



Conversations That Matter

Giving Feedback with Clarity and Courage

Using the BOFF Model to Give Feedback with Clarity and Impact

How to Give Feedback

Feedback is one of the most powerful tools a manager has to develop people, improve performance, and strengthen trust. Yet many managers avoid it—especially when the conversation feels difficult or uncomfortable. This guide offers a practical, structured approach to giving feedback, grounded in respect, clarity, and courage.

Positive Feedback

Many managers do not give positive feedback in a meaningful way, which reinforces the employee's good performance. Sometimes good performance gets taken for granted – 100% attendance, the employee who is always punctual, the error-free report, the employee who deals patiently and sensitively with a difficult client. Good performance can go unnoticed. Or the manager might say a quick “well done” or “thanks” without really stopping to think about the importance of the employee's contribution. This has some results:

- ☐ The employee may feel taken for granted or that their contribution is not valued.
- ☐ They may believe that they only hear from their manager when they have done something wrong.
- ☐ The manager has less credibility when something goes wrong, and they give developmental feedback¹.

As human beings, we have problem-solving brains – in other words, we notice what is wrong (things that need fixing). We often don't stop and notice what is right.

Developmental Feedback

Many managers avoid giving developmental feedback when confronted with poor performance or inappropriate behaviour in the hope that it will simply go away. This has several results:

- ☐ The manager adjusts their expectations of the employee in line with the employee's performance instead of asking for what they want and need from an employee.
- ☐ The manager devises a way of working around the employee, which may be time-consuming and result in extra work for the manager. This ‘modus operandi’ gets established as working practice.
- ☐ The poor performance is not tackled, and the employee may either be unaware of it

Research suggests that people need to hear much more positive and supportive than developmental feedback, with some suggesting a ratio of 4 (positives) to 1 (developmental).

¹ Developmental feedback, constructive criticism or negative feedback? I use the term ‘developmental feedback’ because it underlines the fact that feedback is being given in order to help the employee develop by making changes to their behaviour or performance.



Guidelines for giving feedback

Feedback should always be:

❑ Prepared

Think carefully about what you want to say. Reflect on how the employee should feel as they walk out the door. What should they be thinking about? How should they feel? What specifically should they do differently? What specifically should they continue doing? Choose your words carefully – people often hang on to a sentence, phrase or image.

❑ Balanced

As Ken Blanchard says in 'The One Minute Manager' *"catch people doing things right or nearly right, and let them know"*. Make sure to give sincere praise about what the employee is doing right.

The feedback should fairly represent the good and the bad. This means acknowledging and giving space to both sides of the story. Don't talk up one side and give the wrong impression.

❑ Sincere and honest.

Analyse why you are giving the feedback – what constructive purpose is it going to serve? We are all human (and imperfect). The employee who 'just gets on your nerves' might, in fact, be doing a great job, but their personality might rub you up the wrong way. If you can't think of a definite reason for giving feedback, don't give it. Things to watch out for are

- I just don't like her/him (e.g. their attitudes and views which have no bearing on the job)
- I let her/him away with something the last time – I'll load it on a bit this time, OR, so I'll ignore it again
- Being angry or upset about other aspects of your life and taking it out on the employee
- Feeling jealous or upset about something to do with your employee, e.g. your employee gets noticed by senior management (who did not notice your role),
- Trying to court popularity by giving positive feedback where it is not warranted

❑ Generous and bearing the long-term in mind

Not everybody responds well to receiving feedback. This could be due to a lack of self-esteem or to poor experience in the past. If somebody reacts badly, don't take it personally or hold them to 'spur of the moment' responses. Depending on the size of the issue, give them some time to lick their wounds. If there has been a disagreement, make it easy for your employee to get back on board. Keep your long-term relationship and work objectives in mind.

❑ Concise and to the point

When you are going to give feedback – give it! Here are some things to watch out for:

- The long-lead in. Don't preface your feedback with phrases such as *"Now, this isn't a big issue but..."* or *"I don't want you to get upset about this, but..."*.
- Over-explaining the issue. Saying it, then feeling uncomfortable and saying it again
- Rescuing the employee. Discussing a problem and then telling them the reasons why they behaved like that. *"You were probably very busy", "I know that she's very difficult..."*
- Downsizing the issue *"just", "only", "maybe", "a bit", "if you could"*.

