

Module 10: Handling Difficult Reactions to Feedback

In this lesson, you'll learn best practices to handle five of the most common—and most difficult—reactions to feedback. Whether you're up against the employee who goes silent, gets angry, or denies the validity of your feedback, this guide will help you build confidence in handling the worst-case scenarios professionally and effectively.

Click on the first lesson below—or the *"Start eLearning"* button above—when you're ready to begin.



What If They React Badly?



Difficult Reaction #1: The Silent Treatment



Difficult Reaction #2: The Person Playing Defense



Difficult Reaction #3: The Tearful Reaction



Difficult Reaction #4: The Commitment-Phobe



Difficult Reaction #5: The Person Who Gets Angry



When to Set Boundaries and Take a Hardline Approach



Summary

What If They React Badly?



One of the top reasons managers avoid giving feedback is that they're afraid of employees' reactions. Feedback conversations can be awkward or uncomfortable as-is —let alone when an employee gets defensive, cries, or lashes out in response.

So, how should you handle these situations? What should you say? And how can you still create a positive outcome from a feedback conversation gone wrong?





Handling Difficult Reactions to Feedback

In this video, learn how to handle five of the most difficult reactions to feedback.

VIEW ON YOUTUBE >

But First—a Little Empathy and Understanding

Before we dive in, it's important to develop a little empathy and understanding about why people may react to feedback negatively. People don't typically respond negatively to feedback because they're *unprofessional*, *being difficult*, or *overly sensitive*. Rather, adverse reactions to feedback are a common and natural response.

Here are a few examples of what may be going on with your employee:

1

They feel like they're under attack. Employees may confuse your feedback about their behaviour as an attack on their character. They may feel as if you're questioning their skills or abilities. They want to defend their identity and professional reputation.

2

They go into a “fight or flight” response. Our brains aren’t always adept at distinguishing threats in the modern world. Corrective feedback may be perceived as a “threat” by the brain and trigger its “fight or flight” response. That is why it’s so common for people to either get angry and defensive about feedback (fight) or avoid and deny feedback (flight).

3

Their self-esteem is hurting or feels threatened. Employees may latch onto corrective feedback and disregard positive feedback, exaggerating the severity and magnitude of what you say. As a result, they may get down on themselves; their self-esteem may be hurting or feel threatened.



Recognise and honour each person’s humanity. You aren’t managing a team of robots, so don’t act like you are. People are human beings with emotions. Sometimes those emotions are messy, unpredictable, or misplaced, and that’s okay. Help employees deal with their emotions and move forward.

Overview

With this in mind, let’s explore some of the negative reactions you might face after giving feedback. By anticipating and practicing how to deal with a negative response, you can remove the sense of unpredictability and fear surrounding your feedback conversations. The following sections will cover how to handle:

1. The silent treatment
2. The person playing defense
3. The tearful reaction
4. The commitment-phobe

5. The person who gets angry



Complete the content above before moving on.

Difficult Reaction #1: The Silent Treatment



The Reaction

After delivering feedback, there are crickets in the room. Your employee is silent and not communicating. They may nod or give you short, curt responses like *“Mm-hmm”* and *“Sure, you got it, boss.”* You ask if the employee has any questions or anything they want to say, and they decline. They may even physically withdraw by crossing their arms, leaning back, or avoiding eye contact with you. What do you do?

How to Handle It

In this situation, don't fill the space with more talking. Instead, ask open-ended questions that inspire more than a simple *“yes”* or *“no”* answer. Open-ended questions usually begin with *“how,” “what,” “why,” “describe,”* and *“explain,”* and they typically generate a discussion.

Create a safe environment by saying things like:

- *“I see you're getting quiet. What are you feeling or thinking right now?”*
- *“What are your thoughts? I'm here to support you.”*
- *“How do you feel about your performance?”*



"Take your time to collect your thoughts. I'm here when you're ready to share."

Be comfortable with silence. Don't hesitate to sit in silence and wait for the employee to respond. They may need to process the feedback before getting back to you.

