



# Feedback Guide

Practical tools for leaders who need to tackle tough behavioural conversations without damaging trust, confidence or performance.

# Guide to Giving Purposeful Feedback

A practical toolkit for leaders and managers who want clarity, confidence and accountability.

## Introduction

Most feedback fails because it is too vague, too late, too soft, or too loaded.

This guide is for leaders and managers who want to give feedback that changes behaviour without damaging trust.

It is practical, direct and designed to be used under pressure — not read once and forgotten.

Inside, you'll find simple tools to help you raise difficult issues calmly, clearly and fairly, while keeping accountability high.

The focus throughout is on behaviour, impact and next steps. Not because emotion does not matter, but because unclear conversations create confusion, frustration and avoidable performance issues.

Use this guide in real moments, with real people, when feedback matters most.

### Who This Guide Is For

This guide is for leaders and managers who want to lead well, not tiptoe. For those who value clarity, fairness and accountability. It is also for HR and L&D teams supporting managers under pressure.



### Who This Guide Is Not For

This guide will be less useful if you are looking for a way to avoid difficult conversations, dress up vague feedback as kindness, or talk about accountability without reinforcing it.



# How to Use This Guide

You do not need to read this guide from start to finish. Use it when you need to prepare, reset or act.

1

**If you need to say something now**

→ *Go to Manager's Feedback Guide + Conversation Starters*

2

**If the behaviour keeps happening**

→ *Go to 7 Behaviours Leaders Avoid Challenging*

3

**If the conversation feels tense or emotional**

→ *Go to Emotions in Feedback + Managing the Threat Response*

4

**If behaviour needs to change and stay changed**

→ *Use The Accountability Loop*



# Contents

Why feedback gets avoided	<b>02</b>
How to Use This Guide	<b>03</b>
The Feedback Engine	<b>05</b>
Starting difficult conversations	<b>06</b>
Preparing for the conversation	<b>08</b>
Seven behaviours leaders avoid challenging	<b>09</b>
Managing emotion and threat response	<b>17</b>
Making behaviour change stick	<b>21</b>
Case Study	<b>28</b>
More from Thinking Focus	<b>33</b>

# The Feedback Engine

A simple structure for feedback that drives clarity, ownership and behaviour change.

WHAT



SO WHAT



NOW WHAT

1



## WHAT

### Name the Behaviour

Describe what you saw or heard. Be specific, factual and observable. Avoid labels, judgement or assumptions about motive. Invite them to offer their perspective.



#### TRY SAYING

"I noticed [specific behaviour] in [specific situation]."

#### AVOID

"You're careless."  
"You're difficult."

2



## SO WHAT

### Explain the Impact

Help them understand why it matters. Invite them to share how they see the impact. Connect the behaviour to its effect on people, trust, quality, pace, risk or results.



#### TRY SAYING

"The impact of that was [specific impact]."

#### AVOID

Making it personal. Focus on the consequences.

3



## NOW WHAT

### Agree the Change

Move the conversation towards ownership. Agree what needs to happen next, what support is needed and how you will follow up.



#### TRY SAYING

"Going forward, I'd like to see [specific behaviour]. Let's agree how we'll make that happen."

#### AVOID

Ending with awareness. End with ownership.



### STAY WITH THE BEHAVIOUR, IMPACT AND NEXT STEPS

The clearer you are, the fairer the conversation becomes.



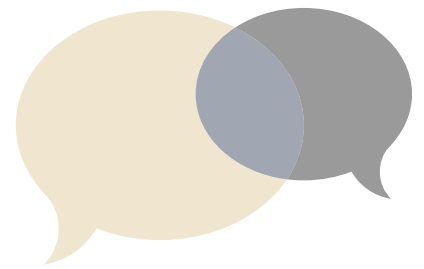
# Conversation Starters

If you stumble into the opening, you start on the back foot.  
A calm, clear first sentence helps the conversation feel purposeful rather than personal.

# 7 Ways to Start a Tough Conversation

1

"There's something I'd like to share that will help us work better together."



2

"I want to explore something that may be affecting your impact."

3

"I've noticed a behaviour we need to talk about."

4

"This might feel uncomfortable to hear, but I have some feedback for you."

