

A Practical Thinking Tool

The Future-Ready

Leader's

Conversation

Playbook

What to Say When It Matters Most

Five Scenarios

Real-Time Decision Making

Trust-Building Conversations

About This Playbook

Built for the moment — not the model

Most leadership challenges don't show up as strategies or frameworks. They show up as moments. A conversation you've been putting off. A decision you need to make without full clarity. A meeting where something feels off, but you can't quite name it.

Many of the challenges leaders face are not the result of incapable people or lack of effort. They are often the result of how the work is set up, unclear expectations, incomplete information, environments that do not fully support people in doing their best work, or how leaders respond when things start to drift.

In those moments, what you say and how you show up matters more than models or theory. This playbook is built for those moments where judgment matters more than certainty. It is not to provide scripts to follow word for word, but to help you respond more intentionally, and lead in a way that builds trust rather than erodes it. This thinking tool is designed to help you stay clear under pressure, respond in real time, and navigate conversations where the outcome is not fully known in advance.

This playbook contains five common leadership situations:

- When performance is slipping and you're not sure why
- When expectations need to be reset without losing trust
- When your team feels disengaged or checked out
- When someone pushes back and the conversation shifts
- When you need to make a decision without full clarity

Each section is built to help you:

- Understand what's really happening beneath the surface
- Approach the conversation with clarity and confidence
- Respond in a way that strengthens both outcomes and relationships

This playbook is a practical extension of the ideas in *The Future-Ready Leader*, designed to help you apply them in conversations where it matters most.

Scenario 01

When a team member's performance is slipping and you're not sure whether the issue is them, something you could have done differently, or the way the work is structured

What's Really Happening

When performance drops, it's rarely just about effort or lack of capability. In most cases, the team member is someone who has already shown they can contribute at a high level, but something is not working in the current context. More often than not, it is a mix of unclear expectations, competing priorities, lack of support, or something the leader hasn't fully seen yet.

If you move too quickly to judge the situation, you risk solving the wrong problem and damaging trust in the process. Strong leaders start from the assumption that team members are capable, and treat a drop in performance as a signal to better understand the environment, expectations, and support around the work.

What Most Leaders Do

Initiating conversations of this nature is often the most challenging aspect. Most leaders delay the conversation hoping the situation will resolve itself. When they do address it, the feedback is often too vague to lead to meaningful change or to reflect the importance of the issue. Others assume the issue is motivation or capability and approach the conversation from that perspective, or move too quickly to solutions without fully understanding what is actually driving the decline. These approaches rarely resolve the issue and often create frustration for both the leader and the team member.

A Better Approach

1. Start with clear observation

Focus on what's actually happening, not your interpretation.

2. Open the conversation

Create space for their perspective before drawing conclusions.

3. Explore the real source

Look at clarity, support, workload, and expectations — not just performance.

4. Take shared ownership

Acknowledge where you may have contributed to the situation.

5. Reset expectations with clarity

Define what success looks like and how you'll move forward.

Example Phrasing

"Here are some things I have observed. Can we walk through what's been happening from your perspective so we can pinpoint where things are breaking down?"

"There may be aspects on my side that haven't been clear — let's clarify things together so we can move forward."

"What obstacles are getting in the way, and how can I help you overcome them?"

"Let's align on what success looks like over the next few weeks and check in regularly to make sure we're on track."

"Let's both stay close to this and adjust as we learn more about what's actually driving it."

What to Avoid

- Jumping to conclusions about attitude or effort
- Being indirect to avoid discomfort
- Taking full responsibility and removing accountability
- Waiting until the issue becomes urgent

Key Takeaway

Performance issues are often signals. **The goal is to understand what the signal is telling us** before trying to fix anything. These moments test a leader's ability to separate assumptions from reality and understand what is actually driving performance before acting.

Scenario 02

When someone pushes back on your direction and you need to respond without shutting them down or letting the conversation drift

What's Really Happening

When someone questions your direction, it is easy to interpret the moment as resistance or to begin labeling the individual as difficult. Often, what is actually happening is that the team member feels safe enough to raise a concern, surface a blind spot, or ask a question others may be reluctant to voice. This is likely evidence that the environment feels safe enough for people to speak up.

Leaders who want high-performing and adaptive teams do not simply manage these moments well. They intentionally create an environment where people feel safe raising concerns, even when those concerns may be unpopular. This kind of environment becomes a learning culture, where questions, challenge, and respectful dissent strengthen decision-making rather than threaten it. If the leader reacts too quickly or defensively, the conversation can shift from learning to silence, and valuable insight may be lost.