CONTINUE

Difficult Reaction #2: The Person Playing Defense



The Reaction

The employee refuses to believe what you're telling them. They deflect by saying things like, *"What? I **always** turn my projects in on time. I don't know what you're talking about."*

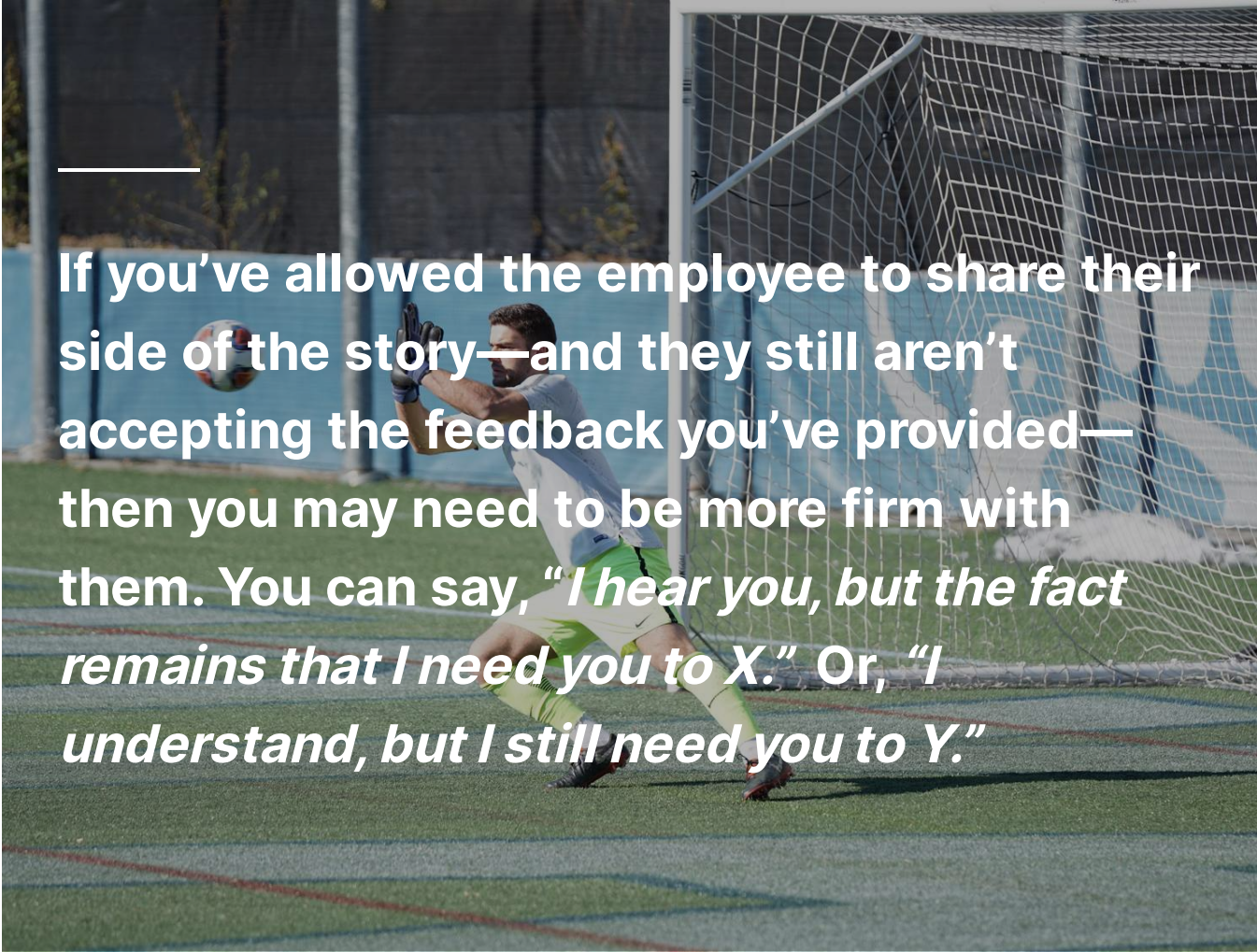
Or, this person might rationalise their behaviours. They rattle off excuses why they couldn't have done things differently, what challenges they were up against, or why your feedback is misinformed or downright incorrect. They place blame on others or attribute their work outcomes to circumstances outside of their control.