5

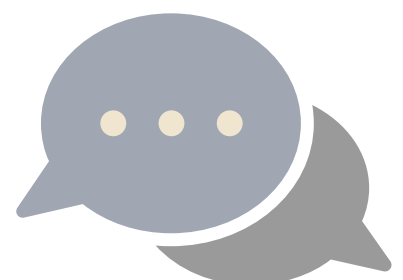
"We need to have a conversation that will help both of us succeed."

6

"There's something I want to raise because your impact matters."

7

"I have an observation I want to share with you."



# The Behaviour Challenge Checklist

Before you challenge behaviour, get clear. The aim is not to build a case against someone, it's to make the conversation fair, specific and useful.

## Is it worth raising?

- Is this behaviour recurring?
- Is it affecting people, performance, trust or delivery?
- Have I addressed this before?
- What happens if I say nothing?

*NOTE:  
If silence has a cost, the conversation matters.*

## What exactly happened?

- Can I describe the behaviour without judgement?
- Do I have one or two specific examples?
- Can I explain where and when it happened?
- Do I know what I want to see instead?

*NOTE:  
If you cannot describe it clearly, you cannot challenge it fairly.*

## What am I bringing into the room?

- Am I calm enough to be clear?
- Am I making assumptions about their intent?
- Am I reacting emotionally?
- Am I choosing comfort over clarity?
- Am I ready to be curious, not combative?

*NOTE:  
The conversation starts before you speak.*

## What do I need to land?

- What is my opening sentence?
- What is the key message?
- What outcome do I want?
- What support might they need?
- What consequence or risk needs to be understood?

*NOTE:  
Do not wing the first sentence.*

## What follow-up will make it stick?

- Have we agreed the What, So What and Now What?
- Does the person understand the expected change?
- Have we agreed support and milestones?
- Have I booked the follow-up?
- Have I reinforced what better looks like?

*NOTE:  
No follow-up means no accountability.*



# **7 Behaviours Leaders Avoid Challenging**

Most feedback becomes difficult because the behaviour has already been tolerated for too long. These are the seven patterns leaders often notice, explain away, and then regret not challenging earlier.

# 1. Passive Aggression & Sarcasm



## WHAT TO SAY

"I've noticed a pattern in some of your comments — they come across as sharp or sarcastic, especially in meetings. For example, yesterday when you said 'Well, if people actually did their jobs...' the tone felt dismissive."

## WHY IT MATTERS

"Comments like this shut people down. Others become quieter, less willing to share ideas, and more defensive. It damages trust and collaboration."

## NOW WHAT

"Let's work on raising concerns directly, without the edge. If something frustrates you, bring it to me early — we'll tackle it together."

## Leadership Note:

Passive aggression is a symptom of **unspoken frustration**. Bringing it into the open without shaming them is key.

## 2. Emotional Volatility

### WHAT TO SAY

“In the last few weeks, I’ve noticed moments where frustration shows up strongly in your tone — for example, your raised voice in Tuesday’s huddle.”

### WHY IT MATTERS

“When the emotional temperature spikes, the team withdraws. People start to tread carefully, which reduces transparency and slows problem-solving.”

### NOW WHAT

“I want you to have the space to feel pressure — but we need to manage how it shows up. Let’s agree one or two strategies you’ll use to stay composed in the moment.”

### Leadership Note:

Volatility creates **walking-on-eggshells** cultures. Consistency is the antidote.



## 3. Blame, Excuses, Defensiveness



### WHAT TO SAY

"I've noticed that when issues come up, your first response is often explanations or pointing to others — like yesterday when we discussed the missed deadline."

### WHY IT MATTERS

"This stops us from learning quickly. Accountability gets diluted. It also sends a message that owning mistakes isn't safe."

### NOW WHAT

"Let's focus on what's in your control. Next time something slips, bring the issue and your proposed fix. That mindset shift will build trust and momentum."

### Leadership Note:

Defensiveness often means the threat response is triggered. Create **psychological safety** while keeping accountability high.

## 4. Withdrawal or Going Quiet

### WHAT TO SAY

"I've noticed that in meetings you've become quieter and less involved — especially when discussions get difficult."

### WHY IT MATTERS

"When your voice withdraws, the team loses valuable insight, and difficult topics remain unaddressed. Silence becomes permission."

