

Kristin Scroggin,
genWHY Communications



CLARITY IS KINDNESS

**HOW GREAT LEADERS SET
EXPECTATIONS, GIVE FEEDBACK,
AND BUILD TRUST**



Field
Guide
002

2026

DEVELOP. EMPOWER. RETAIN.

How Great Leaders Set Expectations, Give Feedback, and Build Trust

Core Idea

Leadership has confused kindness with comfort. The kindest leaders are not the ones who avoid difficult conversations. They are the ones who make expectations clear, give feedback while improvement is still possible, and hold people to consistent standards.

- Confusion is not kind.
- Avoidance is not kind.
- Lowering the bar is not kind.
- Leaving people wondering where they stand is not kind.
- **Clarity is kindness.**

Why This Matters for Millennials and Gen Z

Millennials and Gen Z were educated in environments shaped by frequent feedback, rubrics, collaboration, coaching, revision, formative assessment, and opportunities to improve before a final grade. Many learned to expect leaders to tell them where they stand before it is too late to change the outcome.

- Silence may not feel like approval. It may feel like leadership is not paying attention.
- Frequent feedback is not automatically entitlement. It can be a learned expectation created by years of continuous coaching.
- Do not wait for the annual review to address something that could have been corrected months earlier.

The Three Leadership Moves

1. Set Clear Expectations

- People cannot meet expectations they do not know exist.
- Define success before the work begins, not after you are disappointed.
- Explain what needs to be done, why it matters, when it is due, what quality looks like, and what support is available.
- Check for understanding. Do not assume that saying it once means it was understood.
- **Clarity before the work reduces conflict after the work.**

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2. Coach in Real Time

Coaching means correction. If no one is correcting, redirecting, or helping an employee improve, then no one is truly coaching.

- Managing checks off tasks.
- Managing may mean doing the work yourself just to get it finished.
- Leadership develops the person so the work can be done well again.
- Managing asks, "Did it get done?"
- Leadership asks, "What did you learn, and what needs to change next time?"
- Correction is not punishment. Correction is investment.
- We coach the people we believe can improve.

The five expectation questions BEFORE the work begins:

- 1 What does "done" look like?
2. What STANDARD matters most?
3. Who owns the decision?
4. When should we check in?
5. What happens if we get stuck?

STOP ASKING "Does that make sense?"

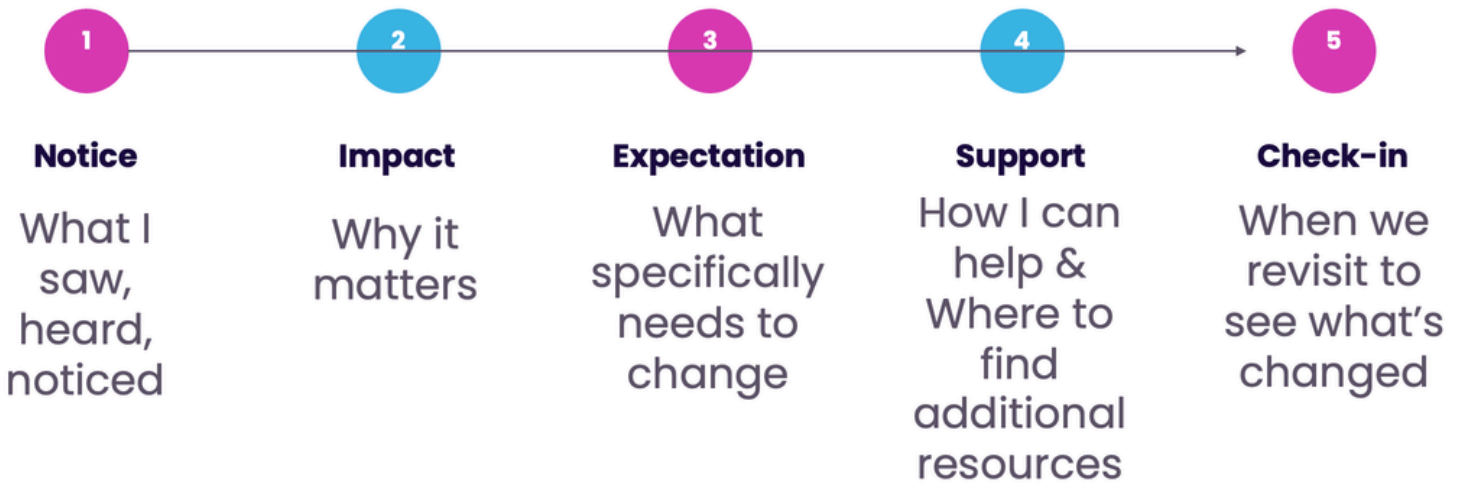
Instead ask:

