How to Handle Candid Conversations

Winning by Design

> ## *"I've been noticing some pushback.*
> ## *What would you like to change?"*

Coaching with positive reinforcement is powerful in group settings and during 1:1s, but there will be times when you need to have direct conversations about negative circumstances.

Confrontation has an emotional component; it's never easy giving someone bad news or constructive feedback about something that may not be taken well. Your job as a leader is to help your team to be successful. If someone is interfering with personal targets or their behavior is affecting others, it's best to confront the situation quickly to minimize collateral damage.

▶ Intent Matters More Than Execution

Giving feedback is about helping the other person and achieving coaching moments that will develop them professionally. Before you start the conversation, determine your desired outcome and work out the best strategy to achieve that.

Behavior psychologists have found that any time you call someone out directly for doing something wrong, it is human behavior to become defensive. When this happens, learning or improvement is nearly impossible. Therefore, if you're giving feedback in hopes of seeing behavior change, adjust your strategy based on a few common scenarios.

Scenario 1 **Person is open to feedback and values your advice.**

- In this scenario, help set the context. Ask questions that will help them understand and incorporate the feedback you're giving them to improve.

Scenario 2   **Person is typically open to feedback, but other parts of their work/life are causing distractions.**

- Before you deliver your feedback, ask or assess whether they are in the right mindset to receive it. Your best intentions will backfire if you deliver the right message at the wrong time.

- If they are not able to digest your feedback, find a better time instead of forcing it when it's not convenient.

Scenario 3   **Person is not open to feedback because they do not value your advice or they believe they are more of an expert than you.**

- Word choice and semantics are critical. If you attempt to deliver feedback through questions, the person will interpret this as patronizing as they "know what you're doing."

- Have a casual conversation, instead of coaching through questions.

- Minimize any aggressive or confrontational word choices:

  - "How can I help?" can imply that you're able to help them in a way they can't help themselves. This signals that you have more power/skills/expertise, which can lead to a negative reaction.

  - "I'm proud of you" has a parental connotation, potentially making the person you're speaking with feel lesser or lower than you. Instead try "I'm impressed by you."

You have the ability to create an operating environment in which your team members can be honest and constructive with one another. Give them the tools to have candid conversations about opportunities to improve their performance.

How to Structure a Confrontational Conversation

1 **Ask if the circumstances on which you're delivering feedback are unusual or came about due to factors outside of the person's control.** Their answer could change your recommendation.

    A. If circumstances were unusual but their intent was correct, give them a pass.

    B. If circumstances were not unusual and they deliberately behaved in a way that you know is likely to be repeated if not corrected, proceed to Step 2.

2 **Ask them to verify what process is expected for this situation.**

    A. Are they aware of what good looks like? If not, teach them. This is simply a knowledge gap — no need to escalate to confrontation.

    B. If they know what was expected but intentionally chose to behave a different way, this is likely a skill gap. Proceed to Step 3:

3 **Explain your perspective.** "This is how I interpret the situation… Can you see it from my perspective?" At this stage, they will realize you're holding them accountable to behave in a certain way and that your expectations were not met.

4 **Offer the options you see.** Give them the power to take the right steps to fix or alter their behavior. Do not attack them or their character, and do not force them to do this exactly the way you want them to. For example:

Option 1: What correction can they make to implement the right process?

Option 2: Create a performance improvement plan together to clearly define expectations.

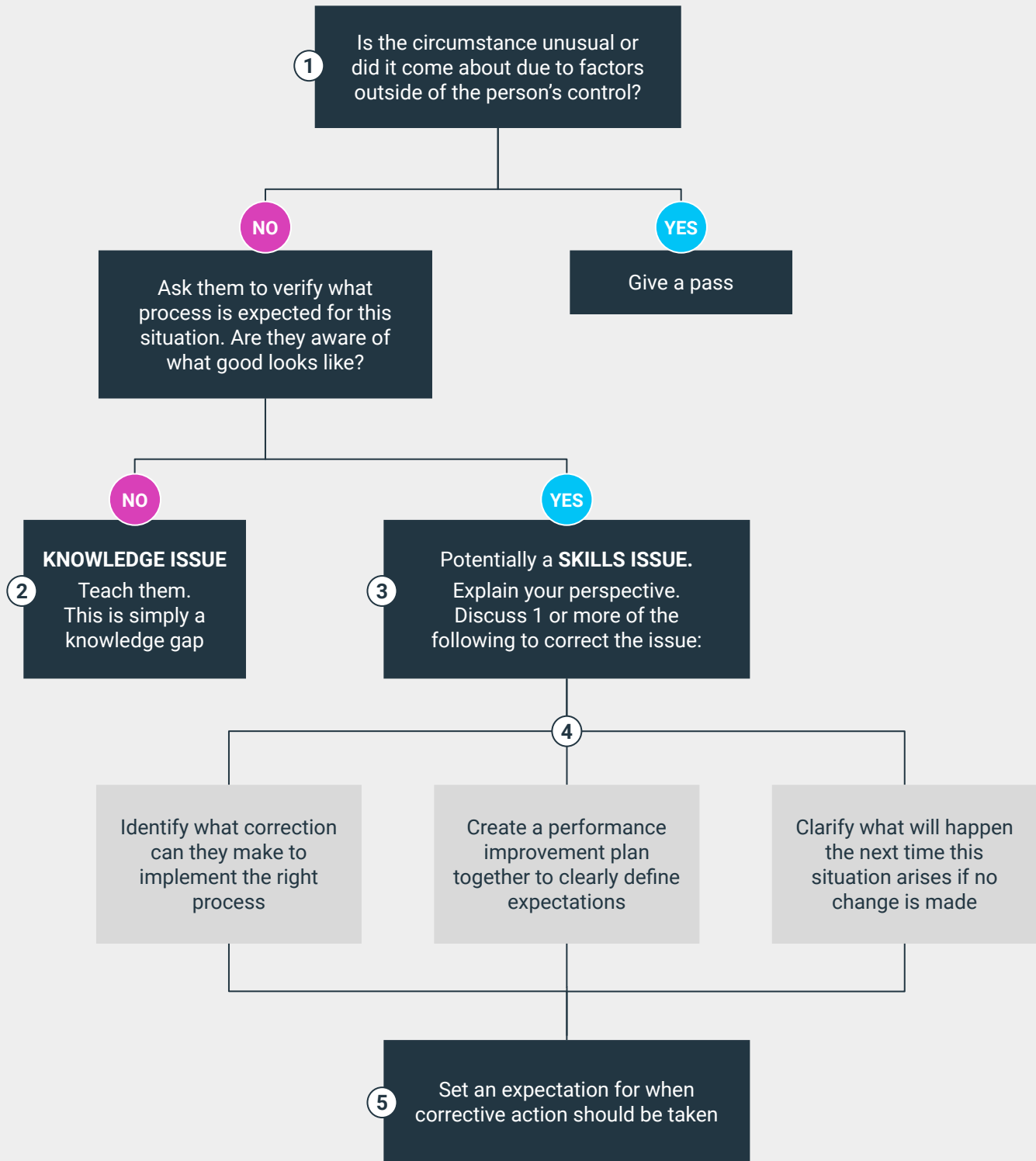**Option 3:** What will happen the next time this situation arises if no change is made?

