leave.

In the end, if they don't handle the transition well, they'll be asked to leave the company, so setting it up for success is important.

It's always hard to know when to tell someone that they are going to be layered.

- Telling them early is ideal because they can help with the hiring process, but the risk is that they will be demotivated and might quit.
- Telling them while the hiring process is underway has risks as well because they will feel that you moved behind their back without telling them. What's worse is if they will find out about the search while it's underway and feel totally betrayed.
- Telling them after someone is hired is problematic because they had no input into who is being hired and so often will feel less excited to work with and less likely to support a successful transition. If you do decide to keep things hidden, perhaps include them when you're down to two choices so that they have some input.

You have to decide when the best time is to tell them based on your knowledge and relationship.

Create Context and Objectives: The most important outcome of this conversation is that they feel that their career is safe. You want to be authentic, compassionate, and clear. It's best to tell them what you've decided within the first few sentences and then ask if now is a good time to discuss their career and next steps. Know the severance package that is available to them if they do decide to leave.

Understand each other's Worlds: It's OK to offer appreciation for their role and what they've done, and to explain fully how you've arrived at this decision. Transparency is generally the best approach. However, it's much more important for you to understand their career ambitions, how they see their career path, what THEY think they need to learn, etc. Paraphrase what you hear so that they feel like you have their career interests top of mind.

Brainstorm Options: There are several conversations that happen here. Their future role, the hiring plan, the transition plan, how this will be communicated and when, their future career and exit, title and compensation changes, etc. Layering someone is complex and takes time. Make sure you have several meetings scheduled to cover all the fine details so that your team member can either be fully aligned in supporting a new hire or start looking for a new role and leave with dignity.

End with Commitments: Appreciate how the person is handling the conversation and who they are being in the process. There will be a lot of loose ends, so make a list of things to be decided and schedule a follow up meeting for the next day to check-in.

Layering someone is complex. Don't layer someone because you feel sorry for them or don't want them to quit. Layer them because you like working with them and really want them to take the new job.

Best Practices for Conversation 5B: Layering a Team Member

C REATE CONTEXT & OBJECTIVES

- Ideally have this conversation in the morning early in the week. It gives them time to adjust to the new reality without stewing over the weekend
- Share any important context, e.g. “I consider you a friend and this is a difficult conversation.”
- Name the elephant. “John, I have decided to hire someone as Chief People Officer. I’d like you to stay as Head of People Operations and be part of the interview process. I’m hoping we can find someone that you will enjoy working with and will support your career ambitions.”
- The ideal is to include them in the recruiting process and pre-negotiate their new title and role. If they are a flight risk, this may not be possible. Apologize if you couldn’t include them.
- Clarify that the decision has been made, where you are in the recruiting process, what you are offering them, and what is still to be decided, e.g. the transition, title, etc.

U NDERSTAND EACH OTHERS WORLD’S...THEIR WORLD FIRST

- You can appreciate them for their contributions if it’s authentic and clarify that you want them to stay.
- Let them know that you are committed to their success, willing to invest in their development and their career, and want to make the transition smooth for them in a way that protects their dignity.
- Ask them if there is anything that they want to share with you. Listen to and appreciate their view even if it’s inaccurate.

B RAINSTORM OPTIONS

Brainstorm options for:

- Their role
- The recruiting process
- Communications, e.g. how the leadership team and their team will be informed, how to make the transition smooth, preserve their dignity, etc.

E ND WITH COMMITMENTS

Appreciate how the person is handling the conversation.

- Decide and fully align on clear next steps.
- Schedule a follow up meeting for the next day to check-in. In that meeting, ask them to inform you if/when they are going to look for a new job elsewhere.

Common Mistakes for Conversation 5B: Layering a Team Member

C REATE CONTEXT & OBJECTIVES

Breaking their trust by not letting them know earlier or not including them in the recruiting process.

- Telling too many execs before you tell them. You don't want them to find out from other people that you are layering them.
- Not being clear up front that the decision has already been made and where you are in the recruiting process.
- Not knowing the specifics of what you can offer them, e.g. title, compensation, role, incentives, role in recruiting, etc.

U NDERSTAND EACH OTHERS WORLD'S...THEIR WORLD FIRST

- Not taking responsibility for any role you may have had in their failure.
- Not empathizing with their emotional response even if you disagree with their perspective, e.g. you didn't give them enough time to prove themselves.
- Thinking that they will be logical and be able to hear your reasoning.
- Not being able to be compassionate, their anger or upset.

B RAINSTORM OPTIONS

- Underestimating the importance to them of next steps and retaining their dignity: title, participation in meetings, or how the team will learn (communications).

E ND WITH COMMITMENTS

- Not letting them know you support them on the personal level even if their role is ending.
- Not being clear about next steps and checking in.

Preparation Sheet for Conversation 5B: Layering a Team Member

C REATE CONTEXT & OBJECTIVES

What will I say to start the conversation? What was decided already and what is this conversation about?

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-
-

U NDERSTAND EACH OTHERS WORLD'S...THEIR WORLD FIRST

My Interests

What are my interests and concerns for the recruiting process, their role, etc.

-
-
-

Their Interests

What will they need to feel good about staying?

-
-
-
-

What open-ended questions can I ask them to confirm or disprove my guesses?

-
-
-

B RAINSTORM OPTIONS

What are the options in multiple domains?

-
-
-

E ND WITH COMMITMENTS

Who is doing what by when? (Communication, departure, etc.)

-
-

Part 3: Learning From Each Conversation

Post-Conversation Self-Assessment

CREATED CONTEXT & OBJECTIVES

The What

- ☐ I created and shared a vision of success that they bought into.
- ☐ I set a forward-looking, positive tone.
- ☐ The elephant was named (the problem, the complaint, the request).
- ☐ It was clear what was being discussed or decided (and what was off the table).