☐ **Courageous/Deals with the issue**

Identify the issue. Prepare to deal with the issue. Stick to the issue. Acknowledge other issues which are raised but park them (including criticisms of you – but do make sure to come back to these at another time in an open way). Many discussions about performance get side-tracked – even when managers are aware of this, they often allow it to happen as the ‘sidetrack conversation’ is more comfortable than the ‘issue conversation’.

Be aware that issues can change. For example, if you discuss a behaviour that needs changing with somebody on your team, you may find that they change the surface behaviour (e.g. not getting in reports on time) but that their attitude to you changes (e.g. they become over-polite or dismissive). This may be the signal for another conversation at a later date. You would then need to decide on whether the focus of the conversation would be the specific new behaviour or how they have responded to the feedback.

☐ **Adult to adult**

Simple, direct messages. Warm tone of voice. Open body language.

☐ **Timely**

Research shows that the sooner the feedback is given, the more impact it has. The only time to wait before giving feedback is when you are emotionally engaged by something

☐ **Owned by you**

This is not about policy or what ‘everybody else’ does. Use expressions such as *“For me...”*, *“My experience of working with you was...”*, *“The way I see it is...”*, *“I have a question in my head as to whether...”*. Don’t back off if somebody finds it difficult to accept your feedback. If that happens, it may be a good idea to give the person time to think about you’ve said. Revisit if necessary.

☐ **Over when it’s over**

If somebody has dealt with something then it’s over. Don’t keep old problems and issues simmering. At performance review, if you are dealing with an issue that happened at the beginning of the year but was dealt with, you need to (a) acknowledge the issue and (b) acknowledge that the person dealt with it.



Signalling and positioning

Many managers find it helpful to let their employees know that they are going to give them feedback (signalling) and to give them some indication of how important the feedback is (positioning). Read through the following and see how the words that the manager uses in setting up the feedback discussion can help prepare the employee for what is to come (and give the manager the courage to follow through!).

Assume a friendly but business-like tone of voice, warm eye-contact, relaxed body posture as you read through the following

- ❑ *"John, now that your report has been delivered, I'd like to sit down with you and review that project. A lot of great things happened on that project, and I'd like to discuss them with you. There were also a couple of challenges for you, and I think it's worth spending some time talking about what you learned from those. Are you free tomorrow at 10 am?"*
- ❑ *"John, now that your report has been delivered, I'd like to sit down with you and review that project. For me, there was a lot of good work on that project, and I'd like to give you my input into what I felt was particularly worthwhile. There were also some challenges – let's talk about those and see how they could be avoided in future. As you know, I have a concern about how you handled the communications aspect of the project, which I'd also like to discuss. Are you free tomorrow at 10 am?"*
- ❑ *"John, now that your report has been delivered, I'd like to sit down with you and review that project. Some aspects were very well looked after, and I'd like to go through those. As you know, I'm concerned about how you handled the communications aspect of the project, and I need to discuss this with you in terms of lessons learned for your next project. Are you free tomorrow at 10 am?"*

"How do you think you're doing?"

Signalling is particularly useful if you want to start off the conversation by letting your employee do the talking ("e.g. how do you think you're getting on?" or "how do you think that project went?"). There is a lot of value in asking your employee how they are getting on. This encourages your employees to be reflective, to come up with their own solutions, to increase their self-awareness etc. It also puts you in the position of commenting on their opinion of themselves.

