

The Conversations No One Taught You to Have

A Manager's Playbook for the 8 Most Uncomfortable Workplace Conversations

Most managers can navigate a performance review or a missed promotion. It's the conversations that touch who someone is, not just what they do, that stop even experienced leaders cold.

This playbook covers those conversations. Word for word.

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Contents

Introduction	Why Personal Conversations Are the Real Hard Ones	3
How to Use	Framework, documentation, and when to involve HR	4
Scenario 01	"I Don't Want You to Do Anything."	5
Scenario 02	Dismissive Toward Customers and Toward You	6
Scenario 03	The Employee Everyone Walks on Eggshells Around	7
Scenario 04	You Suspect Someone Is Under the Influence	8
Scenario 05	Body Odor or Excessive Fragrance	9
Scenario 06	Attire That Is Too Revealing for the Environment	10
Scenario 07	The Employee Who Takes Over	11
Scenario 08	The Employee Who Has More to Offer Than You're Hearing	13
Final Word		14

Introduction

Why Personal Conversations Are the Real Hard Ones

Ask a group of experienced managers which conversations they dread most, and you will not hear 'performance reviews.' You will not hear 'telling someone they didn't get the promotion' or 'explaining why we went with a different candidate.' Those conversations are uncomfortable, yes, but experienced managers know how to have them. There are frameworks, HR templates, and a general script that most managers can reach for.

The conversations that stop leaders cold are different. They are the ones that touch who someone is, not just what they do. The conversations about how someone smells, how they dress, how they make their coworkers feel, whether they might be drinking at work. These conversations exist in territory that feels off-limits, because they brush against a person's dignity, their self-image, and sometimes their identity. Most managers would rather tolerate the problem indefinitely than risk that kind of collision.

That avoidance is understandable. It is also expensive. Every week a manager does not have one of these conversations is a week the team absorbs the cost of the problem. Coworkers adjust their behavior to accommodate someone who undermines them. Customers experience someone who dismisses them. People who want to contribute get cut off before they finish a sentence. The team watches the manager notice, and say nothing, and draws their own conclusions about what the manager is willing to deal with.

This playbook covers the eight scenarios that show up most consistently in workplaces, that managers are least prepared to handle, and that matter most to the people on their teams. For each one, you will find what is actually going on beneath the surface, why most managers handle it badly, language you can use to open the conversation, how to respond when it gets difficult, and what to do if nothing changes.

These are not easy conversations, but they are learnable ones, and once you have had a few of them, you will realize that the anticipation is almost always worse than the conversation itself. Most people, when approached with respect and directness, respond better than their managers expected.

A note on this framework

Each scenario follows the same structure: what is really happening beneath the surface, why most managers handle it badly, how to open the conversation (with specific language), how to handle pushback, and what to do if nothing changes. Use the opening language as a starting point, not a script. The goal is to give you a place to begin, not to replace your own judgment.

How to Use This Playbook

Read it before you need it. The worst time to figure out how to open one of these conversations is when you are standing outside someone's office, having decided three minutes ago that today is the day. Familiarity with the framework matters. So does having thought, even briefly, about how you would adapt the language to your own voice.

Adapt the language to your own voice. The opening lines in each scenario are suggestions, not scripts. What makes a difficult conversation land is not the precise wording. It is the combination of being specific, being calm, and being clear about what needs to change.

Have HR as a resource, not a crutch. For most of these scenarios, the first conversation should be between you and the employee, directly and privately. Involving HR too early can escalate a coaching conversation into a disciplinary one before you've given the person the chance to respond. That said, some situations require HR involvement from the start, and those are noted in the relevant sections.

Document after significant conversations. You do not need to create a formal file every time you give feedback; for the conversations in this playbook, though, a brief note with the date, what you said, and how the person responded is worth having. If you need to have the conversation again, or if the situation escalates, that record matters.

Assume good faith until you have evidence otherwise. Most of the employees in these scenarios are not bad people. They are people who have not been told, or who have learned that the behavior is tolerable because no one has pushed back. Approach these conversations from a position of honesty and respect, and you give the person the best possible chance to respond well.

Scenario 01

"I Don't Want You to Do Anything."

When a coworker reports something serious, then ties your hands.

WHAT'S REALLY HAPPENING

A coworker has come to you and told you that another employee is undermining someone, whether that means bad-mouthing a colleague, spreading negative information, or working against someone behind their back. What you are really dealing with here is a loyalty conflict. The person who came to you is trying to protect their relationship with the coworker involved while also relieving their own discomfort by telling someone. They want you to know, but they are terrified of being seen as the source. The employee doing the undermining is almost certainly aware that something is off in the dynamic, even if no one has named it, and you are now sitting on information that affects the health of your team.