The Relationship

- ☐ The conversation established us as friends not foes--they know I am a support for them.
- ☐ They felt appreciated by me.

The How

- ☐ We agreed on topics, agenda, and timing for the conversation.
- ☐ We identified who else needs to be consulted before a decision can be made.

UNDERSTOOD EACH OTHER'S WORLDS...THEIRS FIRST

Their World

- ☐ I understood their world and their point of view even if it was inaccurate (interests, cares, feelings, priorities, challenges, or concerns).
- ☐ I demonstrated understanding through paraphrasing.
- ☐ For cleanups, I identified what I did to contribute to the problem and took responsibility for any negative impact I had.

Your World

- ☐ I shared my world, point of view, and underlying interests and priorities.
- ☐ I owned my opinions as interpretation not as facts.
- ☐ I ask to be paraphrased if I was doubtful that they understood me. .

Shared Reality

- ☐ We now have a shared reality--we know where we agree, where we disagree, or what's still unknown.
- ☐ We identified common priorities and differences.

BRAINSTORMED OPTIONS

- ☐ We brainstormed options and did not debate or assess them while brainstorming.
- ☐ We came up with several options and did not just jump into the first solution that came up.
- ☐ We let the ideal path be generated through the brainstorm.
- ☐ For cleanups, we also discussed the relationship and how to ensure any misunderstanding doesn't happen again.

ENDED WITH COMMITMENTS

- ☐ We gained clear commitment on next steps (who is doing what by when).
- ☐ We left the meeting in a way that WE had a shared commitment.
- ☐ For cleanups, we agreed to specific actions to deal with similar breakdowns in the future.
- ☐ I reconfirmed my support for the other person.

Part 4: Ongoing Accountability - Managing Right

TBD

Part 5: An example

An example: Jenna is a perfectionist. She takes pride in getting things right, thinking through every little detail, and ensuring everyone plays their part. However, she can be rigid, controlling and insistent. Her team members put up with her because she is usually right and generally gets the job done, but they also roll their eyes. She is respected but not liked.

You assigned her a big project to change how clients are invoiced, which requires cross-functional agreement from a number of people, including a few higher-level execs. She has been somewhat effective in this first stage of the project, but also rubbed some people the wrong way.

Here's how the first conversation went.

“Bad Do”

Manager: Jenna, I'd like to give you some feedback on the project.

Jenna: Great. I feel like I've gotten a lot accomplished and overcame some big obstacles. We figured a LOT out in the last week.

Manager: Yes, you did, but you also have made a few people quite upset. I've had to defend you and the project a few times this week and I'm concerned the CS team will be very resistant to the project. The VP of CS is going along with things for now, but you have to do a better job negotiating and creating stakeholder alignment.

Jenna: Look, the CS group has to tow their line too. They are always looking to cut corners and then the accounting group doesn't know how to proceed. I tried to get their input, but they just didn't cooperate, so I ultimately just told them what to do.

Manager: Well, look, just try not to make so many waves, OK. Try to collaborate more effectively.

“Good Do”

Manager: Jenna, I'd like to give you some feedback on the project.

Jenna: Great. I feel like I've gotten a lot accomplished and overcame some big obstacles. We figured a LOT out in the last week.

Manager: I fully agree. You have accomplished a lot. I'd like to share what I see as going well and some things I'd like to be shifted. Let me give you the list and then we can talk through each item and what I can do to support you. OK?

Jenna: Ok, it feels like a lot, but yes.

Manager: Ok, here's the list. I think you're doing a great job overall, and we need to figure out how to manage the interactions with other groups. Here's what I've seen so far:

+ (Plusses)	(Deltas)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The plan, timeline and the resources needed are very detailed and really well considered. It's great work.• The kickoff presentation you gave to the execs was amazing. You were strategic, concise, and came off as very knowledgeable. The graphics too were top-notch.• From your interviews, the way you captured and included quotes about why some people are excited felt compelling. I've heard several executives repeat some of the quotes.• I really like how you followed up with the executive summary and specific requests for each manager.• I didn't realize you were so good at creating presentations and would love to talk about how others can learn from this.• I appreciated how you picked up this task in the midst of a busy cycle and made efforts to include other managers in how this was going to be presented.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Both the VP of Customer Service and the VP of Marketing reached out to me and said that you were asking for a lot from their teams. Several team members complained that you were telling them how to do their jobs, and the VPs got a lot of questions from their team that they couldn't answer and they felt caught off-guard.• Can you do more to understand the impact on other teams and how you can get their buy-in? How can I help?• Also instead of making requests directly to the manager, let's work together to get the VPs buy-in so that they understand what is going.• I know things are going well. Do you have backup plans if things don't go as planned? I'd like to make sure we have thought it through in advance, especially if engineering is delayed. This is becoming a bigger project than either of us expected so I want to make sure it can move forward effectively.• I thought you were going to give me a draft communication plan last week. I felt caught off-guard when the VPs reached out to me. I didn't even know you were already starting the engagement. Can you get caught up and keep me informed of what's happening so I can support you more effectively?

Jenna: Wow, that doesn't make me look very good. I mean, there are a lot more negatives than positives.

Manager: I don't think anyone realized how big of a project this was or the level of impact it was going to have on CS or Marketing. I could have done a better job managing expectations, and I think you could have brought things to my attention sooner. You made a solid plan, you got good leadership buy-in, and now we just need to figure out some of the change-management aspects.

Jenna: Ok. I feel like I'm getting reprimanded here.

Manager: I'm trying to give you balanced feedback. There are some things you did really, really well, and there are some things that didn't go so well. That's it. You have my full support. Let's brainstorm...

CONVERSATION 2 WITH JENNA