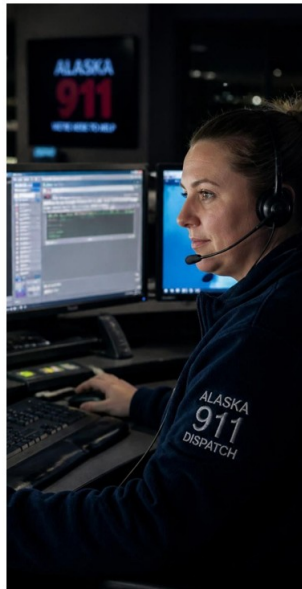


# THE FIELD GUIDE

## SHARING DIFFICULT FEEDBACK WITHOUT BREAKING TRUST OR CULTURE

Direct without being destructive.  
Kind without avoiding accountability.



PREPARE

SAY IT CLEARLY

FOLLOW THROUGH

**KRISTIN SCROGGIN**

genWHY.com | Practical tools for public-sector leaders

# Sharing Difficult Feedback Without Breaking Trust or Culture

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THE FIELD GUIDE | A practical reference for supervisors, managers, and public leaders

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Direct without being destructive. Kind without avoiding accountability.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Use the first sections to recognize the habits and culture surrounding difficult feedback. Use the preparation pages to plan a real conversation. During and after the conversation, return to the scripts, questions, and follow-through tools. The final page is a quick pre-meeting reminder you can keep at your desk.

PUBLIC SERVICE NOTE: Follow your agency policies, applicable collective bargaining agreements, and HR procedures. Examples in this guide illustrate communication practices, not universal legal requirements or agency-specific rules.

# 1 Why feedback goes wrong

## Direct is not destructive. Kind is not weak.

Clear expectations are an act of respect. Leaving someone to guess whether their performance is acceptable, or whether their job or reputation is at risk, creates uncertainty rather than kindness. Giving feedback can be uncomfortable without being humiliating.

## Your silence is feedback, too

Silence communicates what is tolerated. If a road maintenance lead repeatedly ignores a late start, the crew learns that start times may be optional. High performers see who carries the load and who gets a pass. Unaddressed issues accumulate until they appear as an unpleasant annual-review surprise.

## Fight and flight at work

**FIGHT / “VIOLENCE”** Defensiveness, interruptions, controlling the discussion, labeling, attacking intentions, or pulling rank. Example: “That’s completely unfair and not my job.”

**FLIGHT / “SILENCE”** Masking, sarcasm, avoidance, withdrawal, one-word answers, or sudden polite compliance. Example: “Whatever you say, boss. Everything’s fine.”

## Four diagnostic questions before you act

- What happened? Name the observable fact, not the character judgment.
- What was my part? Consider unclear instructions, missed check-ins, or delayed feedback.
- What was their part? Identify the actual standard or commitment missed.
- How do we stop the loop? Decide what boundary or expectation must change.

## Conversations people often dodge

Time and attendance; missed commitments; oversharing; temper and reactive communication; volume and workplace etiquette; personal space and boundaries. These are not always dramatic incidents. They are often recurring behaviors that quietly reshape team expectations.

## Manager versus coach

### Move from policing to coaching

**Policing manager** Catches errors after the fact, relies on inspection, and leaves staff feeling scrutinized.

**Skilled coach** Defines success before the work begins, asks diagnostic questions, clarifies boundaries, practices skills, and provides steady feedback.

## What employees actually need

**Exact standards** — Define what done well and on time looks like.

**Predictable feedback** — Make course corrections timely rather than surprising.

**Clear boundaries** — Explain authority, decision rights, and when to escalate.

**Praise in writing** — Document good work with the same specificity used for problems.

Same standard, different support: Hold quality, behavioral, and performance expectations steady while adjusting tools, training, context, and checkpoints based on what an employee needs.

## 2 The culture you accidentally create

Culture is not the values poster. It is what employees learn they must do to survive and succeed. They watch who is rewarded, what leadership ignores, how bad news is received, and what happens when someone asks for help.

### Incident → story → rule → culture

A worker admits an equipment near-miss. A director reacts harshly in public. Coworkers tell the story. The unwritten rule becomes “hide problems until you cannot.” Repeated reactions become culture.

### Four accidental cultures

**FEAR — Protect yourself** People hide mistakes, withhold questions, and wait until problems cannot be concealed.

**APATHY — Nothing I do matters** Effort and minimal performance receive the same response, so employees stop trying to improve.

**BURNOUT — My capacity is my problem** Everything is urgent and dependable staff absorb more and more work.

**DEPENDENCY — Don't move without permission** Leaders redo work or require unnecessary approvals, so staff stop making decisions.

### How fear gets built

- Emotional reactions: sighing, eye-rolling, or raising your voice at bad news.
- Public embarrassment or cross-examination in front of colleagues.
- Asking “Who did this?” before “What happened?”
- Treating sincere questions as insolence or incompetence.
- Punishing the person who brings an early warning.

### Signs fear is already present

Problems arrive as sudden emergencies; meetings are silent but hallway conversations are active; dashboards remain green until a deadline collapses; staff hide uncertainty and near misses.

