

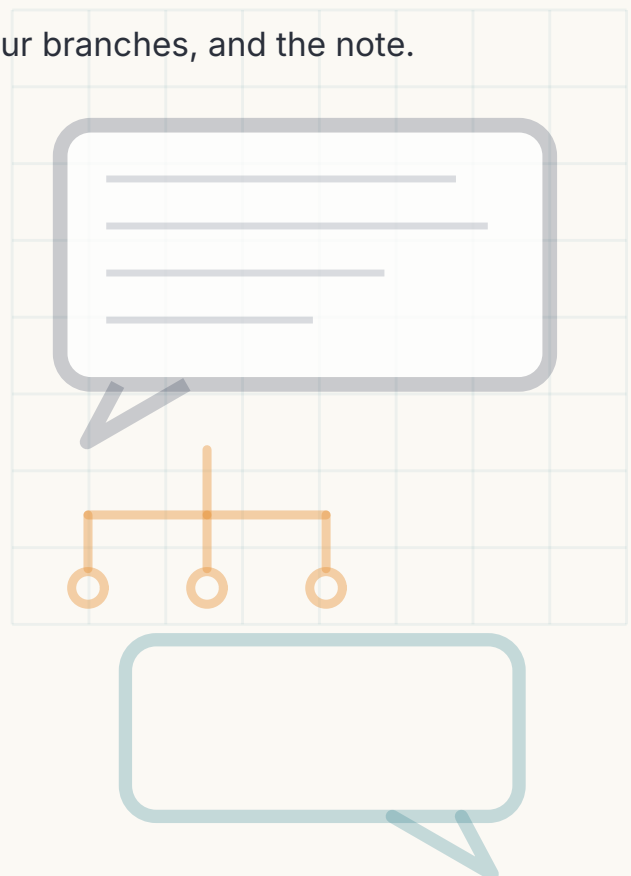


AN ARDENT WORKSHOP PRODUCT

The First Performance Concern

One whole script from the bank — opener, four branches, and the note.

Free · ungated · one of fifteen



One whole script from the bank

Managers do not avoid this conversation because they lack courage. They avoid it because they can picture the opener and cannot picture what happens after the other person answers. So this card gives you both: the word-for-word opener, and then the four replies you are actually going to get, with the exact line to say next for each one.

READ THE STOP BOX FIRST

The most important line on this card is not the opener. It is the **STOP — route it to HR** box — the named conditions under which you stop and involve HR, or an employment lawyer, before you open rather than after. Read that before you book the room.

The first performance concern

01.1

Something in someone's work has been off for a few weeks. You have not said anything yet, and you are starting to notice that you are working around it rather than raising it.

WHERE AND WHEN

A booked room or a private call, mid-week, mid-morning. Not Friday afternoon, not the end of the day, and not walking to the coffee machine — a conversation held on the move tells them it was not important enough to sit down for, and they will remember that when the second one is more serious.

WHO ELSE IS THERE

Nobody — adding a witness at this stage escalates an informal conversation into something it is not. Check first, though: a union agreement or your own policy may give the person a right to be accompanied even at this stage.

HOW MUCH NOTICE

Book it 24 hours ahead with a neutral subject and one honest line of context. An unexplained invitation from your manager is a night of dread that starts the conversation badly.

WHEN TO USE IT The first time you raise a concern about someone's work — before any documentation, any plan, any formal step. If you find yourself rehearsing a much bigger speech than the facts justify, that is usually a sign this conversation is three weeks overdue rather than a sign it should be bigger.

STOP — ROUTE IT TO HR BEFORE YOU GO ANY FURTHER IF

Involve HR before you open — whether the drop-off began at a recognizable point or came on gradually — if there is any signal of a health issue, a disability, a pregnancy, a bereavement, caring responsibilities, or a report they have recently made about someone else. In any of those cases the performance conversation may still be yours to hold, but the sequence matters and you want HR involved before you open, not after.

BEFORE YOU SPEAK, HAVE THESE IN FRONT OF YOU

- Three specific instances with dates — not a general sense that things have slipped
- The downstream consequence of each: who was held up, what got reworked, what a customer saw
- What you have already said, if anything, and how plainly you said it
- Anything that changed on your side — a re-org, a headcount gap, a shifted priority they were never told about
- One observable thing you want to be different in 30 days

THE OPENER — WORD FOR WORD

Thanks for making the time. I want to raise something while it is still small, because I would rather say it now than let it build.