### NOW WHAT

"I'd like to see you contribute more consistently. If something is blocking you — confidence, clarity, conflict — let's explore it."

### Leadership Note:

Withdrawal is often a **fear response**. Approach with curiosity, not accusation.



# 5. Micromanagement



## WHAT TO SAY

"I've noticed you're stepping into tasks you've delegated — rewriting work or redoing steps the team has already completed."

## WHY IT MATTERS

"This slows delivery, reduces ownership, and signals to the team that you don't trust them. It prevents people from growing."

## NOW WHAT

"Let's agree where you need to set clearer expectations upfront, where you need check-ins, and where you need to let the team own the work without taking it back."

## Leadership Note:

Micromanagement usually comes from **control or fear**, not arrogance. The goal is to build **confidence in others**, not lower standards.

# 6. Dismissing Ideas or Talking Over People

## WHAT TO SAY

"In yesterday's session, there were a few moments where you dismissed ideas quickly, or interrupted people mid-sentence."

## WHY IT MATTERS

"This signals that some voices matter more than others. It creates a 'why bother?' mentality and reduces creativity."

## NOW WHAT

"I'd like you to stay curious a little longer — ask questions, explore ideas, and make space for different perspectives before concluding."

## Leadership Note:

The antidote to dismissiveness is **curiosity before judgement**.



# 7. Chronic Lateness / Unreliability



## WHAT TO SAY

"I've noticed your repeated lateness to meetings and missed deadlines — for example, Monday's project review and last Friday's update."

## WHY IT MATTERS

"When commitments slip, it forces others to wait or adapt. It erodes trust, reliability, and delivery rhythm."

## NOW WHAT

"Let's agree what needs to change — and what support you might need — so your delivery becomes consistently dependable."

## Leadership Note:

Lateness signals **disorganisation, overwhelm, or misaligned priorities**. Address the root cause, not just the symptom.



# How to Stay in Control

This section exists to help you stay calm and clear so the practical feedback tools in this guide work as intended.

# Why Feedback Triggers a Threat Response

**Feedback often becomes difficult before anyone says a word.**

Before many feedback conversations, leaders do not just prepare. They rehearse the worst-case scenario.

“They’ll kick off.”  
“They’ll cry.”  
“They’ll deny it.”  
“They’ll leave.”  
“I’ll make it worse.”

The brain treats discomfort like danger. So the leader delays, softens the message, talks around the issue, sends an email, or waits for the behaviour to become impossible to ignore.

That may feel safer in the moment, but avoidance rarely protects trust. More often, it creates confusion, resentment and repeated behaviour.

**Practical anchor** before the conversation:

*“I don’t need to predict their reaction. I need to be clear, calm and fair.”*

## **Leader’s reminder**

Your role is not to control their feelings. Your role is to raise the behaviour, explain the impact and move the conversation forward.



# The Threat Response Works Both Ways

The person receiving feedback may also experience threat. Even when the feedback is fair, their brain may hear something much bigger.

Not: "This behaviour needs to change."

But:

"I've failed."

"I'm not good enough."

"I'm in trouble."

"They've lost confidence in me."

*The aim is not to remove emotion. The aim is to stop emotion hijacking the conversation.*

That is why people may defend, justify, minimise, withdraw, blame or counterattack. They are not always being difficult. Sometimes they are protecting themselves.

## Keep the conversation grounded

When threat shows up, come back to three things:

**Behaviour** — what happened

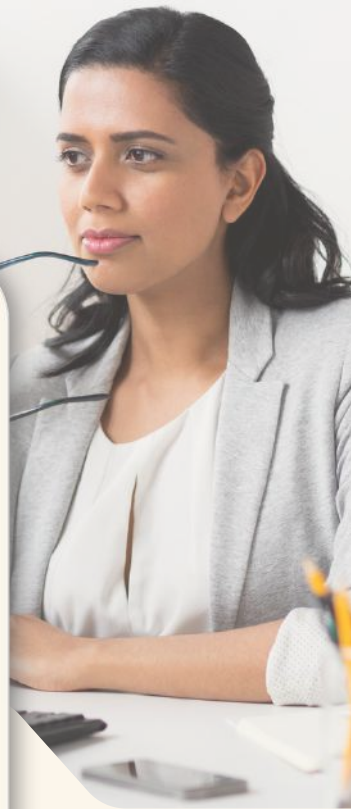
**Impact** — why it matters

**Next steps** — what needs to change



# How to Keep the Threat Response in Check

When emotion rises, clarity drops. Use these steps to stay steady, and keep the conversation productive.