However, managers often use the 'how do you think you're doing?' question even when they have some clear feedback to give or are unhappy with how something has gone. In this case, they may be using the 'how do you think you're doing' question as a cop-out, hoping that the employees will manage themselves. Here's what can happen:

Let's take an example where there has been a quality issue on a task and the manager wants to give feedback but starts by asking, "How do you think you're doing?" and the employee replies that they are doing "very well, thank you". The manager now has two choices:

1. To pull the rug out from under the employee's feet. *"Actually, you're not doing that great",* or
2. To dilute feedback which was potentially very valuable. *"Yeah... you're doing pretty well".*



Signalling and positioning can be very useful in this regard. *"John, now that the Acme Project is over, I want to chat through with you how you feel it went. I think that parts of that project ran very well but there were a couple of hiccoughs at the end. But let me start by asking you how you think it went".*

Now the employee may decide to 'calibrate' what he says against your signal and does not run the risk of having a completely different appraisal to you.

Here are some ways useful phrases for that 'formative feedback' conversation:

"What could you/we do to make your performance even better?"

"What would you do to change that?"

"What if approached it from x angle?"

"What would you do differently?"

"How do you think you could make this even more effective?"

"How could you change this sentence to make it put more emphasis on ...?"

"What would a good alternative be?"



The BOFF Model of Giving Feedback

There are four parts to the feedback conversation:

Behaviour – What happened? What you observed. A pattern of behaviour, outcomes. What has been reported to you, as the manager?

Outcome – the impact of the behaviour. The facts about what happened as a result of the behaviour. Or the potential impact of the behaviour (*“There is a possibility our customer may go to the Ombudsman”*).

Feeling – the manager’s feelings or concern about this situation. Facts about how the manager is feeling. (*“I’m concerned that...”*). Why this issue is important.

Future – what the manager wants the employee to do or to stop doing.

This model is useful when you want to give somebody feedback. Sit down and prepare what you want to say. When giving feedback, you **always** need to state what the behaviour was – and may decide to add outcome, feeling or future as appropriate.

GET IN EARLY AND KEEP IT LIGHT

If something needs attention (i.e. developmental feedback), you should get in with your feedback early and keep it light. *“John, are you aware that when you talk to customers on the phone, your voice is very loud”?*

Behaviour

Essentially, this is the **FACTS** part of the feedback. This should be based on observable behaviour, – what the person did (or did not do), said (or did not say) – or a pattern of behaviour: *“when you were speaking to that client on the phone this morning, the tone of your voice was very curt, and you were making one-word replies”*

Stay away from assumptions and judgements: *“You were rude and unprofessional with that customer this morning”*. Be very careful here – our brain naturally interprets the behaviour that we observe (rude, helpful, unprofessional), and it is very easy to let these words slip out when we are talking to somebody. This is why it is so important to prepare your feedback – ask yourself ‘what did I observe?’ or ‘what makes me say that this behaviour was unprofessional?’.



FACTS may also include previous conversations about similar incidents. *"We spoke about this two weeks ago, I have observed that you are still speaking to clients in the same way".*

You may use phrases like:

"I noticed "

"I was told..."

"Let me describe what I experienced/saw/heard..."

"You (describe action/behaviour)"

"I saw/heard..."

"I really liked the way you..."

"The first part worked really well"

"The second part worked less well"

Outcome

You may need to let your employee know what has happened because of their behaviour. What IMPACT it has had. At this stage, you are still dealing with FACTS.

You may use phrases like:

"What that meant was ..."

"This led to..."

"The outcome of that was..."

"What happened as a result was..."

Feeling

You may wish to share the FACT of how you feel about the employee's behaviour and the impact it has had. This could be pride, a sense of being able to rely on somebody, concern about what a client may be thinking or concern that you have addressed this issue with the employee twice already and nothing has changed.

You may use phrases like:

"I feel that..."

"I'm delighted/proud/pleased/glad..."

"I am concerned that ..."

"My fear about that it..."



Future

It may be appropriate to let your employees know what you would like them to start doing, stop doing, do more of or do less of in the future.

You might use phrases like

"I want..."

"Can I ask you to ..."

"In future, could you ..."

