

Inklusiiv

Why Feedback Isn't Fixing Your Performance Problem

5 things leaders get wrong about feedback & what to do instead

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Why Isn’t Performance Improving?

You’re giving feedback.
You’re trying to be clear.
You’re having the conversations.
So why isn’t performance improving?

After an honest reflection some of this might sound familiar:

- You dread and possibly delay a difficult conversation for weeks. When you finally have it, the discussion shifts to tone and feelings instead of the actual issue.
- Your team says they want a “better feedback culture” but no one can define what that means.
- Expectations and priorities are clarified, yet deadlines slip because people are still not truly aligned.
- A conflict lingers for months because “it’s complicated.”
- Communication breaks down, cultural differences are blamed and nothing really changes.
- Disagreements aren’t voiced openly. They surface later as passive-aggressive comments or quiet resistance.

This is more common than you’d think, so if one or more of these resonate, **the problem probably isn’t that you’re not giving enough feedback**.

Feedback is a powerful tool, but it only works when the structural foundations around expectations and roles are already clear.

The Feedback Trap

"Feedback" is often used as shorthand for every performance-related conversation.

But there are actually **two different tools** at play and many leaders unknowingly mix them:

1.

Instruction

Instruction is about clarity. It answers: **what is expected here?**

It defines:

- Role
- Goals
- Responsibilities
- Standards
- Direction

Academic research highlights the importance of role clarity, and our data from multiple surveys across companies shows that it correlates strongly with a sense of belonging at work.[1]

2.

Relational Feedback

Relational feedback is about connection. It answers: **how is this affecting us?**

It involves:

- Sharing observations about behaviour
- Separating facts from interpretation
- Naming impact (on you, the team, or the work)
- Expressing what would strengthen the working relationship and fulfil underlying needs

[1] Rintala, O. & Ristimäki, M. (2026). On inclusion in the workplace through narrative review and critical reflections. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion - an International Journal (forthcoming). Correlations are based on survey data with 3000+ participants, conducted across multiple companies in 2023-2024.

Both are necessary, but they serve different purposes. When they're blended together, conversations become heavy, defensive, and unproductive.

Example:

> *"You haven't taken the initiative lately. I need you to be more proactive. I can't keep chasing you."*

What is this actually about?

- Was "proactive" clearly defined?
- Were decision rights explicit?
- Is there anxiety about delivery?
- Has frustration built up over time?

When observation, interpretation, emotion, and instruction are mixed together, the person receiving the message doesn't know what to respond to. They often defend themselves against the interpretation, instead of hearing the underlying concern. The focus shifts away from performance.

The 5 Mistakes Leaders Make About Feedback

1. Mixing Structure and Relationship in the Same Conversation
2. Confusing Interpretations with Observations
3. Calling Avoidance “Psychological Safety”
4. Intervening Too Late
5. Confusing Needs with Strategies — and Ignoring Emotions in Expert Work

1. Mixing Structure and Relationship in the Same Conversation

You address a missed deadline by talking about attitude. You clarify a role change while expressing accumulated frustration. You share impact without checking whether expectations were explicit.

If **structural clarity** is missing, relational conversations feel unfair. If **relational trust** is strained, structural instruction feels cold or misplaced. Precision about which lens you're using changes the tone immediately.

2. Confusing Interpretations with Observations

Our brains are meaning-making machines. We love to interpret, in light of our own experiences, backgrounds and values. In diverse teams, especially across cultures, ages and communication styles, assumptions multiply.

> *"He's disengaged."*
> *"They don't understand our standards."*
> *"She's too sensitive."*
> *"They're too direct."*

These are interpretations, without separating important elements at play:

- What happened (observable fact)
- What story you made about it
- What you felt
- What your feeling is telling you about what you need

When interpretations are presented as facts, people defend their identity rather than reflect on behaviour. Over time, professional shortcomings get framed as personality problems. And diversity, which could be an asset, starts to feel like friction.

3. Calling Avoidance "Psychological Safety"

Most leaders genuinely want their teams to feel safe, and psychological safety is a precondition for innovation and managing business risks. But **safety without clarity about roles and expectations** can lead to:

- Vague standards
- Unspoken resentment when performance is brought up
- Underperformance that goes unaddressed
- Quiet disengagement
- A culture of "niceness"

Clarity about roles and expectations without human connection leads to:

- Fear
- Stagnation
- Compliance
- Withdrawal

High performance doesn't come from choosing one over the other. It requires both human connection and clarity about roles and expectations.[2]

Avoiding hard conversations in the interests of harmony does not strengthen psychological safety or a sense of belonging. It creates ambiguity.