How to Handle It

A defensive approach is a coping strategy that people may use if they're feeling unsafe. If someone has their walls up, your feedback won't get through. So, take a gentle approach. Explain your willingness to hear this person out. That way, they can let their guard down and allow you to communicate your message.

If someone is defensive, keep your voice even and try one of the following responses:

- *"I may not know the full story. Let's talk about why you're feeling this way."*
- *"I can see this feedback is surprising for you. Let's talk about that."*
- *"Can I give you some examples of what I'd like to see going forward?"*
- *"Then let's talk about solutions. What support do you need to make this happen?"*



If you've allowed the employee to share their side of the story—and they still aren't accepting the feedback you've provided—then you may need to be more firm with them. You can say, *"I hear you, but the fact remains that I need you to X."* Or, *"I understand, but I still need you to Y."*

CONTINUE

Difficult Reaction #3: The Tearful Reaction



The Reaction

You see this person's eyes well up as they say, *"I'm such a failure ... I never do anything right."* Their words become incoherent as they start to sob. How do you help them regain control?

How to Handle It

If your employee is emotionally distraught, don't make assumptions about why that might be. Instead, communicate your support and encourage them to talk through those emotions. Show empathy and remind this person that they're not being attacked.

Try a soothing message such as:

- *"I understand this is difficult. Let's work through it together. You're not alone."*
- *"What's going on in your head? We can get through it."*
- *"I know feedback can be unsettling, but I'm here to help. What are you feeling right now?"*

You can also help the other person to position your feedback as an opportunity for continuous growth and development—and not as a sign of failure or a personal attack. Reiterate that you're committed to their success.

CONTINUE

Difficult Reaction #4: The Commitment-Phobe



The Reaction

You've delivered your feedback, and the other person agrees to make the change—sort of. They shrug off the feedback or respond by only partially committing to the change by saying things like, *"I'll try my best," "I can't make any promises,"* or, *"We'll see how it goes."* Clearly, this person is feeling reluctant to embrace your feedback, but they're hiding behind passive-aggression.

How to Handle It

The employee may be saying the right words, but their tone and attitude suggest a different story. When you hear this response, it's often because someone feels like they can't express what they're feeling. So, they shut down those emotions and half-heartedly say what they think you want to hear.

In this case, encourage the person to open up. You'll need to work through the employee's concerns and get them fully on board to make the necessary changes.

Try one of these responses:

- *"I'm sensing that you're not fully on board with this feedback. I'd like to hear more about how you're feeling."*

- *"I hear some doubt in your voice. What are your concerns? Let's address them together."*
- *"What's going on in your head right now?"*
- *"What's standing in the way of you feeling confident and committing to these changes 100%?"*
- *"I need you to give 100% effort for this to work. Let's talk about how you're feeling right now and brainstorm solutions to get you there."*



Encourage the person to open up.

CONTINUE

Difficult Reaction #5: The Person Who Gets Angry



The Reaction

You've shared your message, but now the other person is getting visibly angry. Their face gets red, they start to raise their voice, and they may even retort with a purposefully mean or snotty response. Someone who is angry may also become argumentative. They may cut you off, refuse to hear out your suggestions, or relentlessly challenge and refute your feedback.