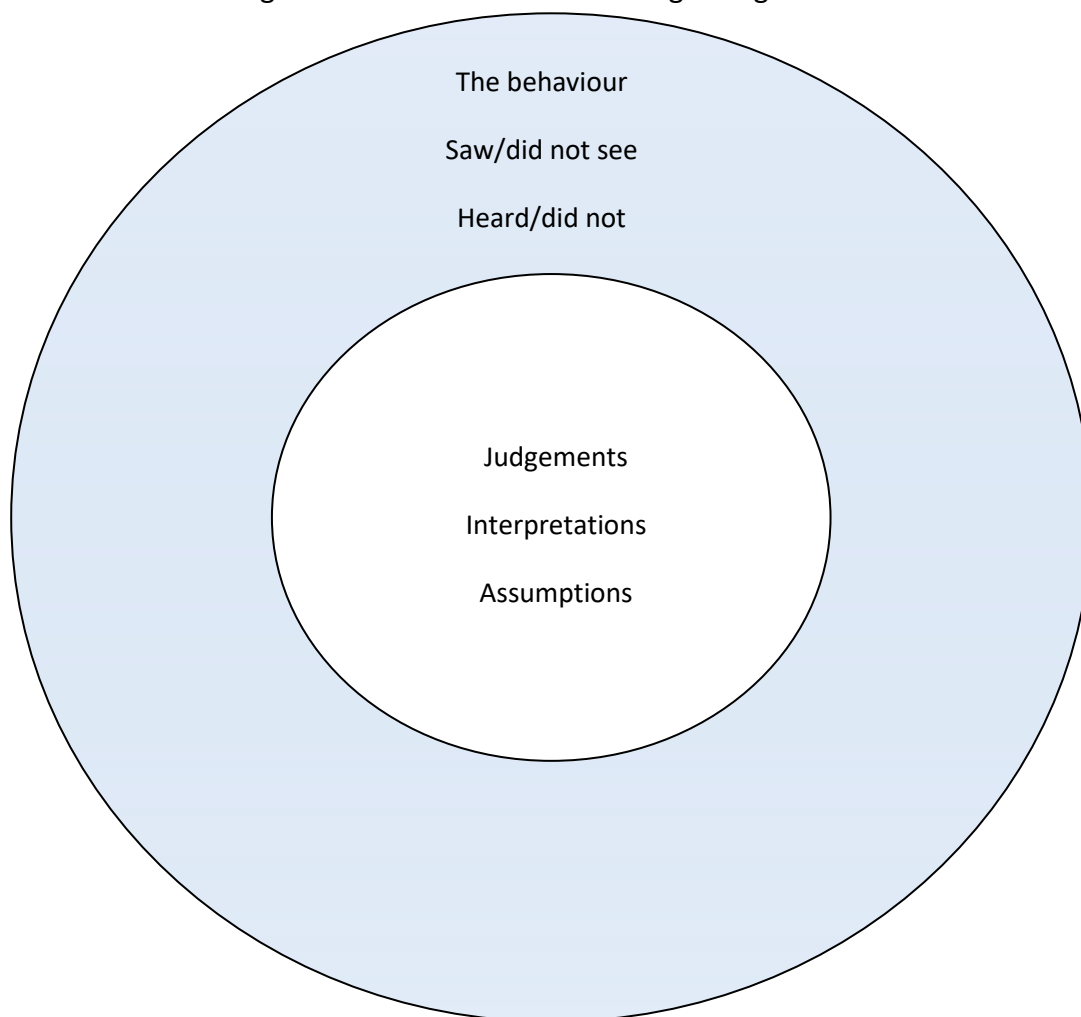
"Keep up the good work"

I'll come back to you about that again

I'll need to involve HR/put a note on your file the next time we talk.

What's the real issue?

It is very important to be clear about the issue that you are dealing with. For example, imagine that you have spoken 3 or 4 times to somebody on your team about how they talk to customers. Each time, you have 'turned up the heat' a little and given them a stronger message. You notice that they are still talking to customers inappropriately – do you keep going back to them with the same message – or has the issue moved on? Might it be an issue about not taking feedback on board and making changes?