[2] Konrad, A., Richard, O., and Yang, Y. (2021). Both diversity and meritocracy: managing the diversity–meritocracy paradox with organizational ambidexterity. Journal of Management Studies, 58, Article 8, 2180–2206; Waldman, D., and Sparr, J. (2023). Rethinking diversity strategies: an application of paradox and positive organization behavior theories. Academy of Management Perspectives, 37, Article 2, 174–192.

4. Intervening Too Late

By the time many leaders step into a difficult conversation, the situation has already accumulated weight.

- Interpretations have solidified
- Frustration has grown
- Neutral behaviour is reinterpreted through a negative lens

When you don't feel confident separating observation from interpretation, or expressing the impact someone's actions have had without blaming them, it's easier to delay the conversation. And delay increases emotional load.

What could have been a 10-minute alignment conversation becomes a 60-minute tension-filled exchange, usually with HR or a senior leader involved.

5. Confusing Needs with Strategies — and Ignoring Emotions in Expert Work

In expert environments, we tend to assume we operate rationally. We value autonomy, ownership, freedom and responsibility.

And we assume emotions don't belong in performance conversations. But they are already there:

- Frustration
- Disappointment
- Concern about delivery
- Impatience about recognition and progress
- Anxiety about something going on in our private lives

When these needs remain unnamed, they show up indirectly, usually as rigid strategies.

> We say: *“From now on, send me daily updates.”*
> *Instead of: “I need predictability in delivery.”*
>
> We say: “This is unacceptable. I’ll need to approve these going forward.”
> Instead of: *“I am worried about how this affects our credibility.”*

Offering strategies is not wrong. But when we jump straight to strategy without naming the underlying need, we don’t open up the possibilities to meet those needs in different ways. We miss out on the creativity and autonomy of the experts we’ve hired.

Especially in expert teams, this creates friction, because autonomy matters. People resist being told how to think or operate.

Separating:

- What happened
- What I feel
- What I need
- What outcome we’re aiming for

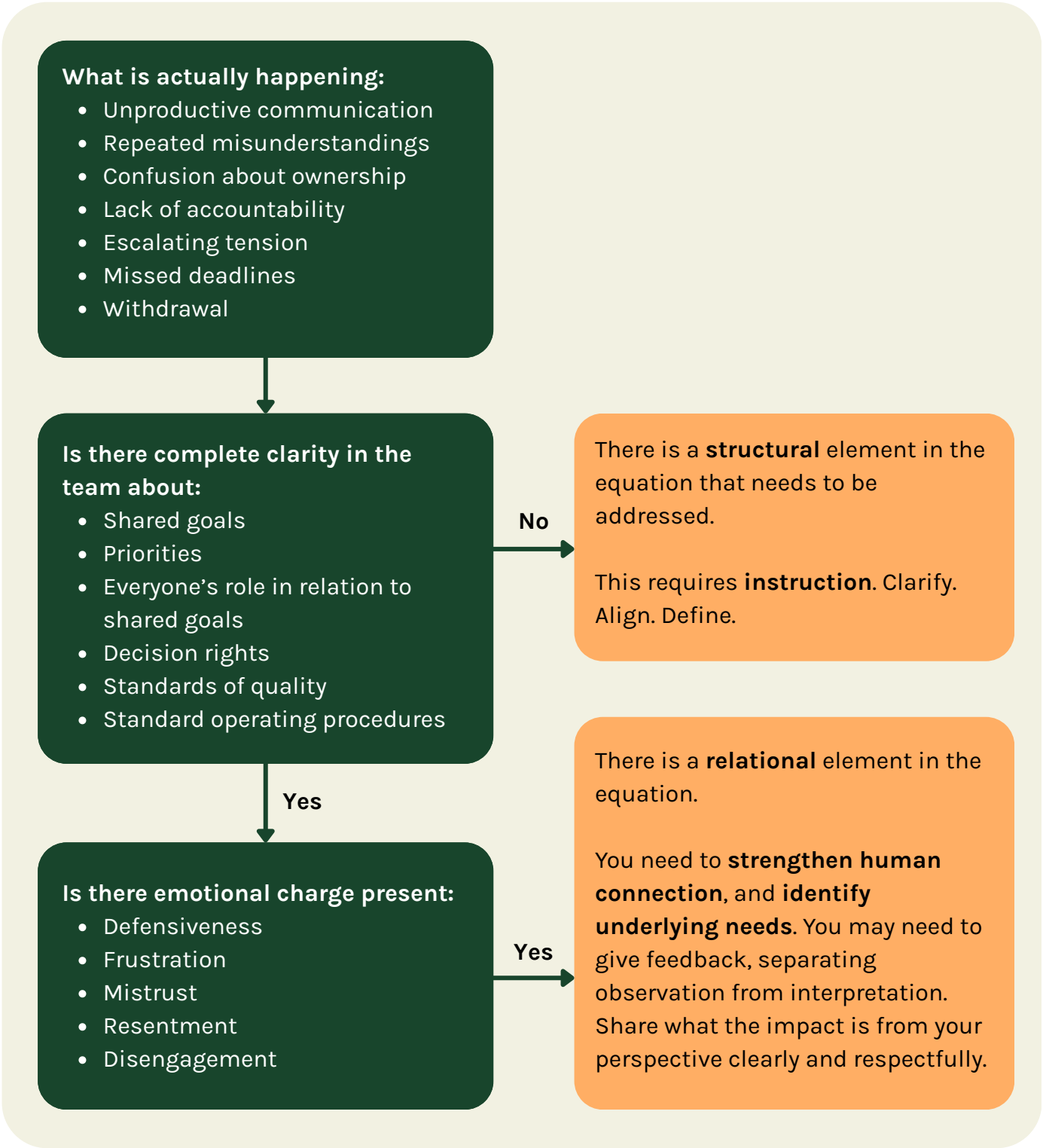
…creates space for shared problem-solving.