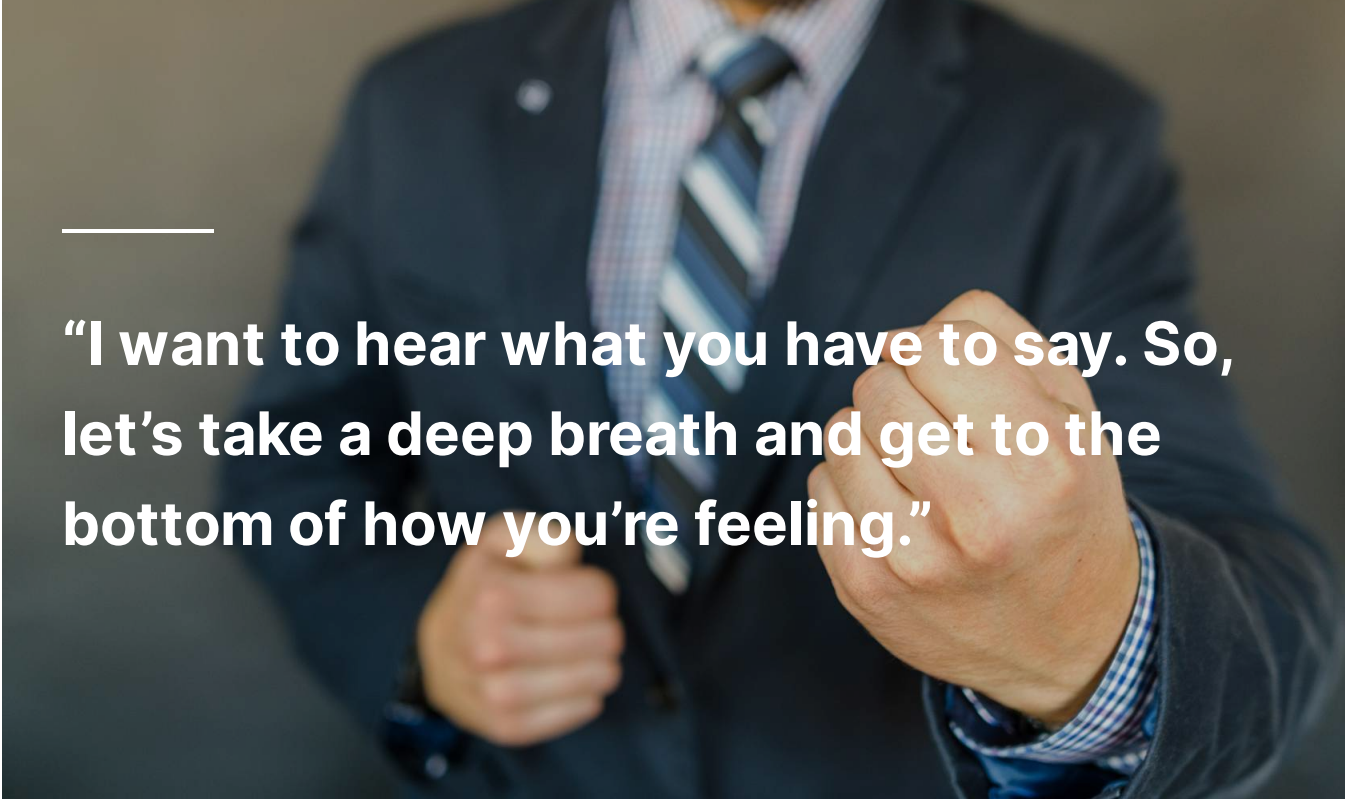
How to Handle It

Remember that people often experience anger when they feel fear, frustration, or helplessness. In this case, don't escalate the situation. While you might be tempted to match their anger, do your best to maintain a calm and neutral tone. In a composed voice, try one of the following responses:

- "I want to hear what you have to say. So, let's take a deep breath and get to the bottom of how you're feeling."
- *"I can see you're angry. What feedback were you hoping to get?"*
- *"What can I do so that you're in a better place to continue this conversation?"*



"I understand that this was not your intention or interpretation of the situation. But the fact remains that the impact of X behaviour was ..."

A photograph of a man in a dark blue suit, light blue shirt, and striped tie. He has both hands clenched into fists, suggesting a state of anger or determination. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

"I want to hear what you have to say. So, let's take a deep breath and get to the bottom of how you're feeling."