The Feedback Doughnut

Level 1 feedback:

The behaviour. What you saw/did not see or heard/did not hear

What can be observed? What you could see/hear on a video

"I saw", "I heard", "I observed", "I read", "I noticed"

Useful phrases *"Let me describe what I saw", "Here's what I heard"*

"You raised your voice", "You met the deadline", "You raised your eyes to heaven"

Level 2 feedback

The conclusions that you have drawn from the behaviour. These could include interpretations, assumptions, judgements, and inferences. They may or may not be true and are probably not "provable". Use this level freely when giving positive feedback. *"You were very professional with that client"*.

Use more cautious developmental feedback if using level 1 feedback has not worked or when you want to explore behaviour. *"I get a sense that you're not as motivated about this as before"*.

Be careful about using judgemental language (e.g. rude, unprofessional, sloppy)



Giving Feedback – preparation sheet

STEP 1 – Analyse

Under pressure, the wrong words can slip out, an issue can get side-tracked or fudged. By thinking through and writing your response to the following questions, you are giving yourself lots of useful and helpful thoughts, which will help you to achieve a positive outcome. It is a good idea to say the feedback that you want to give out loud a few times.

1. What is your positive intention in giving this feedback? What are you trying to achieve?
2. Needs to give feedback arising from a specific incident or a series of incidents. Have you addressed the issue before? Have you ignored it? Are you 'getting in early, keeping it light' – or has this been building for a while?
3. B - What is the Behaviour that you want them to change? Describe the behaviour.
4. O - What is the Outcome (or potential outcome) of this behaviour?
5. F - How do you feel about this? (Why is it important? Why are you concerned?)
6. F - In Future, what do you want the person to do or stop doing? Do more of/less of?
7. When this conversation is over
 - a. What do you want them to think? (What should be in their head at the end?)
 - b. How do you want them to feel? (motivated, hopeful, sober, worried...)
8. How would you know if the problem did not exist anymore?
9. How big a deal is this? Could other issues be clouding your judgment?
10. In this case, is it more appropriate to give feedback directly or to ask the other person for their input? (E.g. "I want to talk to you about... how do you think you're getting on?")
11. How do you feel about giving the person this feedback? Describe your feelings as honestly as possible. (Nervous, angry, frustrated, puzzled, proud, confident...)
12. How can you make sure that your feelings help you give feedback appropriately?
13. What might some useful exit strategies be?

STEP 2 – Prepare

- Signal/position – How will you ask for the meeting? What signal will you use at the beginning?
- How can you show kindness, respect, and hope for the future?
- Bullet point the conversation that you want to have



If you believed that the person you were talking to truly appreciated your feedback, what difference would that make?

| <i>Behaviour</i> | <i>Outcome</i> | <i>Feelings/ Concern</i> | <i>Future</i> |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>I've noticed...</i> | <i>The result of this was...</i> | <i>I'm concerned that,</i> | <i>Can I ask you to...?</i> |
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Sample Topics

TOPIC: Performance appraisal

Case Scenario 1 – Underperformance

Individual: Jo

Must first start to listen rather than talk

- Ask some open-minded questions:
 - o Thanks for taking the time to meet with me. How are you today Jo,

Explore perception before trying to define reality

- o You have been working with us for two years now; how do you like it so far?
- o All going well then?

Behaviour: (Describe specific behaviour that you observe)

I have noticed that the last few weeks, your performance has been below expectation. I have therefore set up this meeting to discuss and address it, as I am very surprised in view of the last two years

Outcome (of the behaviour on yourself and others)

While this is not a formal review, we need to address this before the official review in 8 weeks; if not, unfortunately, I will be forced to take disciplinary action. (first in the form of a verbal warning).

Feelings: (Personal reaction)

We know each other well enough, and after all the last two years you have shown how capable you are (performed above expectation), I would like to give you the opportunity to address it

In the meantime, I would like you to know if you have noticed an issue and if there any reason you can think of.

I'd also if you think there is anything I could do more to help

Future: (What I would like you to do)

You need to improve your performance, and I suggest we meet on a weekly basis to discuss improvement and ensure you can meet the targets again.