1



## NOTICE

Recognise what is happening.

Name what you are feeling and what is showing up in the other person. Awareness creates choice.

### TRY SAYING



"I can feel tension rising."

I can see this is a sensitive topic."

we are both feeling strongly about this."

2



## PAUSE

Create space before reacting.

A pause breaks the cycle. It protects your tone and helps you think, not react.

### TRY SAYING



"Let me think about that for a moment."

"I want to respond properly, give me a second."

"Let's pause for a moment."

3



## ACKNOWLEDGE WITHOUT BACKING AWAY.

Recognise the discomfort without diluting the message.

Validate the emotion. Reassert your intent to have a useful, respectful conversation.

### TRY SAYING



"I know this is uncomfortable."

"I care about helping, so I need to be clear."

Let's keep this respectful and focused."

4



## RETURN TO WORK

Bring the focus back to behaviour, impact and next steps.

Steer the conversation back to facts, impact and what needs to happen next.

### TRY SAYING



"Let's return to what actually happened."

What's the impact of this behaviour."

"What do we need to agree will happen next?"



### LEADER'S REMINDER

You cannot control how they respond, but you can control how you lead.

Clear is calm.  
Calm is controlled.  
Controlled is leadership.



# How to Make it Stick

Feedback creates awareness.  
Accountability creates change.

# The Accountability Loop



## What is the Accountability Loop

Whenever you are asking people to change behaviour, you need more than a conversation. You need clear expectations, an honest diagnosis of the gaps, and consistent follow-through until the new behaviour becomes the expected standard. That is the Accountability Loop.

## Why it Matters

Leaders often believe that because they've told their people that's enough, only to be disappointed later.

Too often, people are told — or worse, emailed — new expectations that simply do not land because there is no involvement or follow-through. If you want your behavioural changes to land, you need to establish accountability, and that requires robust follow-through.

People need to be involved in the desired future state and understand why the current reality is not the desired standard.

## How to use it

Follow the five-step process to agree crystal-clear expectations, understand and close any gaps (which will prevent the transition) before setting your people on a path. Then it's all about monitoring, reinforcement and reviewing to show that the desired change is important.

# Clarity



"Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind." – Brené Brown



## WHAT

Define the behaviour, standard, outcome, timeframe and relevance with complete clarity. Use SMART and ensure the Reward/Risk is clear – what are the benefits/consequences if delivered/missed?



## WHY

Ambiguity is the enemy of clarity. **People can only hit targets they can see.**

Clear expectations remove assumptions and create shared ownership.

**Leader's Note:** Clarity accelerates speed, reduces rework and prevents misunderstandings that quietly drain team performance.



## HOW

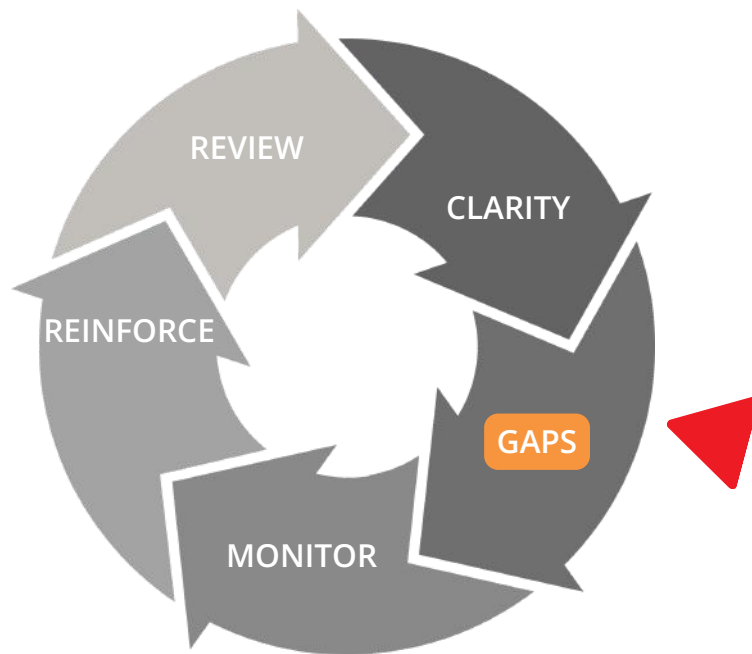
- Describe the standard: *'What good looks like'*
- Include short-term milestones to build confidence
- Clarify consequences — be supportive, not threatening, and establish what support is available