CONTINUE

When to Set Boundaries and Take a Hardline Approach



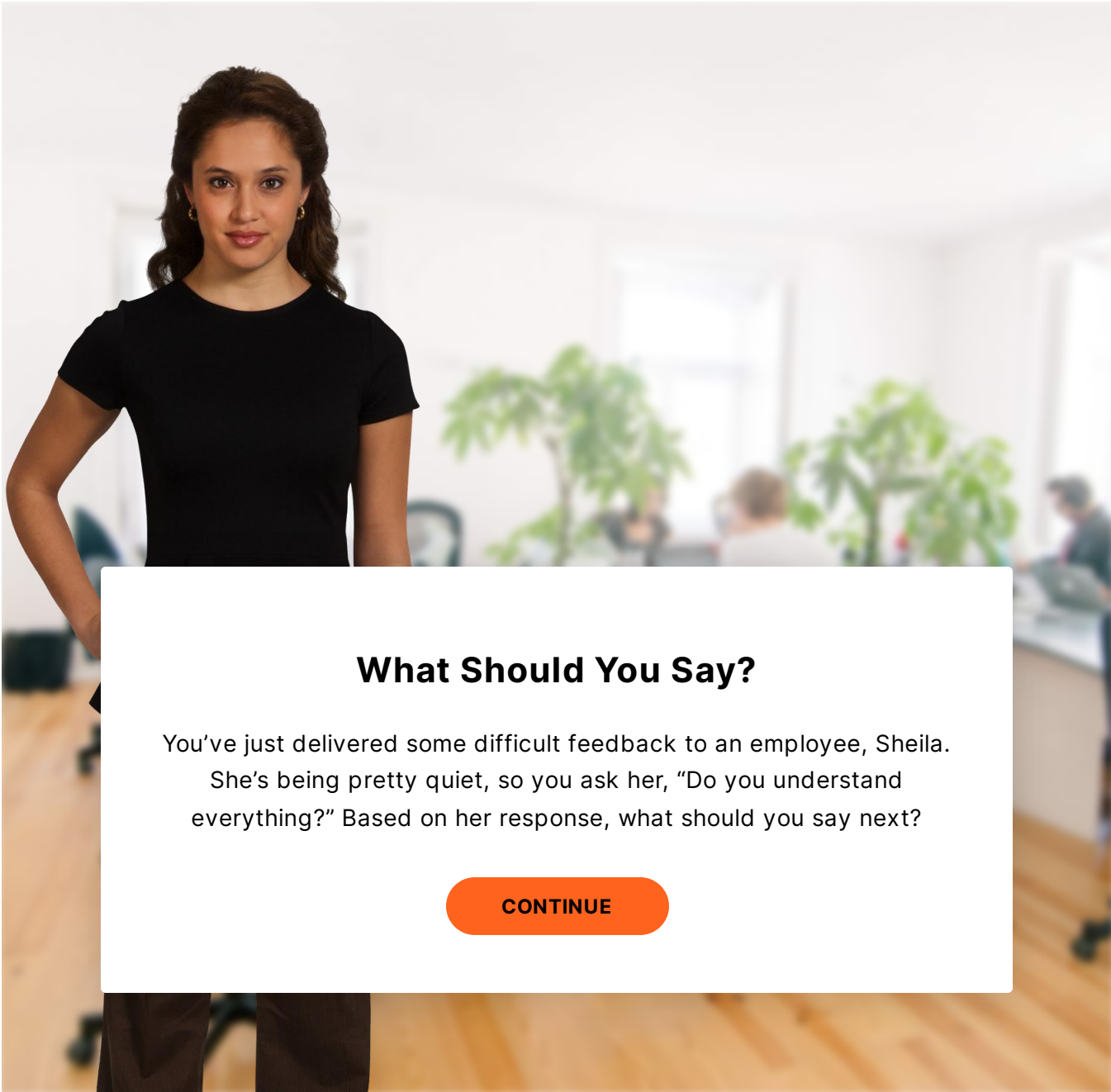
You may occasionally encounter employees who refuse to let up or seem to argue for the sake of argument. If you've tried the above tactics, and the conversation is still going nowhere, or the employee is becoming increasingly hostile, then you may need to set some boundaries and take a firmer approach. Here's what you can say:

- *"I've outlined what I need you to do differently. You don't have to like it or agree with me on this, but I still need you to make these changes. If you don't, we'll need to discuss the consequences."*
 - *"I know emotions are high, so let's break for now and give you some time to reflect and process the feedback I've provided. We can get together to talk about how to move forward from here tomorrow at 9 a.m."*
 - *"This is what I need from you. I'm happy to work with you to brainstorm solutions and set goals for your success. But if you can't get on board, then I'll have to pursue the next steps."*
 - *"The bottom line is that X behaviour is not acceptable. It's up to you to either make the necessary changes or face the consequences."*
-

While you can't manage someone's response, **you can manage your reactions**. As long as you take a deep breath, stay collected, and remain mindful of your personal state, there's no reason a feedback session should spin out of control.

Apply Your Understanding

Work through the following scenario to practice the strategies that you've learned throughout the lesson.



What Should You Say?

You've just delivered some difficult feedback to an employee, Sheila. She's being pretty quiet, so you ask her, "Do you understand everything?" Based on her response, what should you say next?

[CONTINUE](#)

Scene 1 Slide 1

[Continue](#) → [Next Slide](#)



Yep. I understand everything. Can I get back to work now? I've got a lot to do.

1 Of course. I'll give you some time to reflect, and I trust that you'll come to me with concerns if you have them.

2 Not so fast—you seem quiet. Let's talk about it. What's on your mind? Are you willing to share what you're thinking or how you're feeling right now?

3 I don't appreciate your tone. I need your 100% commitment for this to work. Can I get that from you?

Scene 1 Slide 2

- 0 → Next Slide
- 1 → Next Slide
- 2 → Next Slide

A blurred background image of an office interior. In the foreground, there is a white conference table and several black office chairs with blue seats. In the background, a person is visible sitting at a desk near a window. The overall scene is brightly lit and out of focus.