Tired ? -- > Doctor → sick leave → Time off: both could impact time to improve performance, but medical cert could be a factor to alleviate

Think of legitimating Emotions but do not get emotional

- o I understand

End by summarising and agreeing on what was said and what is going to happen next



Case Scenario 2 – Pay/Promotion Freeze

Need to use the Pull method

Convince SAM to continue working hard despite the setback

While the decision is morally unfair, it is made for the good of the company and therefore the employees. If the company has bad publicity, it will impact business, making it harder for all, not just the board of management.

What's in it for SAM?

Individual: SAM

Must first start to listen rather than talk

- Ask some open-minded questions:
 - o Thanks for taking the time to meet with me,
 - o I have been getting excellent feedback on you, Sam and want to thank you for it

Explore perception before trying to define reality

- o What do you think about all the bad press we have been getting?

Behaviour: (Describe specific behaviour that you observe)

Financial institutions have been getting an extremely bad press over the last few months

Outcome (of the behaviour on yourself and others)

Our institution is very anxious to regain public confidence, therefore the board of management has decided to FREEZE pay and promotion for the next three years.

Feelings: (Personal reaction)

While we are all in the same situation, I particularly feel bad for you given your performance and the recommendations from your Branch manager.

Future: (What I would like you to do)

My hands are tied until the next review of the situation in 18 months, you are a very valuable contributor of our success, while this is a setback we need to see the positive of the situation, the company is currently healthy and if we continue on the same path when time comes those who made this possible and kept faith during the difficult time like now will get the reward they deserve.

Think of legitimating Emotions but do not get emotional

- o I understand

End by summarising and agreed what was said and what is going to happen next



Case Scenario 3 – Attitude towards Co Workers

Individual: The chef

Try using the Pull behaviour

Start listening first, few open-ended questions

Thanks for taking the time, another busy day for you I assume, is there a lot of booking for today?

Explore chef's perception

Anyway down to the reason I'm here today, how do you think this year went for you?

Has there been many challenges or issues?

Performance result

While the quality performance (in term of hygiene safety and cooking is excellent, the overall performance is below average due to the poor results in communication approachability and complain handling.

Use rational reasoning using examples of behaviours

Take from the sheet and match with the complains

Approachability

- He locked me in the cold room for 5 minutes and claimed he did not know I was in there.
- He hid my knives after I complained about him using one of them.
- Keeps saying 'do you know who I am' when questioned about any quality issues.

Complaint handling

- Told staff member to 'shove it' when they returned a fish dish that the customer rejected.

Communications

- He called me 'Fatso' and 'Fat ass' as I was walking away.
- He also calls people 'wasters' and 'useless' and shouts at people.
- Is always saying things like 'you're lucky I'm here, no one would eat in this dive if I was not here'.

Legitimate the concern over the behaviour and its effect on the general staff

BOFF

Behaviour: (describe specific behaviour that you observe)

I have noticed you attitude toward the staff, talking them down and abuse, this has become worse since the master chef program

Outcome: (of the behaviour on yourself and others

Feedback is poor, employee moral is low, and while there is certain success it does affect overall organisation performance and will impact the Chefs perception

Feelings: (Personal reaction)

MY feeling is that this is not acceptable behaviours from a chef



While I fully understand that running a kitchen is like been constantly at war, but even in real time the best officers in charge do not abuse their solders on the contrary, they lead by example, and built up a team that can face any challenges.

Future: (what I would like you to do)

Moving forward, I want those attitudes to disappear, but also, I want to know if there is any particular issue with the staff that have not been reported to me and that we need to address.

Think of legitimating Emotions but do not get emotional

- I understand

End by summarising and agreed what was said and what is going to happen next



TOPIC: Potential Conflict Situation

Case Scenario 1 –Time Keeping

Start listening first, few open-ended questions

Thanks for taking the time. How are you today?

Explore the employee perception

How do you think you are doing at work? any problems?

BOFF

Behaviour: (Describe specific behaviour that you observe)

The reason I called for this meeting is in relation to your timekeeping. You arrive late, regularly 2 to 3 times per week.

