



Crucial Conversations.  
FOR ACCOUNTABILITY



# A MANAGER'S DILEMMA

**SKILLS TO LEAD WITH EMPATHY AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

**CHARLA**, a veteran nurse manager, cancels her vacation to deal with hurricane fallout and a staff shortage. In the middle of a hectic day, a nurse tells her, "I have to leave—family emergency." It's the third time this has happened. Compassion tugs at one side. Patients and a stressed team tug at the other.



**MARIA**, a first-year restaurant manager, is on the floor during a packed dinner shift. One of her team members storms out, visibly upset. Another employee—Luca—made an inappropriate comment. Maria is sympathetic, but the restaurant is packed and customers are waiting to be served.



These are not hypotheticals. They're real-life stories of leaders navigating real-life situations. Today, leadership demands more than operational skill—it demands a human touch, one that acknowledges people's challenges and still ensures the work gets done.

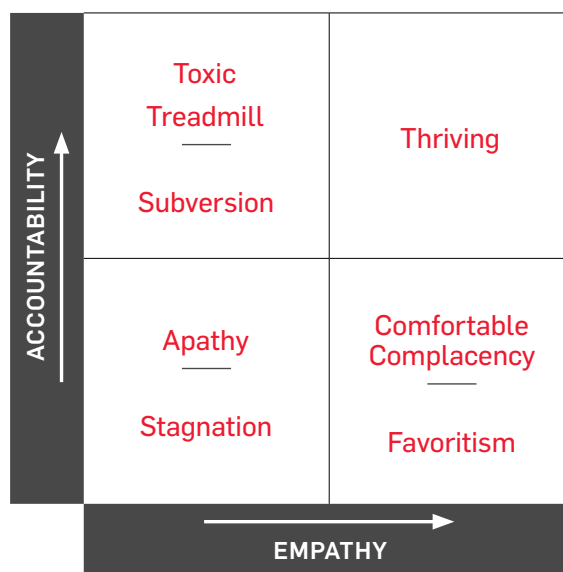
*This is the manager's dilemma: balancing empathy with accountability.*

In this ebook, we'll help you recognize these moments of disproportionate influence—the moments at work that have an outsized impact on our relationships and results—and equip you with practical skills to lead in a way that benefits both the individual and the organization.

## The tension between accountability and empathy occurs when there's a gap between what you expect to happen and what actually happens.

For example, you thought your coworker was going to complete an assignment and they didn't; you expected civility, but a supervisor yells and curses at you; or you assumed the truth and a family member lies to you.

When these types of gaps arise, what is your initial reaction? Leaders and organizations high on empathy and low on accountability are in a state of **comfortable complacency**. Often a concerning culture of favoritism and inequality begins to permeate empathetic-heavy organizations when some people, either legitimately or less so, need more concessions while others do not. Some are repeatedly given a long leash without consequence, while others work hard, or even make great sacrifices, to keep commitments without reward. Over time, resentments build, engagement suffers, and top performers jump ship.



In other organizations, people emphasize holding others accountable—work needs to get done, promises need to be kept, and behavior must be at a higher standard. Those are the rules! But too much accountability can lead to a **toxic treadmill**. All that matters is work and results, work and results, performance, performance, performance. Pretty soon people resort to subversion, find workarounds, and care less about their responsibilities. Resentment builds, engagement suffers, and employees look for softer ground to put down roots.

However, the idea that we must choose between empathy and accountability is what Crucial Conversations calls a *Fool's Choice*: we can either be understanding OR we can keep to the rules. In reality, it's possible to turn these "either/or choices" into "and" choices. It may take more effort, but leading with empathy AND accountability is possible.

**Let's look at how.**



# MAKE THE ACCOUNTABILITY MINDSHIFT

**Why accountability isn't  
about kicking them when  
they're down.**



When someone we manage is going through challenges that prevent them from meeting expectations, we want to offer concessions and space. And when the challenge is isolated and short-lived, that can be easy to do.

But what if the challenges are chronic and wide-reaching? What if the person has health challenges or family issues that frequently take them away from work for extended periods? What if their distractions impact other top performers or impact the bottom line? In these moments, we need to say something to keep results and relationships intact. But how?

When we're managing someone who is truly in crisis, holding them accountable can feel a bit like kicking them when they're down.

The reason we falsely assume that accountability is the opposite of empathy is because we've only seen accountability done poorly. What we've seen modeled is the punitive, scary kind of accountability that looks like pointing out failures and shortcomings with little regard to extenuating circumstances.

And that's why managers need to make an accountability mind shift.

