

The DEAA Framework

Conducting Difficult Performance Conversations

Describe, Explain, Ask Questions, and Agree. The DEAA Framework is a practical solution for first-time supervisors and team leads, helping you address performance issues with confidence and care.

MICROLEARNING MODULE

FIRST-TIME MANAGERS

5-MINUTE MICROLEARNING

- ✔ **Learning Objective:** Given a workplace scenario involving a performance gap, first-time managers will be able to apply the DEAA framework to conduct a coaching conversation that focuses on observable behaviors and ends with mutually agreed-upon next steps.





Your Top Employee Has Missed Three Deadlines This Month

You've noticed it.

Your team has noticed it.

And you know you need to say something.

So why haven't you?

Why These Conversations Feel So Hard

Because these conversations feel risky. You don't want to damage a relationship you've worked hard to build. You don't want to be wrong. You don't want to watch someone shut down across the table from you. You don't want the rest of the team to notice.

These instincts aren't weaknesses. They're what makes you a thoughtful manager. But when those instincts stop you from acting, your employee and office culture suffer. **Silence has a cost:** Avoiding a conversation lets the problem grow, affects morale, impacts workplace culture, and leads to the need for more difficult conversations down the road.

Four barriers that keep managers from acting:

Fear of Conflict

Worry that raising an issue will damage your relationship or trigger an emotional response.

Uncertainty

Not knowing what to say, how to start, or how to handle employee pushback.

Hope It Resolves

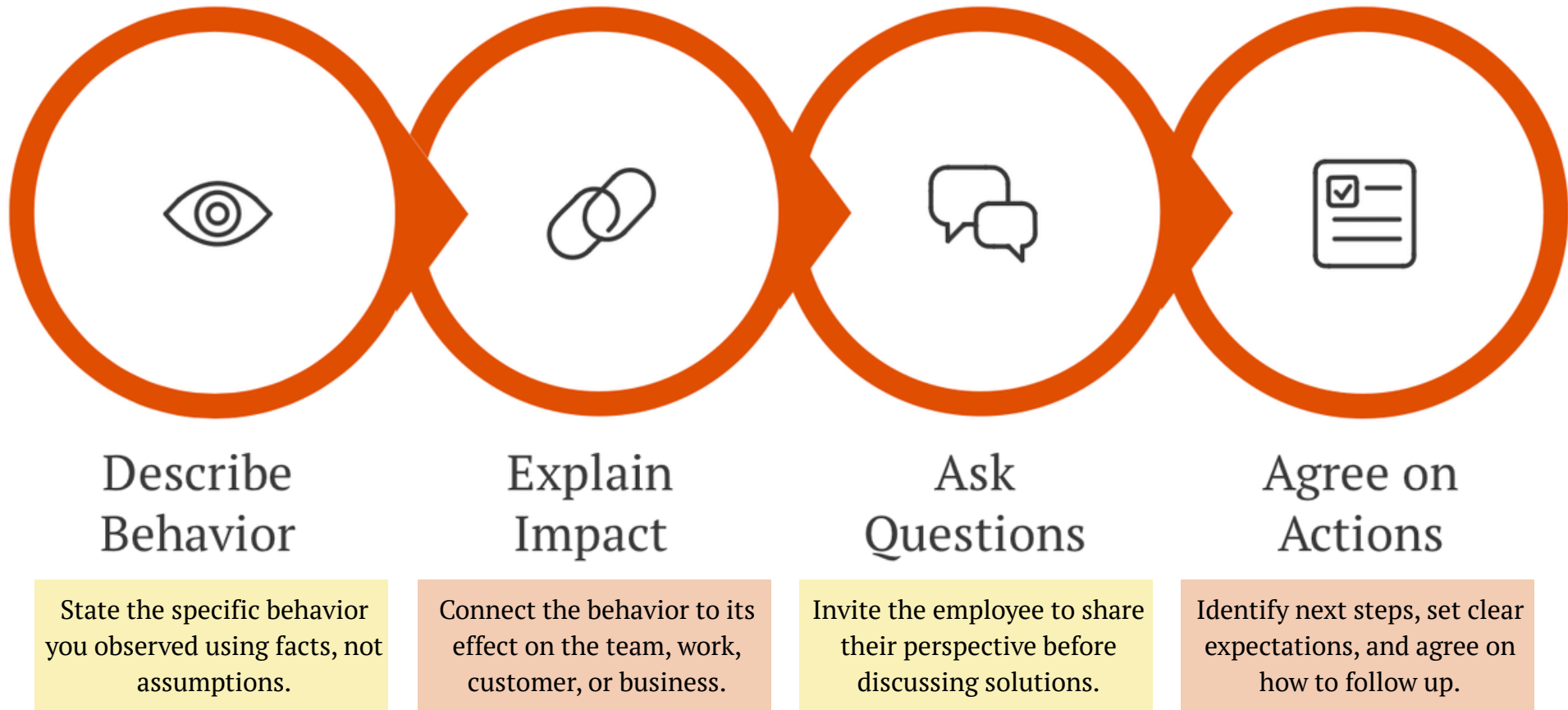
Assuming that your employee will self-correct without ever hearing that there's a problem.