Outcome (of the behaviour on yourself and others)

Looking at your work output, you are an excellent worker, but if this does not change, a part the fact that it may give the impression that I am showing you some favouritism, it may also lead others to copy you.

Feelings: (Personal reaction)

I feel you are taking a very casual approach to core hours. Out of respect for your peers and myself, I feel you should be taking a more serious approach. In any case, this is a breach of our HR policy that could lead to disciplinary action if not corrected.

Future: (What I would like you to do)

Core hours must always be respected, but I understand there could be exceptions:

- In the event you are going to be late, I want to let your team lead or myself know
- In the event this is not followed through with or the explanation you provide is not convincing, I will need to take disciplinary action and start with a verbal warning.

I suggest we meet again next month for the next 6 months to monitor and discuss the situation till I am satisfied the situation is resolved.



TOPIC: Potential Conflict Situation

Case Scenario 2 –Body Odour

Must first start to listen rather than talk

- Ask some open-minded questions:
 - o Thanks for taking the time to meet with me. How are you today?

Explore perception before trying to define reality

- o Are you enjoying working with us? Any particular issues

BOFF

Behaviour: (Describe specific behaviour that you observe)

There is no nice or easy way, but I rather prefer been honest with you I have noticed a strong body odour from you

Outcome (of the behaviour on yourself and others)

Along with general Hygiene concerns, I have some concerns that this impacts general team working

Feelings: (Personal reaction)

I feel this plays against you

Future: (What I would like you to do)

While I am clueless whether this a case of bad hygiene or a medical condition, I would like to discuss with you what can be done

Think of legitimating Emotions but do not get emotional

- o I understand

End by summarising and agreeing with what was said and what is going to happen



TOPIC: Potential Conflict Situation

Case Scenario 3 –Bullying

BOFF

Behaviour: (Describe specific behaviour that you observe)

I have heard about bullying tactics being used such as Bad language, threats, shouting, and abusive tone.

Outcome (of the behaviour on yourself and others)

While there have been no official complaints, the staff is not happy, this will impact on staff retention and indirectly on our future performances.

Feelings: (Personal reaction)

My feeling is that if this is the case, this is non-professional and the attitude is not acceptable with any organisation, there are more adequate and professional methods to deal with team performance.

The fact that the teams can perform well demonstrates what they are capable of; use of such tactics is just poor management practice

Future: (What I would like you to do)

I want those tactics to cease immediately; they do not serve anybody.

I think there is a need to refresh management technics



TOPIC: Influencing

Case Scenario 1 –Pay Cut

Must first start to listen rather than talk

- Ask some open-minded questions:
 - o Thanks for taking the time to meet with me. How are you today?

Explore perception before trying to define reality

- Ask some open-minded questions:
 - o What are your thoughts about the company's current situation?

BOFF

Behaviour: (Describe specific behaviour that you observe)

The company is currently in a difficult situation

Outcome (of the behaviour on yourself and others)

We all need to take a 15% salary cut to secure jobs for another 12 months

Feelings: (Personal reaction)

I understand your view, and underperformance must be tackled. This is clear but this is a rather long term approach, while unfortunately the current situation requires all employees to try now to reach our target, not just those underperforming.

Future: (What I would like you to do)

Hopefully, all going well, we will recover the situation and address underperformance along with recognising those who made the additional efforts and made it possible.

In times like this, we need performers like you even more.



Case Scenario 2 – Overtime

Must first start to listen rather than talk

- Ask some open-minded questions:
 - o Thanks for taking the time to meet with me. How are you today?

Explore perception before trying to define reality

- Ask some open-minded questions:
 - o What are your thoughts about the company's current situation?

BOFF

Behaviour: (Describe specific behaviour that you observe)

Outcome (of the behaviour on yourself and others)

Missing our production target will have a greater impact than missing a game that can be recorded

Feelings: (Personal reaction)

While I understand this is a last-minute demand that cannot be enforced, we owe it to the company to put those two hours, missing target impact on performance and the company survival.

Future: (What I would like you to do)

I'd like you to understand the impact and make this additional effort