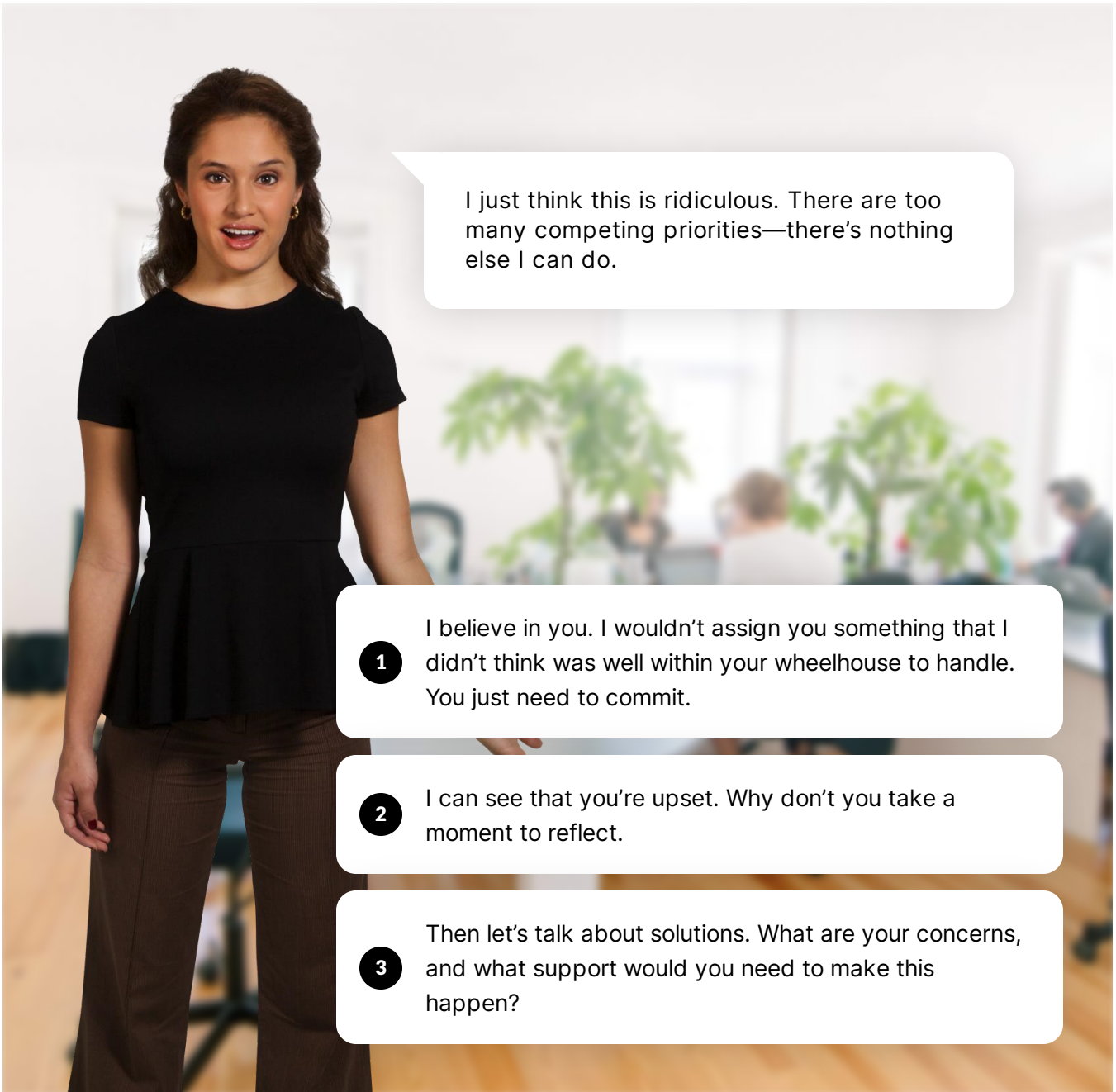
Ask Open-Ended Questions

If you're getting the silent treatment, create a safe environment. Don't pressure the person, but ask open-ended questions that inspire more than a simple "yes" or "no" answer.

[CONTINUE](#)

Scene 1 Slide 3

[Continue](#) → [Next Slide](#)



I just think this is ridiculous. There are too many competing priorities—there's nothing else I can do.

1

I believe in you. I wouldn't assign you something that I didn't think was well within your wheelhouse to handle. You just need to commit.

2

I can see that you're upset. Why don't you take a moment to reflect.

3

Then let's talk about solutions. What are your concerns, and what support would you need to make this happen?

Scene 1 Slide 4

0 → Next Slide

1 → Next Slide

2 → Next Slide

A blurred background image of an office interior. In the foreground, there is a white conference table and several black office chairs with blue seats. In the background, a person is sitting at a desk, and there are windows letting in light.

Ask for More Information

If a person is playing defense, take a gentle approach. Explain your willingness to hear them out, and they'll be more likely to let their guard down and explain what's really going on.

CONTINUE

Scene 1 Slide 5

Continue → Next Slide

Nice Work

You've successfully navigated those difficult reactions—helping Sheila to understand and accept your feedback.

START OVER



Scene 1 Slide 6

Continue → End of Scenario



Complete the content above before moving on.

Summary



Receiving negative or redirecting feedback can be difficult. Employees may react negatively when they feel helpless, disappointed, angry, threatened, or upset by what you have to share with them. Reactions may range from going quiet, dismissing the feedback, crying, responding passive-aggressively, or arguing with you. No matter how difficult the situation may be, there's always a strategy you can use to handle it effectively. Help employees communicate and work through their emotions so that your message can be received, and the employee can grow from the experience.



Don't give up. It may take some practice navigating difficult feedback conversations but don't give up or avoid confrontation. Remind yourself that giving feedback is instrumental to employees' development and growth.

CONTINUE