Accountability can be the exact thing that helps people grow. Managers who expertly hold their employees accountable offer the kind of candid and respectful feedback that helps people improve and reach new levels of performance. And when managers build a culture of accountability by holding everyone accountable equally, people trust that work will get done and feel supported in their roles.

We can be empathetic to people's challenges. But when it's past the point of reasonable concessions or it feels like others are taking advantage of our empathy, we don't have to let ourselves, our teams, and our results suffer. The way forward is accountability. You just have to learn to do it right.



## *Skill 1:* **START WITH HEART**

When you are preparing for an accountability conversation, you first need to start with heart. In other words, start with empathy. When you start with accountability, you'll provoke fear. Instead, take a step back and realize that accountability is not the goal—it's the fruit. The real goal is connection. It's the emotional connection that will become the foundation for your Crucial Conversation. If we can't first connect with the people that we lead, we have no hope of influencing them.

### **ASK YOURSELF: WHAT DO I REALLY WANT . . .**

- For me?
- For the other person?
- For our relationship?
- For our organization?

In the above questions, note the word **for** instead of the word **from**. When we think about what we want *from* the other person, we're going to have an accountability conversation. But when we make a mind shift towards what we want *for* the other person, we lay the foundation for the connection we need to work together.

For example, you might begin your conversation like this: *"Hey Asher, I've noticed a pattern between us that I want to talk about. When I bring up a concern about a commitment you didn't complete, you often raise your voice. I'd like us to be able to talk about things in a way that allows both of us to feel heard and find a solution. But I'm wondering if I've done something—or not done something—that's provoking your response. How do you see it?"*



## *Skill 2:* **CLARIFY THE GAP**

There's a difference between someone coming to you with an urgent, immediate problem for the first time and someone coming with that same urgent, immediate problem for the 85th time. Even if the problem is the same, the conversation topic will be different when there is a recurring, persistent gap in an employee's performance and your expectations.



To help clarify what the gap really is and what Crucial Conversation you really need to have, think CPR:

**CONTENT:** A single instance of a problem

**PATTERN:** A recurring problem

**RELATIONSHIP:** How the problem is affecting the working relationship

To find out which conversation is correct, ask yourself: has the problem happened once? Is it ongoing? Or is this a long-term, chronic issue that requires a bigger change in roles or expectations? What is the real problem here?

For example, a missed deadline may result in a Content, Pattern, or Relationship conversation depending on the frequency and underlying cause. Your response will differ depending on which level the two of you are on:

**Content:** *"You missed yesterday's project deadline."*

**Pattern:** *"You've missed several deadlines over the past month."*

**Relationship:** *"Because deadlines aren't being met consistently, I'm starting to question whether I can rely on you."*



## Content conversations are relatively straightforward and simple—and hopefully they resolve the performance gap quickly and effectively.

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Let's play this out with an employee who has health issues.

You get a note from your team member that says, *"Hey, I've got a pretty bad headache this afternoon, do you mind if I log off early and rest?"*

Maybe the answer is easy: *"Yes, feel better!"* But other times you need to hold a content conversation because they're at risk of missing a deadline. You might say, *"Okay, sorry to hear that. Before you log off, are you able to send over the edits for the proposal that's due in the morning? I want to make sure we don't miss the deadline."*

Now, let's say this is the third time this week that your colleague has a bad headache and needs to log off. It's probably time for a pattern conversation. It might sound like this: *"I'm sorry you're having such a hard time with these headaches. I do want you to get the rest you need so you can feel better. And yet, this is the third time this week you've needed to log off early. It wouldn't be a problem if the work was getting done on time, but you have missed a few deadlines, and I am starting to be concerned about the frequency of your headaches. What is your plan for getting these under control, or do we need to discuss a contingency plan for your workload?"*

And finally, what if this problem persists for weeks or months? What do you say then? This is when you describe the impact to their relationships: *"I'm so sorry you're having such a hard time with these headaches. And I want to give you all the time you need to feel better. But I'm in a tough spot because when you can't get your work done, I have to ask others to fill in or do it myself and it's taking a toll on the team. Perhaps it's time to discuss a work leave or a shift in your role so you can prioritize your health without impacting the team. What do you think?"*

By pinpointing which conversation you need to have, you'll get at the heart of what the real problem is and avoid revisiting the same issues over and over. You'll also save yourself and others from a whole lot of resentment and frustration. Using CPR helps you move beyond surface-level discussions and addresses underlying issues that, if unresolved, will steadily undermine trust and your relationship.