What Most Leaders Do

Moments like this can feel highly charged, especially when they happen in a meeting or in front of others. Many leaders respond by shutting the concern down in order to regain control of the conversation. Others overexplain their reasoning, become defensive, or begin backtracking in a way that creates confusion about direction. Some avoid addressing the pushback directly and allow the conversation to drift without clear resolution. These responses may assert control in the moment, but they train the team to stay quiet the next time something important needs to be said.

A Better Approach

1. Pause before responding

Resist the urge to react immediately. Give yourself space to respond with curiosity rather than defensiveness.

2. Acknowledge the concern

Show that the input has been heard without immediately agreeing or disagreeing.

3. Clarify what is really being surfaced

Explore whether the issue relates to direction, execution, risk, assumptions, or missing information.

4. Respond with clarity

Address the concern directly, either reinforcing the direction or adjusting it if needed.

5. Close with alignment and continued openness

Confirm next steps and create space for continued dialogue if new concerns emerge.

Example Phrasing

"I appreciate you raising this. Help me understand the concern or risk you're seeing."

"That's an important perspective — let's explore it before deciding next steps."

"Whether we stay the course or adjust, discussing this helps the team make stronger decisions."

"That is helpful context. What part of this do you think carries the most risk if we move forward as planned?"

"Based on this, here's how we'll move forward. If new concerns come up, let's surface them early so we can address them directly."

"We'll align on next steps now and revisit if needed, but I want to ensure we're clear on direction."

What to Avoid

- Shutting the concern down too quickly
- Taking the pushback personally
- Overexplaining to regain control
- Leaving the conversation unresolved

Key Takeaway

Questions and respectful challenge are not threats to leadership. **They are often signals of trust and opportunities for learning.** These moments test a leader's ability to stay open to challenge without losing clarity or direction.

Scenario 03

When a team member or your team seems quiet, disengaged, or checked out and you need to shift the energy

What's Really Happening

When a team or team member becomes noticeably quieter or less willing to contribute, it is easy to interpret the issue as a lack of engagement, motivation, or commitment. Often, what is actually happening is more complex. Silence can be a signal of competing priorities, unclear direction, fatigue, lack of psychological safety, or a sense that contributions are not making a meaningful difference. In some cases, the team may be overwhelmed. In others, they may no longer see how their work connects to outcomes that matter.

Leaders who want high-performing teams resist the temptation to treat silence or presumed disengagement as simply an attitude problem. Instead, they approach it as a signal that something in the environment, communication, or team dynamic needs closer attention. If the issue is misread, leaders may end up pushing harder when what is really needed is clarity, support, and reconnection. When leaders assume disengagement is an attitude issue, they often respond with pressure. When they treat it as a signal, they respond with curiosity and clarity.

What Most Leaders Do

Moments like this can be frustrating because the issue often presents subtly before it becomes obvious. Many leaders respond by pushing for more visible participation without first understanding what is driving the shift. Some begin increasing meetings, check-ins, or requests for updates in an attempt to regain momentum, or assume the issue is a lack of engagement and begin addressing it as a performance or attitude concern. These responses may create short-term activity, but they often fail to address the underlying cause and can be the catalyst for increased fatigue or disengagement.

A Better Approach

1. Notice the shift early

Pay attention to changes in energy, participation, and team dynamics before the issue deepens.

2. Explore what may be driving it

Look beyond surface behaviour to clarity, workload, trust, and competing demands.

3. Reconnect the work to purpose

Help the team see how their work contributes to broader goals and outcomes.

4. Remove unnecessary friction

Identify obstacles, unclear priorities, or processes that may be draining focus and energy.

5. Rebuild momentum through clarity and support

Reset expectations, provide support, and create conditions for the team to re-engage.

Example Phrasing

"I've noticed a shift in energy and participation. I would like to better understand what I am seeing."

"What are the obstacles getting in the way?"

"Let's step back and make sure what we're working on still feels clear, manageable, and meaningful."

"What's getting in the way right now, and where can I step in to help remove those obstacles?"

"Let's identify one or two immediate adjustments we can make and check back in to see what's improving."

"We'll keep this simple and focus on what will help you and the team regain momentum."

What to Avoid

- Assuming disengagement is simply an attitude issue
- Increasing pressure without understanding the cause
- Adding more meetings instead of more clarity
- Ignoring early signs of fatigue or silence

Key Takeaway

Disengagement or silence is often a signal, not the root issue itself. **The goal is to understand what is driving the shift** and create the conditions for the team to reconnect and perform. These moments test a leader's ability to recognize what is changing beneath the surface before it becomes visible in results.

Scenario 04

When expectations were unclear and now you need to reset alignment without losing trust

What's Really Happening

When expectations are not met, it is easy to focus on the outcome and assume the issue is execution. Often, what is actually happening is that the expectations themselves were not as clear, aligned, or shared as intended.