## COMMENT

**Example:** "By Friday, I'd like the customer plan updated with risks, next steps and owner names. Let's check progress Wednesday."

# Gaps



*You cannot expect people to make the leap if you have not helped them learn how to land.*



## WHAT

A diagnostic step to understand why the behaviour or performance issue exists.



## WHY

If you misdiagnose the problem, you will frustrate the person and fail to create change. Most performance issues are about capability or environment — not attitude. When leaders treat an attitude problem like a skills problem, everyone ends up frustrated.



## HOW

### Test for gaps:

- A. Do they have the knowledge?
- B. Do they have the skills?
- C. Do they have what they need to succeed?
- D. Do they have the right mindset to win?



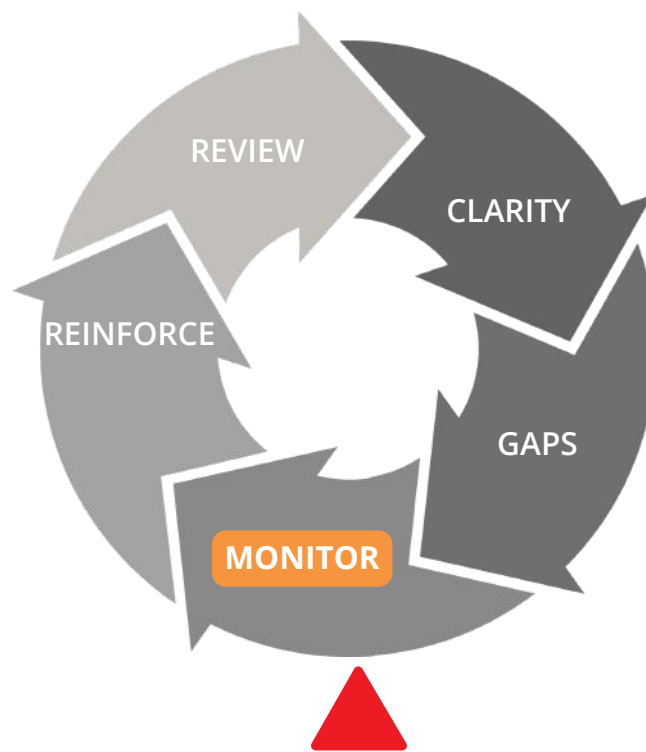
## COMMENT

### Golden Rule:

- If A–C are missing, the leader or organisation has work to do.
- If D is the gap, the individual needs to own the choice they are making.

**Note:** If they know what to do and how to do it, but aren't doing it — this signals a mindset or motivation issue.

# Monitor



*"Without monitoring, change becomes optional — **optional change never sticks.**"*



## WHAT

Active, regular follow-up on milestones, behaviours and outcomes.



## WHY

Most leaders think "I told them once" means accountability. It doesn't!  
Behaviour change fades quickly without reinforcement.



## HOW

- Review milestones weekly
- Give real-time feedback (+ve/-ve)
- Celebrate small wins — early success accelerates motivation
- Reinforce the right effort and attitude
- Challenge excuses immediately