### Five moves from fear to candor

**1. Regulate.** Control your face, breathing, volume, and first reaction.

**2. Thank.** “Thank you for bringing this to me early.”

**3. Differentiate.** Separate honest mistakes and learning opportunities from reckless or negligent conduct.

**4. Debrief.** Examine process failures as well as individual decisions.

**5. Reward early disclosure.** Make reporting problems early safer and more productive than hiding them.

### Public works example: the reported near-miss

A snowplow operator clips a guardrail on an icy pass and reports it immediately. A fear-building response focuses first on blame and repair cost. A candor-building response starts: “Thank you for reporting this immediately. Are you okay? Let’s review road conditions and the equipment check together.” Accountability and learning still follow.

Psychological safety does not mean lower standards. Employees should be able to report mistakes, admit uncertainty, challenge assumptions, and ask questions without ridicule while meeting agency requirements, safety standards, and deadlines.

### How apathy gets built

- Ask for input only after a decision is made.
- Treat exceptional and minimal effort the same.
- Reward reliable employees with everyone else’s unfinished work.
- Fail to explain what happened after staff offered ideas or raised concerns.

### Four moves from apathy to ownership

**Close the loop.** Explain what happened to employee input and what constraints applied.

**Recognize specific work.** Name the operational action and its impact, not vague praise.

**Address chronic underperformance.** Do not ask high performers to silently compensate for it.

**Grant appropriate authority.** Let employees solve problems within clearly defined decision boundaries.

### Burnout and dependency: secondary traps

Burnout grows when every task is urgent, reliable employees absorb extra shifts, and heroic rescues hide system failure. Set priorities, discuss capacity, and cross-train backups. Dependency grows when supervisors rewrite routine work and require sign-off for low-risk choices. Set decision thresholds and ask, “What do you recommend?”

### Replace “Does that make sense?”

- “Tell me what you plan to do first.”
- “Where do you think you may get stuck?”
- “How will you know you have been successful?”

- “What do you recommend we do here?”

### Culture audit: write the unwritten rules

Around here, it is safest to...

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People here are actually rewarded for...

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Asking for help here means...

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Mistakes are treated as...

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The people who succeed here learn to...

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Listen for “Keep your head down” (fear), “It’s not worth bringing up” (apathy), “Just finish it” (burnout), and “Run it by the boss” (dependency).

## 3 Prepare before the conversation

### Separate facts from stories

#### Replace invented motives with observable behavior

**Story: “She does not care.”** Fact: Two project deadlines were missed without notice.

**Story: “He disrespects authority.”** Fact: He interrupted colleagues three times in the briefing.

**Story: “They have a toxic attitude.”** Fact: They provided no updates in four team meetings.

### Un-hook yourself physically

If you are upset, do not enter the meeting merely to discharge frustration. Slow down. The presentation recommends a longer exhale (inhale four seconds, exhale six), feet grounded, shoulders and jaw relaxed, a drink of water, and delaying the conversation if you are too activated to speak calmly. Treat these as practical self-regulation suggestions, not medical guarantees.

### Un-hook yourself mentally

- What is happening?
- What are the facts?
- What is their part?
- What is my part?

- What are my options?

### Un-hook verbally and with business tools

Slow your cadence and use neutral, descriptive words. Ground the conversation in position descriptions, written standards, SOPs, memos, prior reviews, and documented expectations. Review relevant collective bargaining and HR requirements before taking formal personnel steps.

### Start with your heart

**For this person:** I want them to succeed, be respected, and work effectively.

**For the relationship:** I want honest communication without resentment or hidden meanings.

**For the organization:** I want dependable, consistent public service that residents can trust.

If your real goal is to punish, embarrass, or vent, you are not ready for the meeting.

### Exercise 1 | The conversation you have been avoiding

PRIVATE WRITING · ABOUT 7 MINUTES · No breakout room or public sharing required.

1. What exact behavior needs to change?

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2. What facts can you verify?

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3. What story are you telling yourself about their motives?

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4. How might your silence, mixed messages, or delay have contributed?

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5. What will it cost the team and public service if nothing changes for six months?

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## 4 Have the conversation

### The first 30 seconds

Lead with shared purpose. Skip five minutes of suspenseful small talk. Be direct about the issue while preserving dignity. Invite the other person's perspective rather than declaring a verdict.

### Make it safe: contrasting

Explain what you do NOT mean and what you DO mean. Example: "I want you to be successful in this unit, and I value your field experience. I don't want you to feel targeted or micromanaged. I do need to talk about the late inspection reports this month so our permits don't stall."

### S.T.A.T.E. | A framework for tough feedback

Adapted from *Crucial Conversations* by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler.

**S — SHARE your facts.** Begin with observable evidence: "In our last three public hearings, you interrupted council members twice before they finished speaking."

**T — TELL your story.** Explain the concern without pretending your interpretation is proven: "When that happens, it makes it look like our department is not listening."