### *Skill 3:*

# REDUCE THE LOAD

The authors of *Crucial Accountability* teach many skills that have helped millions of people hold better accountability conversations. But one profound accountability insight comes not from the authors, but from coauthor Joseph Grenny's father, something his father calls the Stress Bucket.



We all have a metaphorical bucket that represents our capacity to deal with stress. Some of our buckets are smaller, some of our buckets can hold a little more. The same goes for stressors. We all experience stressors in our lives—some smaller and some bigger.

Sometimes, our stress buckets begin to overflow—we simply can't handle it all.

It's in those moments when that big stressor hits and their bucket begins to overflow that an empathetic accountability conversation is needed. When this happens, our tendency in that moment is to say, *"How can I help you with that big, massive stressor that just came into your life?"*

Yet fundamentally, we usually can't do anything about that big, massive stressor. But here's the key: we don't have to. What we need to do is try to help them get their overall stress level back down below the level of the bucket.

#### CONSIDER:

- Can you remove smaller stressors?
- Can you simplify expectations?
- Can you extend deadlines?
- Can you offer additional tools?
- Can you restructure or offer clarity?

Your job is not to fix everything. As a workplace manager, you can't fix the majority of the stressors that people experience, but what you can do is help them get down to the level where they can manage their own stressors and where they can help themselves. Just be sure the toll of removing those stressors doesn't fall on your or others, because that would be counterproductive. Instead, find reasonable ways to lighten their load until their bucket stops overflowing.







## *Skill 4:* **MOVE TO ACTION**

Now that we've established safety by Starting with Heart, focused on the right issue by Clarifying the Gap, and done what we can to help by Reducing the Load, it's now time to move from the more empathetic side of the conversation to the accountability side. While we have empathy for those involved, it would be crippling for both the employee and the organization to not take steps to ensure responsibilities are kept and production is maintained.

To help encourage accountability, we need to stop finishing our conversations with sketchy plans and failed assumptions. A successful accountability discussion assumes nothing and sets expectations by including the following key components:

- **Who**
- **Does What**
- **By When**

Here's an example: *"OK, let's confirm the details. Maggie, you'll proofread these two articles and send the edited documents to me by Tuesday at 1 p.m. Is that right? Do you have any questions?"* While clarifying is helpful, what you're really looking for is commitment. When someone agrees to a plan of action, they're more likely to see it through.

Once you've clarified who is doing what by when, establish how you'll follow up on what's supposed to happen. This could happen through a **checkup** where you make a plan to circle back and check on the status of the plan: *"I'll shoot you a message Monday to see if you have any final questions or concerns before the articles are due."* Or, follow-up could happen through a **check-back** where the person with the assignment is tasked with reporting back to you: *"I'll let you know Monday where I'm at with the articles and if I have any questions or concerns."*

A successful accountability conversation will fizzle out and come to nothing without a plan of action. By stating who does what by when and following up, you'll hold others accountable in a helpful, supportive way.



# CONCLUSION

**Empathy without accountability leads to burnout. Accountability without empathy leads to fear. But empathy with accountability leads to transformation.** You don't have to choose. You can be both strong and soft. You can be the kind of leader who makes people feel seen and helps them rise. When you show up in these moments of disproportionate influence with both heart and structure, you create cultures where people—and results—can thrive.

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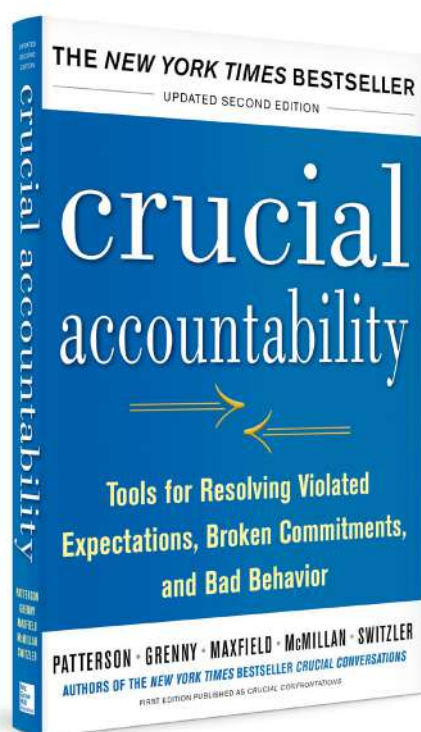
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Why? Because in addition to all we've learned about organizational behavior and performance in our decades of research and service, we've continually rediscovered this beacon of insight: while everyone understands new thinking can shift behavior, few consider that new behavior shifts thinking. We learn by *doing*. An awareness of concepts does not change behavior.

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