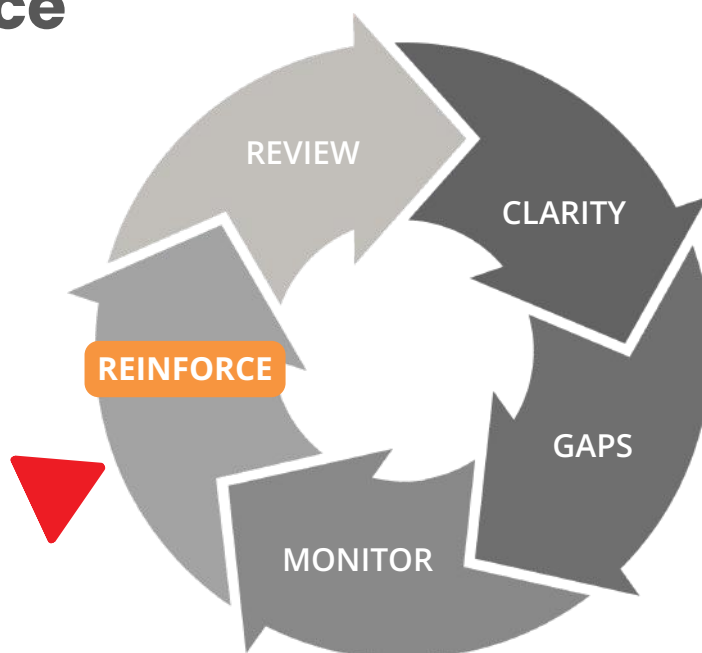
## COMMENT

### Examples:

"I can see progress in X — great work."

"We're behind on Y — let's reset and remove any blockers."

# Reinforce



*"Reinforcement builds momentum. Redirecting prevents drift."*



## WHAT

A mini-reset conversation depending on whether progress is on-track or off-course.



## WHY

People need reinforcement when on-track AND correction when off-course. Leaders must do both with equal consistency.



## HOW

- Reinforce: the right activity, mindset, behaviours, and celebrate success - "Your preparation for today's meeting was excellent — keep this going."
- Redirect: When the activity or effort isn't aligned to the agreed goal and when behaviours don't match those expected - "This isn't matching what we agreed — let's reset expectations."



## COMMENT

### Golden Rule:

Reinforce effort AND attitude - "Reinforcement builds momentum. Redirecting prevents drift."  
Challenge poor behaviour AND poor ownership.

# Review



*Embed accountability in your team by using this loop weekly, not only when problems arise.*

“When you consistently review progress, people consistently make progress.”

Peter Drucker



## WHAT

A closing clarity conversation to cement expectations going forward.



## WHY

**“Recontracting prevents the ‘illusion of agreement’ — the silent killer of accountability.”**

- Prevent standards slipping
- Eliminate misunderstandings
- Clarify accountability
- Avoid repeating the same conversation

**Recontracting** resets alignment and reinforces accountability.



## HOW

**Check for:**

- **Clarity:** “What happens next and when?”
- **Confidence:** “How confident do you feel doing this?”
- **Consequences:** “What happens if this isn’t achieved?”
- **Support:** “What do you need from me?”



## COMMENT

**Example 1:** “By Tuesday, we’ll have X complete.”

**Example 2:** “From this coming Monday, you will share the team updates by 10am.”

***This is where ownership is cemented.***



# Case Study

# Case Study: Turning Pressure-Driven Behaviour into Purposeful Leadership

How clear feedback, coaching and accountability helped a business unit leader rebuild trust, reduce pressure and improve performance.

## The Situation

A global manufacturing client contacted us about a team leader responsible for a major business unit. The environment was fast-paced, customer demands changed frequently, and pressure was passed down through the line.

The result was a team operating under stress, with behaviours starting to damage trust, confidence and performance.



## What was showing up



Impatience



Short-Tempered Responses



Reactive Decision-Making



Team Walking on Eggshells

**Organisation:**  
Global Manufacturer

**Challenge:**  
Pressure-driven leadership behaviours

**Audience:**  
Business Unit Leader and Team

**Duration:**  
3 months

**Outcome:**  
Improved leadership behaviour, stronger engagement and more stable performance.



*"The issue was not intent. It was impact."*



# The reset: from reaction to responsibility

## Before:

- Pressure passed down the line
- Unclear expectations
- Emotional spikes
- Team withdrawal
- Performance slipping

## Intervention:

- Named the behaviours and impact
- Explored triggers and threat response
- Reframed the leader's internal narrative
- Rebuilt clarity around standards
- Created follow-up routines
- Reinforced progress and ownership

