De-stress performance conversations — for both of you

With one simple mindset shift, you can reduce dread and defensiveness and have a more productive discussion.

Video transcript:

Andrea Caldwell: If you're like me, you probably dread performance improvement conversations. Let's face it: They can be awkward, and managers feel like they spend too much time aligning on people's shortcomings while deflecting defensive reactions. So, how can you take a more positive, productive approach? It all starts with a shift — from viewing performance feedback as a criticism of past behavior to seeing it as an opportunity to motivate and plan for future success.

So, here are three ways this mindset can help you improve performance conversations with your team members:

First, establish that you both want the same thing. If you launch right into your feedback, you can put your direct report on the defensive. Instead, start with something like, "I'm glad we have this uninterrupted time to talk. It's my job to help you make progress, so I look forward to discussing ways to do that." Now you both have a shared reason to be there, which is finding ways to keep improving.

Second, invite your direct report to assess themselves. Too often, leaders start with their view of the person's performance, leading their direct reports to either to disagree and defend themselves, or say they agree without truly accepting the feedback. Instead, ask your direct report to share in detail their own performance first, or maybe even have them do this self-assessment ahead of time. You may learn something that leads you to recalibrate your feedback. For example, maybe the person has said yes to too many things, so they aren't giving enough attention to the assignment you care most about. Now, instead of assuming them as deficient in the task, you can talk about their priorities and how they can better manage their workload.

And finally, paint a picture of what success looks like and ensure they feel confident in taking the next steps to get there. This is especially important when you're giving critical feedback. It's not helpful for you to tell someone, "You're bad at team collaboration — you botched last month's report because you didn't ask anyone for input." Instead, try redirecting the conversation toward the future. You might say, "It's important for our monthly reports to reflect the whole team's latest thinking. What are some ways you can make sure that happens in the future?"

This shift in your approach won't magically make performance improvement conversations easy, but it can make them more productive and less stressful for everyone.