WHY MOST MANAGERS BOTCH IT

Most managers either promise confidentiality and then feel paralyzed, or they move immediately to confront the situation and blow up the relationship with the person who came to them. Both are mistakes. Promising full confidentiality when the situation may require action puts you in an impossible position. Moving without care punishes the person who trusted you enough to speak up.

HOW TO OPEN THE CONVERSATION

Start by acknowledging what the person who came to you actually did. Then set honest expectations:

"I really appreciate you trusting me with this. I want to be straightforward about what I can and can't do. I can't promise I'll do nothing, because I have a responsibility to the whole team. What I can promise is that I'll handle it in a way that protects you as much as I possibly can, and I won't use your name directly, but I need you to know that I may need to address this."

HOW TO HANDLE PUSHBACK

If they say "I'll be so embarrassed" or "you'll ruin the relationship," don't argue with their fear. Acknowledge it: "I hear you, and I don't take that lightly; part of my job is to make sure this team is a place where people can work without being undermined, and I'll be as discreet as I can."

Then, when you address the behavior with the other employee, frame it as a pattern you have observed yourself. "I've noticed some things lately that I want to talk about directly."

IF NOTHING CHANGES

If the undermining continues after you've addressed it, it becomes a performance and conduct issue. Document specific incidents. Have a direct conversation about consequences. At that point, the conversation shifts from coaching to accountability.

Scenario 02

Dismissive Toward Customers and Toward You

When the attitude that drives away clients also shows up with their manager.

WHAT'S REALLY HAPPENING

Employees who are dismissive toward customers and managers are often operating from a belief that they are right and others are wrong, or that their role is beneath them. Sometimes there is real frustration underneath it: they feel unsupported, overlooked, or stuck. Other times it is simply a pattern of behavior that has never been named clearly enough to create a reason to change.

WHY MOST MANAGERS BOTCH IT

Managers often address the customer-facing behavior without addressing the behavior toward themselves. That is a mistake, because the two are connected. If you correct the visible behavior while ignoring the dismissiveness directed at you, the employee learns that the real relationship has no real accountability. You also need to be honest with yourself: if you have been tolerating this behavior toward yourself, you have already sent a message that it is acceptable.

HOW TO OPEN THE CONVERSATION

Be specific. Do not say "your attitude with customers." Say exactly what you saw:

"Last Tuesday, when the customer explained the issue at the front desk, I noticed you roll your eyes and look away before they finished speaking. That is the kind of moment that damages trust and costs us relationships. I need that to change."

Then address the other piece directly: "I also want to talk about how we communicate with each other. I've noticed that when I bring something to your attention, the response is often dismissive. I'm not asking for agreement. I'm asking for a professional working relationship, and right now I'm not consistently getting that."

HOW TO HANDLE PUSHBACK

They may say the customer was rude, or that you are misreading the situation. Don't debate the moment. Say: "Even if the customer was being difficult, the way we respond is always within our control. That is what I'm focused on."

If they push back on how you communicate with them: "I'm open to that conversation. But that is a separate conversation from what I'm raising right now."

IF NOTHING CHANGES

If the behavior continues, it is now a formal performance matter. The combination of customer impact and behavior toward leadership is significant. Involve HR. Set written expectations with timelines. This is no longer a coaching conversation. It is an accountability process.

Scenario 03

The Employee Everyone Walks on Eggshells Around

When one person's moods are shaping the whole team's behavior.

WHAT'S REALLY HAPPENING

When an entire team modifies its behavior to avoid upsetting one person, that person has become the de facto power center of your team, whether they realize it or not. Sometimes this is driven by a volatile temper. Sometimes it is more subtle: sighing heavily, going silent, or withdrawing in ways that others experience as punishment. The employee may have no idea this is happening. Or they may know exactly what they are doing. Either way, the team is paying the price, and so is your authority as a leader.

WHY MOST MANAGERS BOTCH IT

Most managers avoid this one the longest, because the behavior is easy to rationalize: "They're not technically doing anything wrong." But the cost of avoidance is that the rest of the team watches you accommodate the difficult person and draws conclusions about how safe it is to raise issues with you. You are not just managing one employee here. You are managing what the entire team believes is acceptable.