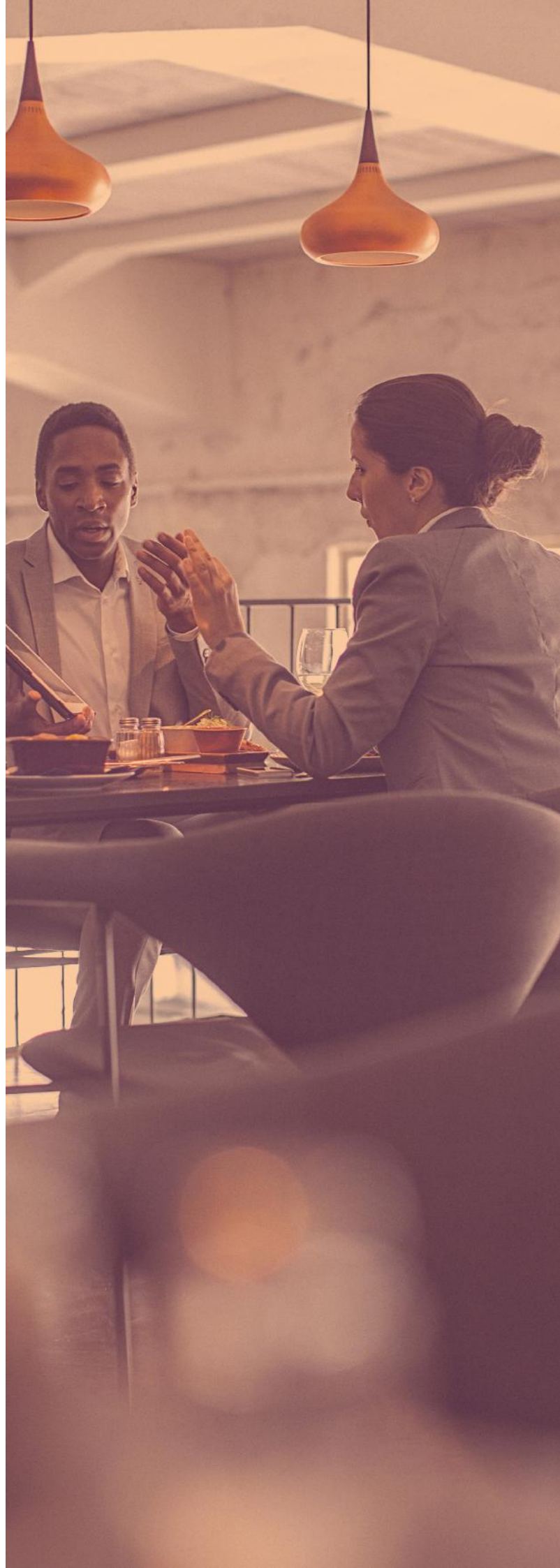
## After:

- Calmer leadership
- Clearer expectations
- Greater team confidence
- Stronger accountability
- Improved engagement

### The Important Shift

We separated what had happened to the leader from what was still their responsibility.

That distinction mattered. It created empathy without removing accountability.





## The outcome: behaviour changed, trust improved, performance stabilised

The leader became calmer, clearer and more consistent under pressure.

### Leadership

The team reported feeling safer, better supported and clearer about expectations.

### Team

The business unit moved from firefighting to more confident, stable delivery.

### Performance



*"We can't believe the transformation in such a short time. They're unrecognisable, and we're delighted with them and how they are leading their business unit now."*

**HR Director, EMEA**



### Leader's Reflection

"My preference is always to reinforce the good — to catch people doing the right things and celebrate it. That creates a feedback loop that breeds success.

But poor behaviours still need to be addressed quickly and clearly. People need to understand what they're doing, the impact it is having and what needs to change.

Feedback is not a threat. Done well, it is the catalyst for change."



# More from Thinking Focus

This guide gives managers the structure. The real shift happens when leaders practise the conversations, build the confidence to use them, and create the accountability routines that make behaviour change stick.

That is where we help.

We work with leaders and teams to build clarity, confidence and accountability through practical workshops, coaching and behaviour-change programmes.

To explore how we can support your managers and leaders, get in touch.



[thinkingfocus.com](https://www.thinkingfocus.com)



[hello@thinkingfocus.com](mailto:hello@thinkingfocus.com)



+44 (0) 333 939 8606