- "Tell me what you are going to do first."
- "What does success look like from your point of view?"
- "Where do you think you may get stuck?"

Understanding is not confirmed because someone nodded

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Correction without a next step sounds like criticism.
Correction with a next step sounds like coaching.

3. Hold Standards Consistently

- Accountability does not destroy trust. Inconsistency destroys trust.
- A standard should not move because a conversation becomes uncomfortable.
- Someone may feel hurt, disappointed, embarrassed, or frustrated in the moment. That does not automatically mean the conversation was unkind.
- Kindness means delivering the truth with respect, support, and a path forward.
- Changing expectations or refusing to enforce them because you are uncomfortable with someone's reaction is not kindness. It is manipulation.
- It teaches people that emotional reactions can change expectations instead of performance changing outcomes.
- It also creates resentment among employees who are being held to the original standard.

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The Expectations and Support Matrix

High Expectations + High Support = Trust

High Expectations + Low Support = Pressure

Low Expectations + High Support = Comfort or Complacency

Low Expectations + Low Support = Neglect

- · Pressure without support can lead to anxiety, resentment, exhaustion, and burnout.
- · Support without expectations can become enabling.
- · Low expectations communicate that growth is not expected.

· **The goal is not to be the nicest leader.**

The goal is to lead in the trust quadrant: high expectations and high support.

What Clear Expectations Sound Like

- · “Here is the outcome we need.”
- · “Here is what success looks like.”
- · “Here is the deadline.”
- · “Here is what is non-negotiable.”
- · “Here is where you have flexibility.”
- · “Here is the support available to you.”
- · “Tell me what you heard so we can make sure we are aligned.”

A Simple Feedback Structure

- · State what you observed without exaggeration or judgment.
- · Explain why it matters to the work, team, customer, or outcome.
- · Restate the expectation clearly.
- · Ask what support, information, or resources are needed.
- · Agree on the next action and when you will follow up.

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Sample Feedback Script

"I want to talk about what happened because I want you to be successful here. The expectation was _____. What I observed was _____. The impact was _____. Going forward, the standard is _____. What support do you need to meet that expectation? Let's agree on the next step and when we will check back in."

When Feelings Are Hurt

- Acknowledge the emotion without abandoning the standard.
- Do not become cold, defensive, or dismissive.
- Do not apologize for having a reasonable expectation.
- Separate the person's value from the performance issue.
- Give the person time to process while remaining clear about what must change.
- You can care about how someone feels and still hold them accountable.

Kindness Versus Comfort

- Comfort says, "I do not want this conversation to feel difficult."
- Kindness says, "I care enough about you, the team, and the work to be honest."
- Comfort protects the leader from discomfort. Kindness gives the employee useful information and a fair opportunity to improve.

Questions for Leaders

- Have I clearly explained what success looks like?
- Did I communicate the expectation before the work began?
- Have I given feedback early enough for the person to improve?
- Am I providing enough support to match the standard I am enforcing?
- Am I holding everyone to the same standard?
- Have I lowered an expectation because I wanted to avoid an emotional reaction?
- Am I coaching the person, or am I simply checking tasks and fixing the work myself?
- Does the employee know exactly what needs to happen next?
- Leadership Reminder

The goal of accountability is not to catch people doing something wrong. It is to make success clear, repeatable, and achievable.