HOW TO OPEN THE CONVERSATION

This one requires more care in the opening, because you are naming something the employee may not see in themselves. Start with curiosity, not accusation:

"I want to check in with you about something, and I'm going to be direct because I think you deserve that. I've noticed that when things are tense or something doesn't go your way, there's a shift in the room. People seem to pull back. I want to understand what's going on for you, and I also need to tell you what I'm seeing, because it's affecting the team."

HOW TO HANDLE PUSHBACK

They may say "I don't know what you're talking about" or "I'm not doing anything." That is possible and worth exploring: "I believe you that it doesn't feel intentional. The impact is real regardless of the intention, and that is what I have to manage."

Resist the urge to name colleagues who are affected. Keep it at the level of what you have observed directly.

IF NOTHING CHANGES

If the dynamic persists, name it again, more directly: "We talked about this a few weeks ago, and I'm still seeing the same pattern. I need this to change, and I want to help you figure out how, but I also need to be honest: if it doesn't change, it will start to affect how I can use you on this team." That is not a threat. It is the truth, and delivering it honestly is part of your job.

Scenario 04

You Suspect Someone Is Under the Influence at Work

When the signs are there, but nothing is confirmed.

WHAT'S REALLY HAPPENING

This is one of the most serious conversations a manager can have, because the stakes involve safety, dignity, and legal exposure. It is also one of the most commonly avoided. Managers hesitate because they don't want to be wrong, don't want to humiliate someone, or don't know what they're actually authorized to do. What is underneath your hesitation matters here: acting too quickly on a wrong assumption can be devastating, and acting too slowly when someone is impaired can be dangerous.

WHY MOST MANAGERS BOTCH IT

The biggest mistake is trying to diagnose or confirm what you're observing. That is not your role. Your role is to respond to observable behavior and performance, not to investigate the cause. The second biggest mistake is doing nothing because you can't prove it. You don't need to prove impairment to act on the behaviors you can see.

HOW TO OPEN THE CONVERSATION

Focus entirely on what you can observe, not what you suspect:

"I need to talk with you right now. I've noticed [specific behaviors: slurred speech, difficulty following conversation, unsteady movement]. I'm concerned about your wellbeing and about safety, and I can't have you in this environment right now. I'd like you to come with me so we can talk privately."

Do not accuse. Do not name a substance. Describe what you see and act on your obligation to create a safe environment.

HOW TO HANDLE PUSHBACK

If they deny anything is wrong: "I'm not trying to accuse you of anything. I'm telling you what I'm observing and I'm following our safety protocols. That's my responsibility as your manager."

Involve HR from the start on this one. Know your organization's policy before the conversation happens. If there is an Employee Assistance Program, have that information ready to offer as support, not as accusation.

IF NOTHING CHANGES

If this is a recurring concern, it becomes a formal process. Document every incident with dates, times, and specific observations. Follow your organization's substance use policy precisely. Holding a clear line is often the kindest thing you can do for someone in this situation, because ambiguity enables the problem to continue.

Scenario 05

Body Odor or Excessive Fragrance

When a workplace hygiene issue has been raised by multiple coworkers.

WHAT'S REALLY HAPPENING

Few conversations feel more invasive than telling someone their body affects the people around them. Managers avoid this one almost universally, sometimes for months or years, while the people who work near the affected employee suffer quietly. What is underneath the avoidance is a reasonable fear of humiliating someone, but the math matters: you are choosing between one uncomfortable conversation and the ongoing discomfort of an entire team, plus the message you send about what you are willing to address.

WHY MOST MANAGERS BOTCH IT

Sending an anonymous note. Bringing it up in a group setting. Giving vague hints. All of these are worse than a direct, private conversation, because they remove the dignity that a direct conversation preserves. The other common mistake is framing it as a coworker complaint rather than a manager observation. "People have been saying..." immediately puts the employee on defense and shifts focus to who said what.

HOW TO OPEN THE CONVERSATION

Private, brief, and matter-of-fact is the goal:

"I want to talk with you about something personal, and I'm going to be straightforward because I think that's more respectful than dancing around it. I've noticed a scent that I think you may not be aware of, and it's becoming something I need to address. This isn't about anything other than making sure you have information I think you'd want to have."

Then stop. Give them room to respond. This is the moment that requires the most silence on your part.

HOW TO HANDLE PUSHBACK

They may be mortified and say nothing. They may say they showered that morning. They may have a medical condition they haven't disclosed. In any of those cases, your response stays the same: "I believe you. I'm not trying to suggest it's intentional. I just want to make sure you know, because I'd want to know. Is there anything you want me to know that might be relevant?"

