



COMMUNICATION THAT BUILDS TRUST: GIVING DIFFICULT FEEDBACK & MANAGING UP

The Global Summit of Women - Istanbul

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2026

“

The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

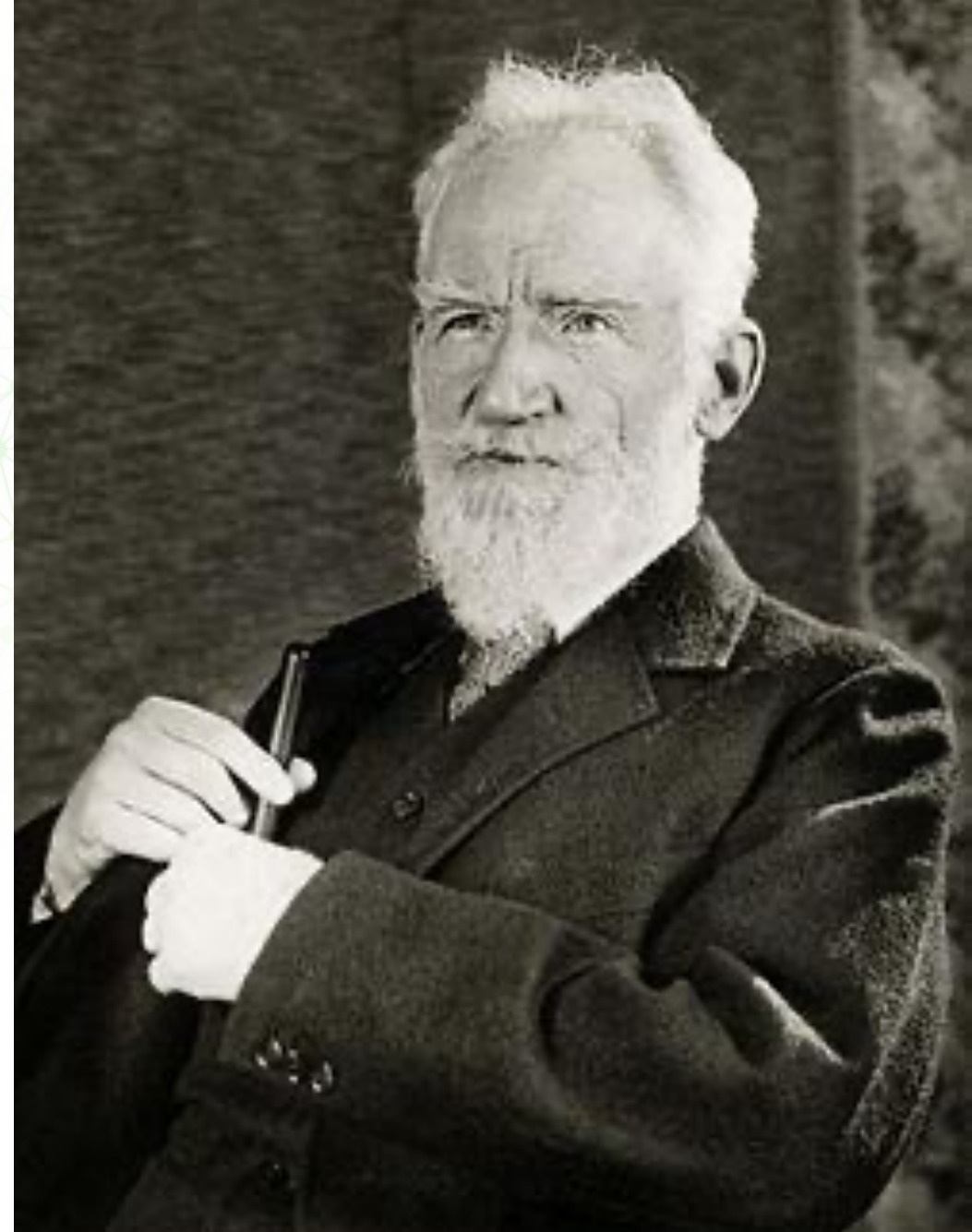
- **GEORGE BERNARD SHAW**

Effective communication is not **just** about delivering a message. It is about:

clarity, trust, accountability, action.