In many cases, what seems clear to the leader was interpreted differently by the team or team member. Priorities may have shifted, context may have been missing, or assumptions may have gone unspoken. The resulting misalignment is less about correcting performance and more about re-establishing a shared understanding of what success looks like.

Leaders who handle these moments well recognize that unclear expectations are often a shared gap, rather than an individual failure. How the reset is handled matters. Done thoughtfully, it affirms the capability of the team member or team while bringing greater clarity and alignment to the work. Credibility in these moments does not come from having all the answers. It comes from being clear about what you do know, what you don't, and how you will move forward.

What Most Leaders Do

Situations like this can be uncomfortable because the issue is not always immediately clear. It can be difficult to determine whether the gap is in execution, communication, or expectations themselves. In response, some leaders move quickly to correct the work without fully addressing the underlying lack of clarity. Others take a more cautious approach and delay the conversation, hoping the situation will resolve itself. In some cases, leaders attempt to reset expectations but not with enough specificity to prevent the same confusion from resurfacing. These responses often lead to ongoing frustration and can leave the team member uncertain about what success looks like moving forward.

A Better Approach

- 1. Acknowledge the gap in clarity**

Take ownership of any lack of clarity in expectations without overcorrecting.

- 2. Separate past confusion from future direction**

Briefly align on what happened, then focus on moving forward.

- 3. Define success more precisely**

Be specific about outcomes, priorities, and what "good" looks like.

- 4. Check for shared understanding**

Confirm that expectations are interpreted the same way — not just explained.

- 5. Put simple structure around follow-through**

Agree on check-ins or milestones to prevent drift.

Example Phrasing

"I realize I could have been clearer about what success looks like. Let's reset together."

"Here's what I see as the key priorities — what does success look like from your perspective?"

"Let's confirm we're aligned and agree on simple checkpoints to track progress."

"I want to ensure you feel supported while we align on what's expected."

"Let's agree on what good looks like and set a quick follow-up to confirm we're aligned in practice."

"Going forward, we'll use these checkpoints to stay aligned."

What to Avoid

- Acting as if expectations were always clear
- Over-apologizing without adding clarity
- Resetting alignment in vague terms
- Skipping confirmation of understanding

Key Takeaway

When expectations are unclear, the issue is rarely just execution. **The goal is to re-establish clarity in a way that is fair, specific, and easy to act on.** These moments test a leader's ability to take responsibility for clarity while restoring alignment without eroding trust.

Scenario 05

When you need to make a decision without full clarity and your team is looking to you for direction

What's Really Happening

There are moments in leadership where waiting for full clarity is not an option. Information is incomplete, timelines are tight, and the team is looking for direction.

In these situations, the pressure is not about making the "right" decision. It is about how the decision is made and communicated. Uncertainty can create hesitation, overanalysis, or inconsistent direction. It can also lead teams to lose confidence if they sense the leader is unsure or avoiding the decision altogether.

Leaders who navigate these moments well recognize that uncertainty is part of the role. They are willing to acknowledge what they do not yet know, while still providing clear direction based on what is known and remaining open to adjusting as new information emerges.

What Most Leaders Do

Situations like this often create internal pressure to get it exactly right. Some leaders delay the decision in search of more certainty, even when timing matters. Others move quickly but do not clearly communicate their thinking, which can leave the team confused about direction or hesitant to act. In some cases, leaders present decisions with false certainty, which can make it harder to adjust course later without losing credibility. These responses can slow progress, create confusion, or erode trust in leadership over time.

A Better Approach

1. Acknowledge the uncertainty

Be clear about what is known, what is still unclear, and where judgment is required.

2. Share your thinking

Explain how you are approaching the decision and what factors you are weighing.

3. Make a clear call

Provide direction based on the best information available.

4. Set the expectation of adjustment

Make it clear that the decision can evolve as new information emerges.

5. Reinforce confidence and forward movement

Provide direction with confidence while encouraging the team and reinforcing that progress will continue as clarity improves.

Example Phrasing

"We don't have all the information yet, but based on what we know, this is our next step."

"There are some unknowns, which is expected. Here's how we'll move forward so we can make progress while staying flexible."

"This is the direction we're committing to for now. We'll monitor things closely and adjust as new information comes in or the situation changes."

"Our goal is to act decisively while keeping the team's well-being and success at the center."

"Let's regroup at [specific point] to reassess."

What to Avoid

- Waiting for perfect information when action is required
- Communicating decisions without context
- Projecting false certainty
- Changing direction without explanation

Key Takeaway

Leadership decisions are not always made with full clarity. **The goal is to provide clear direction, communicate your thinking, and create confidence and momentum** — even when everything is not yet known. These moments test a leader's ability to provide direction with confidence while being transparent about what is not yet known.