Figure 1. Structure of a confrontational conversation

5 **Create accountability:**

    A. Set a date by which you expect them to take corrective action. Be clear on how you will hold them accountable to their word. This may be immediate, or it may be ad hoc if the situation happens in an unpredictable time frame.

    B. Be fair but not threatening.

Individuals are rarely able to see the opportunities to improve their own performance, which makes the role of the coach so important. When possible, have video recordings of their behavior to review together as you coach. This is the most powerful way to avoid the Dunning-Kruger Effect (when people with low ability to do a task overestimate their own ability).

As an independent observer and coach who knows the goals your team is trying to achieve and how they're trying to get there, you are in the best position to identify the behavior changes required to achieve high performance.

Candid Conversations Are...

Focused on achieving the rep's "WHY."	Not an opportunity to attack.	Not urgent, but important.
If your intention is truly to help your reps achieve their personal and professional goals, then all feedback is constructive and should not be difficult.	By using the blueprints as an agreed-upon way to perform, you enable reps and their peers to provide objective feedback without applying personal judgment, whether that be in 1:1, 1:few, or 1:many coaching scenarios.	Candid conversations are often overlooked because more urgent issues come up — or because confrontation may have negative consequences. Have them anyway.

Help Your Team Receive Feedback

A strong professional relationship is based on consistency and accountability.

To help your team receive constructive feedback, you need to build a strong professional relationship based on consistency and accountability:

- **Consistency** starts by making regular meetings with your team a priority — don't reschedule your 1:1s and team meetings. You need to ensure consistent intent and stay continually focused on the collective as well as each individual rep's 'why'.

- **Accountability** isn't just about ensuring your team is hitting their REKS goals. It begins with leading by example and completing any actions from your 1:1s and team meetings in a timely manner. Be the champion of the group's agreed-upon coaching principles.

When consistency and accountability are implemented hand-in-hand, they build trust within your team and create an environment of positive reinforcement.

Tools For Providing Feedback

Giving feedback doesn't come easy for many people, but it's the most important conversational tool for creating the change required to achieve your performance goals. Here are a few ways to make sure your feedback is impactful:

Tool 1 **Align your feedback with their motivations.**

When providing candid feedback, it's important to ensure you have the right motives for providing the feedback.

1. Is your aim to improve the situation and enable them to succeed?

2. Is the behavior you're asking them to reflect on improving or impeding their goals?

Tool 2 **Ensure the feedback is targeted.**

Constructive feedback should be:

- **Objective** — Based on the application of a skill to the agreed-upon framework or based on the results/effort applied to the agreed-upon goals

- **Actionable** — Limit the amount of feedback you provide so that it's actionable

- **Timely** — Don't let time distort everyone's memory; provide feedback at the first available moment

- **Specific** — Don't be vague; use specific customer calls, emails, and employee engagements

Tool 3 **Consider delivering your feedback through questions.**

By asking questions instead of leading with statements, you stimulate critical thinking and provide context to the candid conversation. For example:

Observation	Question
Someone is pitching instead of diagnosing.	*What is the impact of solving the customer's pain points? How did the customer respond when you said...*
The rep is doing all of the talking during a customer meeting.	*What do you think the customer was thinking at this point of the conversation? What other ways could you deliver that message?*

Tool 4 **Help them take action.**

This is particularly pertinent for manager-led coaching conversations.
Ask the person receiving the feedback:

- What are you willing to commit to doing?

- What support do you need from me and the team?

When building a high-performance coaching culture, you and your team must continually strive to improve your performance and ultimately your results, so candid conversations are inevitable. This framework and these tools will give you the confidence to have the candid conversations required to build a strong coaching culture.

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Videos available on
the WbD YouTube Channel

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Additional open source
templates can be accessed at
www.thescienceofrevenue.com