It requires communicating with:

empathy, confidence, purpose.



OBJECTIVES

- ✓ Deliver difficult feedback constructively and respectfully.
- ✓ Navigate sensitive employee conversations with confidence.
- ✓ Manage upward effectively by communicating needs, concerns, and solutions.
- ✓ Build stronger relationships through clarity, trust, and accountability.
- ✓ Use practical communication models for real workplace situations.



KEY PRINCIPLE

The strongest managers consistently separate the person's value from the behavior or performance issue.



Effective feedback says:

"This behavior needs to change."

NOT

"You are the problem."



PRACTICAL PHRASE REPLACEMENTS

X

"You're unprofessional."

"That behavior affected team professionalism."

"You have a bad attitude."

"The team perceives your responses in meetings as dismissive."

"You're unreliable."

"Several commitments were missed without communication and this impacts the team's commitments."

"You're too emotional."

"The tone of that conversation landed as highly charged."

"You don't care."

"I'm seeing reduced engagement on assignments that are mission critical."

✓

A SIMPLE STRUCTURE FOR ALMOST ANY TOUGH CONVERSATION

1. State observable facts
2. Explain impact
3. Clarify expectations
4. Invite response
5. Agree on next steps
6. Document if necessary

FEEDBACK PHILOSOPHY & STRUCTURE

CARE PERSONALLY

Show respect, support, and investment in the employee.

CHALLENGE DIRECTLY

Be honest and specific instead of avoiding difficult feedback.

FOCUS FORWARD

Focus less on past mistakes and more on future improvement.

Why it works?

- ✓ Balances empathy with honesty
- ✓ Prevents overly harsh or vague feedback so reduces defensiveness
- ✓ Builds trust over time and discusses future actions

DESC MODEL

Helpful for **difficult conversations or behavior that must change, performance correction, boundary setting, escalated issues, accountability.**

D

DESCRIBE

State the facts objectively.

E

EXPRESS

Explain how the issue affects you/team/business.

S

SPECIFY

Clearly state what needs to change.

C

CONSEQUENCES

Explain positive or negative consequences of change/no change.

HOW DESC WORKS

“Over the last month, several deadlines have been missed without advance notice (**DESCRIBE**). This creates uncertainty for the team and increases pressure on others to compensate (**EXPRESS**). I need you to communicate risks earlier and provide updates before deadlines are missed (**SPECIFY**). That will help improve planning and rebuild confidence across the team and stabilize workload planning. If the pattern continues, we’ll need to discuss a more formal performance management process.” (**CONSEQUENCES**).”

Why it works?

- ✓ Very clear and direct but professional
- ✓ Establishes accountability without emotional escalation
- ✓ Establishes expectations
- ✓ Discussion of consequences
- ✓ A corrective path forward

Useful for **behavioral feedback, professionalism concerns, communication issues, coaching for high performer.**

S

SITUATION

Describe the specific situation or context.

B

BEHAVIOR

Describe the observable behavior (not personality or assumptions).

I

IMPACT

Explain the impact of the behavior on the team, work, client, or organization.

HOW SBI WORKS

Start With Care Personally (RADICAL CANDOR): “You contribute strong ideas and your expertise is valued on the team. I also want to discuss a behavior pattern that’s affecting collaboration. In the product strategy meeting on Tuesday (**SITUATION**) you interrupted several team members while they were presenting ideas and dismissed two suggestions before discussion could fully develop (**BEHAVIOR**). The result was that some team members disengaged from the conversation, and it limited broader participation. (**IMPACT**). I’d like you to focus on allowing others to finish their points and asking questions before evaluating ideas. Your influence on the team is significant, and improving this will strengthen your leadership presence. (**FUTURE EXPECTATION**)”

Why it works?