Over the last few weeks I have noticed **[THE OBSERVABLE THING]**. Specifically: on **[DATE]**, **[WHAT HAPPENED AND WHAT IT MEANT DOWNSTREAM]**. On **[DATE]**, **[SECOND INSTANCE]**. And on **[DATE]**, **[THIRD INSTANCE]**.

I am not here with a verdict about it. I have noticed a pattern and I do not know what is behind it, which is why I am asking rather than telling. What is going on?

WHAT THEY SAY BACK — AND WHAT YOU SAY TO THAT**IF THEY: They agree, and they are embarrassed****BRANCH 1**

IT SOUNDS LIKE "Yes. I know. I have been meaning to say something." Often followed by an apology that keeps going.

WHAT IT USUALLY MEANS They already knew, and they have been carrying it alone. The risk in this branch is that your relief makes you close too fast and nothing actually changes.

WHAT YOU SAY NEXT

I appreciate you saying that straight out, and you do not need to apologize any further — you have heard me and that is the part that mattered.

So let us make it useful. What would have to be different for **[THE OBSERVABLE THING]** to stop happening? I am asking genuinely, because if the answer involves something on my side I would rather know now.

Here is what I would like us to land on before we finish: one thing that changes, how we will both know it changed, and when we look at it again.

THE TRAP IN THIS BRANCH Accepting the apology as the outcome. An apology is not a plan, and in four weeks you will be having this conversation again with the added weight of "but you said you would." Leave with a specific, observable change and a date.

IF THEY: They explain — and the explanation is real**BRANCH 2**

IT SOUNDS LIKE "The spec changed twice and nobody told me." "I have been covering for **[NAME]** since March." "I asked for that access in January and I still do not have it."

WHAT IT USUALLY MEANS You are looking at a system problem wearing a person's face. It is the best reason there is to open with a question rather than a judgment — you cannot know which you have until you ask.

WHAT YOU SAY NEXT

Then I owe you something here, because I did not know that and I should have.

Let me say back what I am hearing: **[REPEAT IT IN YOUR OWN WORDS]**. Have I got that right?

I want to separate the two things. The first is **[WHAT I NEED TO FIX]**, and that is mine — I will **[SPECIFIC ACTION]** by **[DATE]**. The second is that even with all of that going on, **[THE OBSERVABLE THING]** still landed on somebody downstream, and I want us to agree what you would do differently next time it starts going that way — including telling me earlier.

THE TRAP IN THIS BRANCH Letting a real explanation dissolve the whole conversation. Both things can be true: the cause was outside their control, and the output still needs to be flagged sooner. If you drop the second half, the same thing recurs and you will have lost the standing to raise it.

IF THEY: They deflect onto someone else**BRANCH 3**

IT SOUNDS LIKE "Well, **[COLLEAGUE]** does the same thing and nobody says anything to them." "Honestly the whole team is behind."

WHAT IT USUALLY MEANS Sometimes a fairness objection with something behind it, sometimes a way to move the conversation off themselves. You cannot tell which yet, and you must not discuss the colleague either way.

WHAT YOU SAY NEXT

I am not going to talk about anyone else's work with you, in the same way I would not talk about yours with them. That is not me dodging it — if you think something is being handled unevenly, tell me and I will look at it, separately from this.

But I want to come back to what I raised, because it stands on its own. On **[DATE]**, **[THE INSTANCE]**. What happened there?

THE TRAP IN THIS BRANCH Getting drawn into comparing. The moment you say anything about the colleague — even to agree — you have handed them a grievance and lost the thread. Acknowledge, park it, and return to the dated instance.

IF THEY: They deny it, flatly**BRANCH 4**

IT SOUNDS LIKE "That is not what happened." "I do not accept that at all." Sometimes calm, sometimes not.

WHAT IT USUALLY MEANS Either your facts are wrong, or they are wrong, or you are both describing different things with the same words. All three are survivable if you slow down instead of pushing.

WHAT YOU SAY NEXT

Alright. Then let us go through it properly, because I would rather find out I have this wrong than leave you thinking I believe something untrue.

Take **[DATE]**. My understanding is **[WHAT I BELIEVE HAPPENED, PLAINLY]**. What is your account of it?

[LISTEN. THEN:] Some of that I did not know. Let me check **[THE SPECIFIC THING]** and come back to you by **[DATE]**. What I am not going to do is drop it without checking, because if I am right about this we need to deal with it, and if I am wrong you deserve to hear me say so.