Emotions are not the opposite of professionalism, but a part of the human experience also at work. Unexamined emotions are what make conversations unproductive.

When leaders learn to work with needs explicitly instead of only prescribing strategies, feedback becomes far more effective.

The Decision Tree:
Is This Structural or Relational?

When something feels “off,” pause and diagnose before reacting.
Sequence matters. When you reverse the order, conversations escalate or go around in circles.



Example of a real life situation:

Scenario:
A team member misses, for the second time in a row, a deadline that delays the next steps of the project.

A common reaction might sound like this:
“Your tendency to miss deadlines is very frustrating”

But before jumping into that conversation,

Ask yourself:

- What can I factually observe here?
- When was the agreed deadline, and when was the work delivered?
- Did the person fully understand how this deadline connects to the rest of the project?
- Did they have what they needed to meet it — time, information, support?
- What am I feeling about what happened, and why? What does that feeling tell me about what matters to me here?

When bringing up the issue:

- Approach the conversation with curiosity.
- Begin with what you can observe about what happened, then shift your focus to understanding.
- Listen actively, to understand — not simply to respond. Sometimes this looks like checking your understanding out loud:
  - **“***Do you mean that the scope changed while you were working on it?”*
  - *“So if I’m hearing you right, you didn’t realise the design team needed this earlier?”*

These small moments of clarification can reveal assumptions, misunderstandings, or missing information.

At the same time, notice what you are observing and feeling in the conversation. Those signals often point to what matters most — whether that's reliability, predictability, or trust across the team.

From there, the conversation can move toward alignment: understanding the impact, clarifying expectations, and agreeing on how to handle similar situations in the future.

If Performance Issues Keep Repeating...

If this keeps happening, it's not a people problem. It's a skills gap.

Most leaders respond by doing more of the same: more feedback, more check-ins, more conversations. But when the foundational skills are missing — separating structure from relationship, observation from interpretation, needs from strategies — more effort won't change the pattern.

This isn't fixed by reading a book or attending a one-off workshop. It's built through practice and reinforcement over time, after identifying what the root causes are.

Start with the root cause.

In a 30-minute conversation, we'll help you identify:

- Whether the friction you're experiencing is structural, relational, or both
- Where the highest-leverage intervention point is
- What building this skill would look like in practice

This conversation is free and comes with no strings attached. If we can help, we'll tell you how. If we can't, we'll tell you that too.

Book your conversation →

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