- ✓ Keeps emotions out of feedback: direct and respectful - protects dignity while firm
- ✓ Reduces defensiveness by acknowledging strengths: employee may be defensive as strong performer
- ✓ Focuses on observable actions: behavior (not competence) is the issue
- ✓ Useful for both positive and corrective feedback

STAR / STARAR Model

Useful when discussing **performance, accountability, review discussions & future improvement.**

S

SITUATION

What happened?

T

TASK

What was expected?

A

ACTION

What actions did the employee take?

R

RESULT

What was the outcome?

Optional:

A

ALTERNATIVE ACTION

What could have been done differently?

R

REVISED RESULT

What better outcome might happen next time?

HOW STAR WORKS

“During the quarterly reporting cycle (**SITUATION**), your task was to submit the financial analysis by Friday (**TASK**). The report was submitted two days late without communication (**ACTION**). That delayed leadership review meetings (**RESULT**). In future, proactively flagging delays earlier would allow us to adjust timelines and maintain trust (**ALTERNATIVE ACTION**).”

Why it works?

- ✓ Connects actions to outcomes
- ✓ Encourages accountability
- ✓ Creates learning-oriented discussion

CHOOSING THE RIGHT MODEL

SITUATION

Behavioral issue

Missed deadlines/performance

Difficult accountability conversation

Coaching/development

Quick real-time feedback

Annual review conversation



BEST MODEL

SBI

STAR or DESC

DESC

SBI

SBI

STAR

GENERAL BEST PRACTICES FOR GIVING FEEDBACK

1. **Be Specific**

Avoid: "Your attitude is negative." Use: "In the meeting, you dismissed two proposals before discussion."

2. **Focus on Observable Behavior**

Address actions, not personality traits.

Avoid: "You're careless." Use: "The report contained three data inaccuracies."

3. **Give Timely Feedback**

Closer to the event is usually better.

4. **Balance Candor With Respect**

Direct does not need to mean harsh.

5. **Create Space for Dialogue**

Ask: "How do you see the situation?" "What obstacles are you facing?"

"What support would help?"



COMMUNICATING UPWARD (“MANAGING UP”)

- ✓ Prepare ahead
- ✓ Be concise and specific: key points & recommendation first; supporting detail later
- ✓ Be solution-oriented
- ✓ Be respectful of time
- ✓ Tie to business impact: risk, efficiency, results, customers, cost/time
- ✓ Clear about the ask
- ✓ Check your emotions: Be calm and direct: avoid overexplaining or apologizing



ASKING FOR MORE RESOURCES OR HEADCOUNT: APPLYING SBI

You need additional team support because workload has become unsustainable.

“Over the last two quarters, the team has taken on three additional client accounts while maintaining the same staffing levels (**SITUATION**). As a result, turnaround times have increased and team members are regularly working beyond capacity to meet deadlines (**BEHAVIOR**). We’re beginning to see delays, reduced responsiveness, and higher risk of burnout. (**IMPACT**). I’d like to discuss either temporary contractor support or approval to open an additional headcount so we can maintain service quality. (**Ask**).”

Why it works?

- ✓ Keeps the discussion fact-based
- ✓ Avoids sounding like complaining
- ✓ Positions you as solution-oriented

ASKING FOR A PROMOTION: STAR

Promotion Request

“Over the past year, the team has gone through significant operational growth (**SITUATION**). Part of my responsibility was leading cross-functional coordination for the implementation project (**TASK**). I led stakeholder meetings, streamlined reporting processes, and trained new team members during rollout. (**ACTION**). The implementation was completed ahead of schedule, and reporting errors decreased significantly afterward (**RESULT**). Based on the scope of work and responsibilities I’ve been performing, I’d like to discuss what would be required for advancement into the next-level role.” (**Ask**)

Why it works?

- ✓ Shows measurable contribution
- ✓ Avoids entitlement tone
- ✓ Makes the discussion evidence-based

KEY PRINCIPLES FOR COMMUNICATING UPWARD

1. **Current State:** What's happening?

2. **Risk/Opportunity:** Why does it matter?

3. **Recommendation:** What should happen?

4. **Support Needed:** What are you asking for?

“

Great leaders are remembered not for avoiding hard conversations, but for handling them well.”