THE TRAP IN THIS BRANCH Repeating your version louder. If you cannot immediately evidence an instance, do not defend it in the room — take it away, check it, and come back on the date you promised. A manager who checks and returns is far harder to argue with than one who insists.

HOW TO CLOSE IT

Let me say back what we have agreed so we are both leaving with the same thing.

[THE CHANGE THEY WILL MAKE, IN THEIR WORDS WHERE POSSIBLE]. [ANYTHING I AM DOING ON MY SIDE, WITH A DATE]. And we will look at it again on **[DATE]**.

One more thing. This was a first conversation, not a warning, and it is not going anywhere formal today. But I am not going to pretend it did not happen either — I will write myself a short note of what we agreed and I will share it with you, so there is no version of this where we remember it differently in six weeks.

AGREE THESE BEFORE ANYBODY LEAVES THE ROOM

- The one observable thing that will be different
- How you will both know it changed — not "try harder", something you could point at
- Anything you committed to on your side, with a date
- The date you look at it again — inside four weeks, in the calendar before you leave the room

THE NOTE TO WRITE AFTERWARD

Write this within the hour, while the wording is still exact. Send them a copy the same day.

[DATE] — Conversation with **[NAME]**, **[LOCATION OR CALL]**, **[DURATION]**.

Raised: **[THE OBSERVABLE THING]**, with the instances of **[DATE]**, **[DATE]** and **[DATE]**.

Their account: **[THEIR EXPLANATION, IN NEUTRAL WORDS — NOT PARAPHRASED TO SOUND WORSE THAN THEY SAID IT]**.

Agreed: **[THE CHANGE]**. **[MY COMMITMENT, WITH ITS DATE]**.

Review: **[DATE]**.

Noted as a first informal conversation. No formal step taken.

WHAT A GOOD OUTCOME LOOKS LIKE They leave able to say, in one sentence, what is different from tomorrow — and so can you, and the two sentences match. If either of you would describe the outcome vaguely, the conversation is not finished, it just ended.

IF IT GOES WRONG IN THE ROOM If they become distressed, stop the content and deal with the person: offer to pause, offer water, offer to pick it up tomorrow. Nothing you raise in the next ten minutes will be heard anyway. If they become aggressive, say once, plainly, that you are going to stop the meeting and pick it up with HR present — then actually stop. Do not negotiate your way through a hostile room.

MAKE IT YOURS Cut your opener down until it is shorter than feels comfortable, then cut the last sentence too. The instinct in a first performance conversation is to cushion, and every cushioning clause you add gives them something easier to respond to than the thing you actually came to say. The silence after "what is going on?" is the most useful part of the script. Do not fill it.

The same conversation, played out

A script shows you the shape of a conversation. A worked one shows you the **register**: how blunt is too blunt, how much detail is enough, when to stop talking, and what it sounds like when a manager concedes a point without losing the conversation. Every one of the fifteen in the full bank comes with one of these. **The company and everybody in it below are invented.**

The first performance concern

WORKED CONVERSATION

Marrowfield Tools, a 60-person company that makes bench equipment. Priya Threlkeld manages a five-person applications team. Over about six weeks, quote turnaround from Elliot Wrayford has drifted from same-day to three or four days, and two of them have gone out with the wrong lead times on. Priya has not said anything yet.

Priya	Thanks for making the time. I want to raise something while it is still small, because I would rather say it now than let it build.
Priya	Over the last six weeks or so, quotes have been taking three or four days where they used to go out the same day, and two have gone out with lead times that were not right. Specifically: the Hallam quote on April 9 sat four days and then went out quoting six weeks when the fixture was on ten. Hallam ordered on it. The Sowerby quote on April 22 was three days and had the same lead-time problem, and Devi caught that one before it left. And the Traynor revision on May 2 went five days, which is why they went elsewhere for the second cell.
Priya	I am not here with a verdict about it. I have noticed a pattern and I do not know what is behind it, which is why I am asking rather than telling. What is going on?
Elliot	The lead-time sheet moved. It used to be on the shared drive and in March it went into the new system, and the version on the drive is still there and still says six weeks. I have been quoting off the old one.
Priya	Then I owe you something here, because I did not know that and I should have. Let me say back what I am hearing: the authoritative lead times moved in March, nobody took the old sheet down, and it still opens first when you search for it. Have I got that right?
Elliot	Yes. And the new one needs a login I did not have until about two weeks ago.
Priya	I want to separate two things. The first is mine: I will have the old sheet taken down and replaced with a pointer by Friday, and I will check with Devi and Ama that they are both on the new one. That should not have been sitting there for two months.