If there is a medical condition involved, step back completely. Focus only on whether there is anything that can be accommodated, and loop in HR.

IF NOTHING CHANGES

If the issue continues and there is no medical component, have the conversation again, more explicitly: "We talked about this before, and I need to bring it up again because it is still present. This is affecting the work environment, and I need it to be resolved. Is there anything getting in the way of that?"

At that point, involve HR. This is no longer an informal conversation.

Scenario 06

Attire That Is Too Revealing for the Environment

When professional dress standards intersect with gender, power, and dignity.

WHAT'S REALLY HAPPENING

This is one of the most fraught conversations a manager can have, because it lives at the intersection of workplace standards, personal expression, and the very real risk that the feedback will be experienced as policing someone's body. That risk is not hypothetical, and it does not disappear simply because the concern is legitimate.

What is happening beneath the surface is usually one of a few things: the employee is unaware their attire is outside the norm, they are testing a boundary, or there is a genuine disconnect between what they understand the expectations to be and what the organization actually expects. None of these require a character judgment. They all require a clear, respectful standard.

WHY MOST MANAGERS BOTCH IT

Making it about attractiveness, sexuality, or what other people think of the employee. Making it personal rather than standards-based. Applying the standard selectively based on gender (if men are not held to equivalent professional standards, the conversation becomes indefensible and potentially discriminatory). Avoiding the conversation entirely because it feels too risky, which leaves the employee without information and leaves the organization exposed.

HOW TO OPEN THE CONVERSATION

Ground it entirely in the dress code or professional standard, not in your personal opinion of the clothing:

"I want to have a conversation about dress code expectations. We have a professional standard that applies to everyone on the team, and I want to make sure I'm applying it consistently. I've noticed some recent outfits that are more casual or revealing than what our environment calls for, and I want to address it directly rather than let it become an ongoing issue."

If your organization does not have a written dress code, that is the first thing to fix before having this conversation. A clear written standard removes your personal judgment from the equation entirely.

HOW TO HANDLE PUSHBACK

If they say "this is what I wore at my last job" or "I don't think it's that different from what others wear": "I can only speak to what the standard is here, and I'm applying it the same way across the team. If you feel I'm doing that unevenly, I want to know that, and I'd take it seriously."

If the gender dynamic is named directly: "I hear that, and I want to be careful about that too. What I can tell you is that this conversation is about the professional standard, and I'm having it based on that, not based on anything about you as a person."

IF NOTHING CHANGES

If the behavior continues after a clear conversation, it becomes a conduct matter. Document the conversation and any subsequent incidents. Consult HR before proceeding further. Be consistent: if you are documenting this behavior for one employee, the same standard must apply to everyone on the team.

Scenario 07

The Employee Who Takes Over

When someone's enthusiasm becomes a problem for everyone around them.

WHAT'S REALLY HAPPENING

Employees who hijack meetings or cut off colleagues while they're helping customers are almost always doing it from a place of enthusiasm, not malice. They have a lot to say. They are confident. They are often genuinely good at what they do. That is exactly what makes this conversation hard: you are essentially telling someone that a quality they see as a strength is causing harm to the people around them.

WHY MOST MANAGERS BOTCH IT

Framing it as a personality problem rather than a behavior pattern. Saying things like "you always have to be the center of attention" puts the person on the defensive and makes the conversation about who they are rather than what they are doing. The other mistake is being so gentle that the person walks away thinking you were complimenting their enthusiasm. Be clear. They need to know something is not working.

HOW TO OPEN THE CONVERSATION

Acknowledge the strength before naming the impact, but don't let the acknowledgment bury the message:

"You have a lot of energy in meetings and you're clearly invested, and I want to give you some feedback about how that's landing for others. I've noticed that when colleagues are explaining something or working with a customer, you often jump in before they've finished. What feels like adding value from your side feels like getting cut off from theirs. That's creating some friction, and I need you to be aware of it."

HOW TO HANDLE PUSHBACK

If they say "I'm just trying to help" or "they were struggling and I knew the answer": "I know the intention is to help, but the effect is that people don't feel they have the space to finish their thought, or to build their own relationship with the customer. Both of those things matter here."

Then give them something concrete: "In our next team meeting, I'd like you to try waiting until someone has fully finished before adding to it. Even if you know what comes next. Let's see what that creates."

IF NOTHING CHANGES

If the pattern continues, bring it back with specifics: "We talked about the pattern of jumping in, and I saw it again today when [specific example]. This is affecting how your colleagues experience working alongside you, and it's starting to affect trust. I need this to be a real change, not just awareness of it."