Lack of Practice

Skipping these conversations means never getting better at them.

The DEAA Coaching Conversation Framework

Use this four-step structure to move from observation to action — without triggering defensiveness.



i Follow this sequence to stay focused on what happened, not who's to blame, and leave the meeting with a plan that works for everyone.

Instead of This, Say This

Small changes in wording reduced defensiveness and lead to more productive conversations.

Instead of This...	Say This...
"Your attitude has been a problem lately."	"I've noticed that discussions have become tense in team meetings. I'd like to understand what's contributing to that."
"You always miss deadlines."	"It looks like you missed your last three deadlines. Can you tell me what's getting in the way?"
"You need to communicate better."	"Project updates have come a little late and have affected deadlines. Let's make a plan to improve communication."
"You need to be more professional."	"I am seeing some conflict among the team. Can we talk about the specific behaviors affecting how the team works together?"
"What's going on with you?"	"I've noticed changes in your work recently and wanted to check in."
"This can't happen again."	"Let's identify what needs to change and agree on specific next steps."

- ❏ **Remember:** Defuse the tension right away by leading with empathy. Show that you value and want to hear what your employee has to say. Listen carefully, and be open to learning about struggles you were not aware of. Make space for a collaborative conversation that results in goals that you both can agree on.

COACHING CONVERSATION

ANALYSIS ACTIVITY

Best-Practice Coaching Conversation

Scenario: A manager meets with an employee who has missed several recent project deadlines. Watch how the framework holds up even when the conversation gets tense.

DESCRIBE BEHAVIOR

MANAGER: "I've noticed the last three deadlines were missed. This affected the team's schedule."

EXPLAIN IMPACT

MANAGER: "The delays are making it difficult for the team to plan work and meet project commitments."

 **Pushback:** If the **employee** says, "I don't think I've been missing deadlines. The timelines were unrealistic."

The **manager** validates and seeks understanding: "I hear that. Tell me more about what made these particular deadlines feel unrealistic. I want to understand the full picture before we talk about next steps."

ASK QUESTIONS

MANAGER: "Can you help me understand what's been getting in the way?"

EMPLOYEE: "I'm getting a lot of urgent requests from other departments and I'm not sure how to prioritize them."

AGREE ON ACTIONS

MANAGER: "That's a real problem, getting pulled in different directions without a clear priority system. Let's create a process for reviewing priorities when new requests come in, and schedule a weekly check-in to identify roadblocks early."

EMPLOYEE: "That would help."

 **Why this worked:** The manager resisted the urge to solve the problem immediately or make a unilateral decision. By understanding the cause, they were able to identify actions that addressed the real issue.

Coaching Conversation Checklist

Use this guide **before, during, and after** a performance conversation to stay focused and solution-oriented. Whether you're addressing a performance gap or a recurring behavioral issue, this checklist will help you approach the conversation with confidence, so both you and your employee walk away with a shared understanding of how to move forward.