Priya	The second is that even with all of that, Hallam ordered against a wrong lead time and we are carrying that. And the four-day turnaround is a separate thing from the sheet — that is not a login problem. What is happening there?
Elliot	Honestly, the same thing. I was checking every number twice because I did not trust the sheet, and then I would put it down and come back to it.
Priya	That makes sense, and it also tells me you spotted a problem six weeks ago and worked around it instead of telling me. That is the bit I want to change. If something you rely on is wrong, I want to hear it that week, even if you are not sure. Can we agree that?
Elliot	Yes.
Priya	Let me say back what we have agreed. Quotes go out inside one working day, off the new lead-time system. If something you depend on is wrong or you cannot get to it, you tell me that week rather than working around it. On my side, the old sheet comes down by Friday and I will confirm the whole team has access. And we look at it again on June 3.
Priya	One more thing. This was a first conversation, not a warning, and it is not going anywhere formal. But I will write a short note of what we agreed and send it to you today, so there is no version of this where we remember it differently in six weeks.

THE NOTE SHE WROTE AFTERWARD

May 12 — Conversation with Elliot Wrayford, meeting room 2, about 25 minutes.

Raised: quote turnaround drifting to three to four days, and two quotes issued with incorrect lead times. Instances: Hallam, April 9 (four days, six-week lead time quoted against a ten-week fixture, order placed on it); Sowerby, April 22 (three days, same lead-time error, caught internally); Traynor revision, May 2 (five days).

His account: the authoritative lead-time sheet moved into the new system in March. The superseded sheet is still on the shared drive, still returns first in search, and still shows six weeks. He did not have access to the new system until late April and had been double-checking figures against a source he did not trust, which is also what slowed the turnaround.

Agreed: quotes issued within one working day, using the new system. Where he depends on something that is wrong or inaccessible, he raises it that week rather than working around it. On my side: superseded sheet removed and replaced with a pointer by May 15, and team access confirmed.

Review: June 3.

Noted as a first informal conversation. No formal step taken.

WHY IT WENT THE WAY IT DID Notice what Priya did not do. She did not open with "is everything alright at home", which sounds kind and is actually a way of avoiding the sentence you came to say. She did not accept the lead-time sheet as the whole answer and leave — the turnaround was a separate problem and she said so. And when the explanation turned out to be partly her own department's failure, she fixed her half in the room, with a date, which is the thing that makes the other half stick.

The other fourteen

That is one whole card out of fifteen, and it is the easiest one in the bank.

Situation	The conversations
01 Performance and delivery	The first performance concern (this one) · Missed deadlines and work coming back for rework · The long-tenured employee whose work has slipped
02 Attendance, conduct and the personal	Attendance and lateness · A hygiene or personal-presentation issue · Attitude, tone, and how somebody is in a room
03 When it involves other people	Mediating a conflict between two of your people · Somebody brings you a complaint about a colleague
04 Money and title	A raise request declined · They did not get the promotion · You are being promoted over your friend
05 The formal steps	Introducing a performance-improvement plan · The termination meeting
06 Endings you did not choose	Somebody resigns, and whether to counter · A layoff or role-elimination notification

WHAT ELSE IS IN THE FULL BANK

All **15** scripts with all **60** branch replies, each also played out turn by turn with the note the manager wrote. Plus a Start Here playbook — **24 sentences managers say and what to say instead**, a 19-row handle-it-or-route-it table, the escalation ladder and six rules for the note — six worksheets you can type into or print, a plain-text file per conversation, and a searchable index. [See the full Script Bank >](#)

This sheet is free and ungated — no email, nothing to log into. Pass it to another manager if it is useful. The rest of the Team & Talent tools are at ardentworkshop.com.

A note on what this is. This is a conversation script and general management guidance. It is **not legal or HR advice** and not a substitute for either. What counts as a protected characteristic and what a performance process must contain are set by law and by your own employer's policy, and they vary sharply. Read the **STOP — route it to HR** box before you book anything, and where anything formal, contractual, or protected is involved, talk to your HR team or an employment lawyer first.

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