

Your Tough Conversation Script Pack

Defensive employee feedback

Sample script pack - fictional example

This sample uses fictional details. Your script pack will be generated from the situation you provide.

PREPARED FOR

Direct report

TO NE

Balanced

SITUATION TYPE

Defensive employee feedback

Your 60-Second Prep Card

GOAL Name the feedback clearly, avoid a debate, and agree on the next expected behavior.

OPENING LINE "I want to talk about a pattern I noticed in our last feedback conversation and reset how we handle feedback going forward."

ANCHOR PHRASE "I hear you, and I want to bring us back to the specific behavior and the expectation from here."

DO NOT SAY "You always get defensive when I give you feedback."

CLOSE WITH "The expectation is that we can discuss feedback without shifting to other people or debating fairness before we agree on the next step."

Situation Summary

A manager is preparing to give feedback to a direct report who becomes defensive when feedback is raised. In the last conversation, the employee said the feedback was unfair and redirected the conversation toward other team members.

OBSERVABLE FACTS / PLACEHOLDERS

- The employee said the feedback was unfair in the last feedback conversation.
- The conversation shifted toward what other team members were doing.
- The manager wants to stay calm and reset expectations clearly.

MISSING FACTS TO FILL IN

- Specific behavior example to discuss
- Expected behavior going forward
- Follow-up date or next check-in

Conversation Goal

Name the feedback clearly, avoid a debate, and agree on the next expected behavior.

Full Conversation Script

1. Open calmly

"I want to talk about something specific from our last feedback conversation. My goal is not to debate blame. My goal is to make sure feedback can be discussed clearly and that we agree on what changes next."

2. Name the pattern

"When I raised the concern, the conversation moved quickly to whether the feedback was fair and what other team members were doing. That made it hard for us to stay with the specific behavior I needed to address."

3. State the expectation

"Going forward, I need us to stay with the specific feedback first. You can ask questions and share context, but I need the conversation to come back to the behavior, the impact, and the expectation."

4. Invite response without surrendering the point

"I want to understand if there is context I am missing. After that, we still need to agree on how this will look different next time."

5. Redirect if the conversation drifts

"I hear that you see other examples on the team. We can talk about team consistency separately. Right now, this conversation is about the expectation for your work and our feedback conversations."

6. Confirm the next behavior

"The next step I need from you is to acknowledge the specific feedback, ask clarifying questions if needed, and then agree on the action you will take."

7. Close cleanly

"I appreciate you talking this through. I will send a short recap so we both have the expectation and next step in writing."

Tone Options

SOFTER VERSION

I know feedback conversations can feel frustrating. I am not asking you to agree with everything immediately. I am asking that we stay with the specific example long enough to agree on what changes next.

MORE DIRECT VERSION

I am going to pause us when the conversation moves away from the specific feedback. We need to discuss the behavior and the expectation before we move to other examples.

CAREFUL / PROFESSIONAL VERSION

For clarity, this conversation is focused on the specific feedback discussed today, the expected behavior going forward, and the next step we agree to after this meeting.

If They Push Back

I do not agree

“I hear that you do not agree. I am not asking for instant agreement. I am asking that we talk through the specific example and agree on the expectation going forward.”

Acknowledges disagreement without turning the meeting into a vote.

You are being unfair

“I hear that this feels unfair. I am going to stay with the specific behavior and the impact I need to address. If there is context I should understand, share it, and then we will come back to the expectation.”

Keeps the manager calm and anchored.

Other people do it too

“We can discuss broader team consistency separately. This conversation is about the expectation for your role and what I need to see from you going forward.”

Avoids litigating other employees.

That is not my fault

“I am open to understanding what got in the way. At the same time, the expectation is that you own your part and communicate early when something may not happen as expected.”

Separates context from accountability.

Silence or shutdown

“I can see this may be frustrating. I am going to give you a moment. Before we end, I do need us to confirm the expectation and the next step.”

Allows space without losing the meeting outcome.

Emotion or tears

“Let us pause for a moment. I know this is hard to hear. We can take a breath, and then I want to return to the specific expectation so this is clear and workable.”

Shows care while maintaining clarity.

Fine, whatever

"I am hearing that you are frustrated. I need more than "fine" here. I need us to confirm what you will do differently after this conversation."

Prevents false agreement.

Questions to Ask

- What context do you think I should understand before we agree on the next step?
- What part of the expectation feels unclear?
- What will you do differently the next time feedback is raised?
- What support would help you respond to feedback more productively?

Follow-Up Messages

SUBJECT

Recap from today

Thanks for meeting today. We discussed the need to keep feedback conversations focused on the specific behavior, impact, and next step. You shared that the feedback felt unfair, and we agreed that future feedback conversations should stay anchored to the example being discussed before shifting to other topics. The next expectation is that you ask clarifying questions, share relevant context, and confirm the action you will take.

SUBJECT

Follow-up: feedback conversation expectations

This note recaps our conversation today. We discussed the pattern from the last feedback conversation, where the discussion moved from the specific feedback to fairness concerns and comparisons with other team members. I clarified that future feedback conversations need to stay focused on the specific behavior, impact, and expected next action. We also discussed that broader team concerns can be raised separately.

Documentation Note

Met with the employee to discuss expectations for feedback conversations. Reviewed that the prior conversation shifted from the specific feedback to fairness concerns and comparisons with other team members. Clarified that future feedback conversations should stay focused on the behavior, impact, and next action. Employee shared concerns about fairness. Manager invited context and reiterated expectation for productive feedback discussion.

DO NOT DOCUMENT

- Do not write that the employee is defensive or difficult.
- Do not speculate about motive or attitude.
- Do not document other employees unless they were part of the conversation.

What Not to Say / Say This Instead

Avoid saying	Say this instead
You always get defensive.	When feedback is raised, I need us to stay with the specific example long enough to agree on next steps.
Stop arguing with me.	I hear your concern. I am going to bring us back to the behavior and expectation.
Everyone else handles feedback better than you.	This conversation is about what I need from you in feedback conversations going forward.

Final Checklist

BEFORE THE CONVERSATION

- Choose the specific behavior example before the meeting.
- Decide the one expectation you need to reset.
- Prepare one redirect phrase before the conversation starts.

DURING THE CONVERSATION

- Acknowledge pushback without debating it.
- Return to the behavior, impact, and next action.
- Do not compare the employee to other team members.

AFTER THE CONVERSATION

- Send a short recap.
- Document observable facts only.
- Schedule the next check-in if the pattern continues.

Guardrail Reminder

REMINDER

This script pack helps you prepare clear workplace language. It does not replace HR, legal counsel, or company policy.

PAUSE AND INVOLVE HR OR THE APPROPRIATE INTERNAL RESOURCE IF THE EMPLOYEE MENTIONS

- Discrimination, retaliation, harassment, accommodation, medical leave, pay, termination, or a formal discipline process

PAUSE PHRASE

"I want to pause here and make sure we follow the right internal process before continuing."