Date of Conversation:

Attendees:

Prepare and Conduct the Conversation

Before the Conversation

- ☐ Document 2–3 specific examples of the behavior
- ☐ Write down the business impact of each example
- ☐ Identify one open-ended question you will ask
- ☐ Visualize what successful improvement would look like
- ☐ Clarify the outcome you want from the conversation
- ☐ Consider what you might not know yet
- ☐ Schedule a private, distraction-free meeting

During the Conversation

- ☐ **Describe** clearly what you've observed
- ☐ **Explain** the impact
- ☐ Avoid assumptions about intent or attitude
- ☐ **Ask** at least two open-ended questions before suggesting solutions
- ☐ Listen actively
- ☐ Maintain a respectful, collaborative tone
- ☐ Focus on action rather than blame

 **Pro tip:** If the conversation starts to feel tense, pause and acknowledge the difficulty. A simple "I know this isn't easy to talk about" can reset the tone and rebuild trust.

Agree on Next Steps

- ☐ Define actions that are observable and measurable
- ☐ Confirm any timelines and deadlines
- ☐ Ask about and identify support or resources needed
- ☐ Ensure both parties understand the plan
- ☐ Schedule a follow-up discussion

After the Conversation

- ☐ Document key agreements
- ☐ Provide support as promised
- ☐ Monitor progress
- ☐ Recognize improvement when it occurs
- ☐ Follow up on agreed-upon actions



Key Takeaways

1 Address issues early

Early conversations are easier and more effective than delayed ones.

2 Follow the DEAA framework

Describe behavior → Explain impact → Ask questions → Agree on actions.

3 Focus on facts, not labels

Talk about what you saw, not what you think it means.

4 Understand before you act

The cause of a performance issue isn't always obvious. Ask questions before deciding on solutions.

Comprehension Check

Test your understanding of the DEAA framework and effective coaching conversations.

1. What is the correct sequence of the DEAA framework?

- A) Describe, Explain, Agree, Ask
- B) Describe, Explain, Ask, Agree
- C) Diagnose, Evaluate, Advise, Act

3. An employee gets defensive during your conversation. What do you do?

- A) Push back
- B) Pivot to something positive
- C) Validate and seek to understand

2. When addressing an employee about a performance issue, which statement aligns best with the DEAA principles?

- A) "Your attitude has been a problem lately."
- B) "I've noticed the last three deadlines were missed, affecting the team's schedule. Can you help me understand what's been getting in the way?"
- C) "I've noticed some issues with your recent work. I need you to start hitting your deadlines."

4. You have heard your employee's perspective on the issue you raised. What do you do next?

- A) Collaborate with the employee to plan support structures and next steps. You are conversation partners.
- B) Summarize what you heard and propose a solution based on their feedback. You've listened — now it's time to lead.
- C) Push for the quickest fix you can think of. Time is of the essence.

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- C) Diagnose, Evaluate, Advise, Act

The DEAA framework solicits and takes into account the employee's perspective before agreeing on an action plan. Understanding by asking open-ended questions comes before action.

3. An employee gets defensive during your conversation. What do you do?

- A) Push back
- B) Pivot to something positive
- **C) Validate and seek to understand**

Getting defensive is a natural reaction to feeling criticized. Your job is to stay curious and keep asking questions, not to get pulled into the argument or back down.

2. When addressing an employee about a performance issue, which statement aligns best with the DEAA principles?

- A) "I've noticed some issues with your recent work. I need you to start hitting your deadlines."
- **B) "I've noticed the last three deadlines were missed, affecting the team's schedule. Can you help me understand what's been getting in the way?"**
- C) "This can't happen again, or there will be consequences."

A manager who leads with empathy and shows interest in what their employee has to say, rather than making a unilateral demand, sets up a collaborative, non-combative conversation.

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- **A) Collaborate with the employee to plan support structures and next steps.**
- B) Summarize what you heard and propose a solution based on their feedback. You've listened — now it's time to lead.
- C) Push for the quickest fix you can think of. Time is of the essence.

The DEAA framework depends on a collaborative conversation that takes the employee's perspective seriously and works to set up structures to help them succeed.