

Giving Feedback That Lands

A Conversation Guide for Managers

"Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind."

— Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead*

Most managers avoid feedback conversations—or muddle through them—because they confuse clarity with cruelty. The opposite is true. When you're vague to spare someone's feelings, you deny them the chance to improve. When you're clear, you respect them enough to tell the truth.

This guide offers a simple framework: four questions that structure your feedback so it lands.

A note on rehearsal

Some managers resist scripting because it feels inauthentic. When the stakes are high, preparation is kindness. Write it down. Say it out loud. Deliver it with confidence.



WHEN?

Anchor to a specific moment



WHAT?

Describe the observable behavior



SO WHAT?

Name the impact



NOW WHAT?

Explore the path forward together

The first three questions (When? What? So what?) should be written down and rehearsed. The goal isn't to sound spontaneous—it's to be understood. **The fourth question** (Now what?) is where the real conversation happens.

This is a foundational skill

It doesn't matter whether you're a new manager or a seasoned executive—the ability to give clear, direct, actionable feedback is something most of us never master. Senior leaders are often no better at this than first-time managers. The difference is practice and intention.

What's in this guide

- **Before** — Write your script
- **During** — Deliver, then explore
- **After** — Follow through
- **Appreciative Feedback** — When it's positive
- **Prep Worksheet** — Fill in before any conversation



The first three questions are your script. Write them out completely. Don't wing this part.

WHEN?

Anchor to a specific moment

- Be precise about time and place
- "Yesterday in the team meeting" not "lately"
- Specificity prevents defensiveness

WHAT?

Describe observable behavior

- Stick to what a camera would capture
- Behavior, not character
- Avoid "always" and "never"

SO WHAT?

Name the impact

- Why it matters—to you, team, or client
- Practical or relational impact
- Be honest about your reaction

WHEN — EXAMPLE

"In yesterday's client call, when Sarah asked about the timeline..."

WHAT — EXAMPLE

"...you said we'd deliver by March 1st without checking with the team first."

SO WHAT — EXAMPLE

"Now the team is scrambling to meet a deadline they didn't agree to."

Before you meet

Prepare your script

- Write out When/What/So what completely
- Read it aloud—does it sound accusatory? Adjust.
- Use the worksheet on page 6

Set up the conversation

- Anticipate their perspective—don't be blindsided
- Schedule it. Don't ambush.
- "I'd like to talk about the client call—do you have 20 minutes?"



Part 1: Deliver your script

- It's okay to read from your notes. Seriously.
- Keep it short—under two minutes for When/What/So what.
- Then stop. Let them respond.

NOW WHAT?

This question invites them into problem-solving. The goal is a shared commitment, not a mandate.

Part 2: Shift to "Now what?"

This is where the conversation opens up. Your job now is to listen, not lecture.

"What's your perspective on this?"

"What was going on for you in that moment?"

"How do you want to handle this going forward?"

"What would help you do this differently?"

"What support do you need from me?"

When they push back

Good feedback conversations include disagreement. If they see it differently, that's not a failure—it's the conversation working.

Stay curious, not defensive

Your first instinct may be to defend. Resist it.

"Tell me more." · "Help me understand." · "What am I missing?"

Separate intent from impact

Acknowledge what they meant, then hold the line on impact.

"I hear that wasn't your intention. Here's why it still landed..."

Name the disagreement

If you still see it differently, say so directly.

"We see this differently. Here's why it still matters to me..."

Watch for deflection

Changing subject, minimizing, blaming others. Redirect.

"I want to stay focused on what we can do differently."

♥ If emotions run high

Tears, frustration, or anger don't mean the conversation failed—they mean it matters. Pause if needed: "Let's take a minute." Offer to reconvene: "Would it help to pick this up tomorrow?" The goal isn't to avoid emotion—it's to move through it together.



✔ Before you wrap up

- What will they do differently?
- What will you do to support them?
- When will you check in?

Don't leave the conversation without a clear, mutual commitment. If you can't reach one, name that: "What would need to be true for you to commit to this?"

Document the agreement

Within 24 hours, send a brief note summarizing what you discussed and what you both committed to. This isn't about creating a paper trail—it's about ensuring you heard each other correctly.

Example follow-up message

"Thanks for the conversation today. To recap: you're going to check with the team before committing to client timelines, and I'm going to make sure you have visibility into capacity. Let's touch base in our 1:1 next week."

Follow up

- Check in at the agreed time. Don't let it drift.
- If you see improvement, name it. (See: Appreciative Feedback)
- If the pattern continues, address it again—sooner, not later.

🕒 Remember

Feedback isn't a one-time event. It's an ongoing conversation. The goal isn't to "fix" someone in a single meeting—it's to build a relationship where honest, helpful feedback flows in both directions.



Appreciative feedback deserves the same rigor as developmental feedback. Vague praise ("Great job!") is forgettable. Specific recognition builds confidence and reinforces the behaviors you want to see more of.

Use the same framework—with one addition.

Why "What it says about you" matters

This is the difference between reinforcing a *behavior* and reinforcing a person's sense of *themselves*. You're telling them who they are at their best.

WHEN? Specific moment	WHAT? Observable behavior	SO WHAT? Positive impact	+ WHAT IT SAYS ABOUT YOU The quality or character this reflects
---------------------------------	-------------------------------------	------------------------------------	---

Side by side: The difference one step makes

Without the final step

"In the client meeting yesterday, you noticed Priya was getting talked over and created space for her to share her idea. That changed the direction of the whole conversation—the client loved her suggestion."

With "What it says about you"

*"In the client meeting yesterday, you noticed Priya was getting talked over and created space for her to share her idea. That changed the direction of the whole conversation—the client loved her suggestion. **That's the kind of awareness and generosity that makes you such a strong team player. People trust you to look out for them.**"*

Delivering appreciative feedback

Before

- Still write it down—specific recognition is worth preparing
- Identify the quality you're naming, not just the action

During

- Deliver it close to the moment—don't save it for a review
- The "Now what?" is optional. Sometimes: "I noticed. Thank you."



Who is this conversation with?

What type of feedback?

Developmental Appreciative

Your Script

WHEN? <i>Specific time and place</i>	WHAT? <i>Observable behavior</i>	SO WHAT? <i>Impact</i>

WHAT IT SAYS ABOUT YOU (Appreciative feedback only)

Prepare for the Conversation

What might they say? What's their perspective?

What outcome do you want?

After the Conversation

What did you agree to? · Your commitment to support them? · When will you follow up?



These books and resources shaped the thinking behind this guide. Each offers practical frameworks for navigating difficult conversations with clarity and care.

Books

Dare to Lead

Brené Brown (2018) · Random House

The source of "Clear is kind." Brown's research on vulnerability and courage provides the emotional foundation for honest feedback.

Difficult Conversations

Stone, Patton & Heen (2010) · Penguin

The Harvard Negotiation Project's framework for navigating emotionally charged conversations. Essential reading on intent vs. impact.

Crucial Conversations

Patterson, Grenny, McMillan & Switzler (2012) · McGraw-Hill

Tools for talking when stakes are high. Particularly useful on creating psychological safety in tense moments.

Radical Candor

Kim Scott (2017) · St. Martin's Press

Scott's framework for "caring personally while challenging directly." Excellent on the manager's role in creating a feedback culture.

Thanks for the Feedback

Stone & Heen (2014) · Penguin

The receiving end of feedback. Helps you understand why feedback is hard to hear—and how to coach others to receive it better.

Online Resources

Feedback That Works

Center for Creative Leadership · ccl.org

CCL's research-backed approach to the SBI (Situation-Behavior-Impact) model that influenced this guide's framework.