Sometimes this is a coaching conversation, and sometimes it eventually becomes a performance conversation. If the employee cannot modify behavior that consistently undermines their coworkers, that has real consequences for team function.

Scenario 08

The Employee Who Has More to Offer Than You're Hearing

When real value is present but never making it into the room.

WHAT'S REALLY HAPPENING

Some employees are not disengaged. They are not resistant. They listen carefully, they observe closely, and they often have exactly the kind of perspective a team needs. They just do not volunteer it. The reasons vary: they come from a cultural background where speaking over others or offering unsolicited opinions to a group is seen as disrespectful or presumptuous. They are introverted and need more processing time than a live conversation allows. They have been dismissed before, in this team or a previous one, and learned to hold back. They are not entirely sure their thinking is good enough to say out loud. Any of those roots call for a different response from you, but all of them point to the same starting place: the problem is not the employee. The meeting format, the team dynamic, and the lack of a deliberate invitation are the problem.

WHY MOST MANAGERS BOTCH IT

The most common mistake is calling on someone cold in a group setting: "What do you think, [name]?" With someone who is already uncomfortable contributing, that kind of public spotlight almost always backfires. They fumble, feel exposed, and become even less likely to speak next time. The second common mistake is interpreting silence as agreement or disengagement and moving on. The third is trying to fix this in the meeting room rather than building the relationship where it needs to start, which is one on one and before the meeting, not during it.

HOW TO OPEN THE CONVERSATION

Start privately, not publicly, and lead with what you have already noticed:

"I want to check in with you about something. I've noticed you tend to listen more than you speak in our team meetings, and I want you to know I see real value in that. I also think your perspective is something the team would benefit from hearing more of. I'm not looking to put you on the spot. I want to understand what would make it easier for you to share what you're thinking, because I think there's more there than we're currently getting."

Then listen more than you talk. The answer they give you will tell you whether this is about format, about the team dynamic, about preparation time, or about something deeper. What you learn in that conversation is what you use to actually change the conditions.

HOW TO HANDLE PUSHBACK

If they say "I'm fine just listening" or "I don't usually have strong opinions": "I hear that, and I also believe there's more going on for you than you may realize. In my experience, people who observe as carefully as you do tend to see things others miss. I'm not asking you to perform in meetings. I'm asking what I can do to make it easier for what you're actually thinking to reach the rest of the team."

If cultural background seems to be a factor, name it with care: "I want to be respectful of how you approach things, and I also want to make sure the way our meetings run isn't creating a barrier for you. What would feel more natural?"

Then change the format before the next meeting. Send topics in advance so they can prepare. Ask for their input in writing before the meeting, so they can speak from a position of having already shared their thinking rather than being asked to generate it live. Consider rotating who facilitates, or building structured rounds where everyone responds briefly before open discussion begins. The invitation has to be real, not just verbal.

IF NOTHING CHANGES

If the pattern does not shift after you have changed the conditions and built the relationship, it is worth having a more direct conversation about what is at stake: "I've tried to create more space for your thinking to come through, and I want to be honest with you: your contribution matters to this team's work, and right now we are not getting enough of it. This is not a criticism of who you are. It is me telling you that what is in your head has value, and the team and I need to start hearing it."

For some employees, the under-contribution will persist regardless, and the real question becomes whether the role is the right fit. A person who genuinely cannot or will not contribute in a collaborative environment may be better suited to work that does not require it. That is a different conversation, and it is worth having with clarity rather than hoping the situation resolves itself.

Final Word

There is a version of leadership that waits for problems to fix themselves. It is the most common version, because it is the easiest in the short term. Difficult behavior gets tolerated. Uncomfortable realities go unnamed. The team absorbs the friction, adapts around the problem, and over time the manager loses a little credibility with every conversation that should have happened and didn't.

The managers people remember, the ones who actually shaped how someone developed as a professional, were almost never the ones who avoided hard things. They were the ones who said what needed to be said, clearly and with respect, even when it was uncomfortable. That combination of warmth and directness is not a personality trait. It is a practice. It gets easier with repetition.

You are not doing anyone a favor by not having these conversations. Not the team that is affected by the behavior. Not the employee who deserves honest feedback about how they are landing, and not yourself either, because avoidance has a cost: it accumulates as resentment, as self-doubt, and as a slow erosion of the kind of leader you intended to be.

The conversations in this playbook are hard. They are also the ones that matter most. Leadership grows one small decision at a time.

About the Author

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