**A — ASK for their story.** "How did you see those hearings?"

**T — TALK tentatively.** "From where I sat, it seemed like..."

**E — ENCOURAGE testing.** "Do you see this differently?"

### Listening toolkit: Ask, Mirror, Paraphrase, Prime

**ASK** — "I'd like to hear what happened from your point of view."

**MIRROR** — "You're saying you're fine, but your tone sounds frustrated."

**PARAPHRASE** — "So you felt caught between our policy and the customer's demand?"

**PRIME** — "Are you worried that admitting this will hurt your standing here?"

### When the employee gets defensive

**Acknowledge the difficulty.** "I can see this is hard to hear."

**Understand their view.** "Help me understand your perspective."

**Return to the facts.** "Let's go back to the dates and what was expected."

**Keep the focus.** Avoid a debate about motives; discuss behavior, standards, support, and next steps.

### When the employee goes quiet

Do not treat silence as agreement. Give the person time to think. "I'd really like to hear your reaction, even if it's not polished." "Take a minute; you do not have to answer immediately."

“What is going through your mind right now?” Silence can have multiple causes, so ask rather than assume fear or resistance.

### Scripts for public-service settings

#### Licensing counter clerk

**Issue** A dismissive response to an applicant.

**Say** “Yesterday, when the applicant asked about renewal forms, your tone sounded sharp and you pushed the form across without looking up. Our service standard requires patience. What was happening on your side?”

#### Borough records clerk

**Issue** Assembly packets distributed late.

**Say** “The agenda packets went out four hours after the required posting time twice this month. Walk me through your workflow so we can find the bottleneck.”

#### Public health clinic nurse

**Issue** Delayed record entry.

**Say** “I noticed the vaccination logs were entered three days after administration. Our local protocol calls for same-day entry. What got in the way?”

#### State parks trail ranger

**Issue** Missed safety radio check-ins.

**Say** “You missed the 4 p.m. radio check-in twice during last week’s backcountry sweeps. We need reliable check-ins for staff safety. What would help ensure they happen?”

Scenario details are illustrative; confirm your agency’s actual service standards, policies, deadlines, and protocols before using similar language.

### Close the meeting with an actual agreement

- What will the employee do first? Ask them to explain the action in their own words.
- What support, tools, or training are needed?
- What standard and timeline will define improvement?
- When will you check in? Put a specific date on the calendar.
- What written summary or formal documentation is appropriate under policy?

Kindness is not the absence of consequences. Clear, respectful accountability gives the employee a chance to improve, protects coworkers from absorbing unaddressed problems, and supports public trust. Apply any formal discipline under applicable agency and labor procedures.

## 5 Follow-through makes the feedback real

**Send a summary.** Recap the standard, agreed steps, support, owners, and timeline as appropriate.

**Observe the work.** Watch for improvement and continuing barriers without hovering.

**Recognize change.** Name specific positive behavior as soon as you see it.

**Keep the check-in.** Do not cancel simply because things seem better.

**Reassess if needed.** If the problem continues, use the relevant agency and HR process consistently.

### Two follow-up scripts

CHECK-IN: “We agreed to check in today on the customer intake workflow. What has gone smoother this week, and where are you still feeling roadblocks?”

REINFORCEMENT: “I noticed how patient you were with that permit applicant this morning even though their paperwork was incomplete. That is exactly what success looks like here.”

### Exercise 2 | Write your actual conversation

PRIVATE WRITING · ABOUT 8 MINUTES · Return to the same situation you chose earlier.

1. Write the first TWO sentences: mutual purpose plus verifiable fact.

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2. Write ONE genuine question inviting their perspective.

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3. State the concrete expectation or boundary.

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4. Write what you will say if they become defensive.

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5. Write the date and method of the follow-up.

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### Monday morning: three commitments

- Schedule the conversation you have been avoiding.
- Manage your first reaction when bad news arrives.
- Close one outstanding loop with employees and explain the reason for the decision.

## QUICK REMINDER | Before the hard conversation

10 things to do before you walk into the room. Print this page and keep it nearby.

- ☐ **1. Name the behavior.** What specifically happened? Avoid labels about attitude or character.
- ☐ **2. Check the facts.** Bring dates, observations, expectations, and relevant records.
- ☐ **3. Separate fact from story.** What am I assuming about the person's motives?
- ☐ **4. Own your part.** Were expectations vague? Did I delay or send mixed signals?
- ☐ **5. Know the standard.** What must change, and what does success look like?
- ☐ **6. Check the rules.** Review applicable agency policy, HR procedures, and union requirements.
- ☐ **7. Regulate yourself.** Settle your face, breathing, voice, and intention before starting.
- ☐ **8. Choose your opening.** Write two direct, respectful sentences: shared purpose plus facts.
- ☐ **9. Prepare to listen.** Plan a genuine question and how you will respond to fight or flight.
- ☐ **10. Plan the follow-through.** Know what support you can offer and when you will check progress.

REMEMBER: Be clear. Preserve dignity. Listen. Hold the standard. Follow through.

### Your opening line

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### The standard that must change

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### Follow-up date

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### Further reading

Crucial Conversations — Patterson, Grenny, McMillan & Switzler. Working With You Is Killing Me — Crowley & Elster.