# Play: Building a high-performing team: Having open discussions using supportive confrontation

## What is it:

In the world of agile, we know that Individuals and interactions are valued over processes and tools, but we also know that dealing with other humans is always messier than going at it alone. We also know that truly complex software can’t be built by a single individual, and that it is extremely satisfying to share the journey in solving a complex problem together with an engaged team. Humans are also typically pre-disposed to making human connections and social interactions, and tend have higher happiness when experiencing greater social connections, but what truly makes a high-performing team, and how does one know? In this play below, we provide a framework for providing constructive feedback towards joint problem-solving.

Pro tip: One of the key differences in Product Teams versus Project teams is that long-lived Product teams learn as they grow over a long period of time….

**The content in this play is based on content derived from Hugh Keelan course on providing feedback at Stanford’s Graduate School of Business.**

This play refers to the guardrails:

* [Scrum Team](https://wiki.wdf.sap.corp/wiki/display/agiletrans/Scrum+Team)
* [Team Collaboration, Culture and Mindset](https://wiki.wdf.sap.corp/wiki/display/agiletrans/Team+collaboration%2C+culture+and+mindset)
* [Inter-team collaboration](https://wiki.wdf.sap.corp/wiki/display/agiletrans/Inter-team+collaboration)
* [Managing in an Agile environment](https://wiki.wdf.sap.corp/wiki/display/agiletrans/Managing+in+an+Agile+environment)
* [Working Agreement](https://wiki.wdf.sap.corp/wiki/display/agiletrans/Working+Agreement)

## When to use it:

* Newly formed team (Storming/Forming stages). Consistently using supportive confrontation and embedded within the team culture creates
* Any team in need of improvement with clear dysfunctions. Applying these techniques can lead to joint problem solving.
* Team that has a lot of “I’s.” Applying these play helps provide open, transparent, and builds trust, which are key for aligning towards the team’s goal.
* Team with lower than SAP IT average westrum culture scores. Applying this play helps create a framework for better dialog around joint problems.

## Expected outcomes:

A team that is using open dialog and supportive confrontation effectively will exhibit the following characteristics:

* Members of the team approach all of their interactions with each other with **kindness, consideration, empathy and respect**.
* Members of the team will exhibit a high degree of collaboration
* Members of the team will consistently use supportive confrontation techniques.
* Members of the team will collaborate more closely and shower higher engagement.
* The team will be aligned towards their goals and achieve higher productivity and happiness.

Pro tip: As Mark Twain said, go to “Heaven for the Climate, but Hell for the company.” Talking, listening with respect and empathy, and using supportive confrontation is the basis for a human to human connection and collaboration. We need real conversations to solve our most complex issues and leverage power of group diversity.

## How to execute it:

* Recommend Initial Time: 60-minute reading and role-playing.
* Recommended Update: Practice as often as you can.
* Difficult level 4/5 to do consistently as a team.

### Supportive confrontation play

Dealing with other humans is messy! [It’s not like calculating the answer of 42](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/feb/03/douglas-adams-42-hitchhiker?INTCMP=SRCH), We get it! However, we can’t just ignore the messiness of real human interactions, so we must be equipped with tools to make it a bit less unpleasant.

Pro tip: Constructive Feedback is always a gift.

Consider the pictures below of the three realities, courtesy of Hugh Keelan from Stanford GSB. Person B has his needs, motives and situation (or basically what is in his mind. Person B behaves and interacts with Person A through behavior, actions, words. Person A is impacted by those behavior, actions and words, and in her reality, has feelings, reactions and responses.

Realtities

Realtities

While each person is an expert in his or her own reality, each can never actually know the other’s *INTENT* or *IMPACT* of the shared reality and should **NEVER** make assumptions when giving their feedback. As one starts to assume the intent or impact, you begin to venture outside of your expertise into the realm of another. How can I argue with how you feel about something? I really have no way, but what I can do is start to talk about our shared reality and how we can move forward. It will also immediately put the person on the defensive, which will also lead to the fight-or-flight core portion of the brain, and where any logical thought and discussion will be

With a shared goal of moving towards joint problem solving, constructive feedback from both parties requires one to stick within the realm of fact, which is within their reality and what they observe in the shared reality, never venturing into the other person’s reality.

Pro tip: When we talk about empathy, we are just trying to understand and share the other person’s reality from their perspective.

So here is the technique for having constructive dialogs: *Use this:*

* When you \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (behavior), I feel \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (insert feeling)

NOT this

* When you \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (behavior) I feel that \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (= attribution; imputed motive)

*The second sentence should not be used as it moves towards stepping into someone else’s reality. Speaking from everyone’s own reality, helps build a trust level that hopefully gets you on the way to a joint problem solving, and remember, hidden problems fester!*

When having these conversations, some tips are:

1. Listen. No, I mean really, listen, not just waiting for your turn to respond to the thought you have in your head.
2. Practice [mindfulness](https://www.mindful.org/meditation/mindfulness-getting-started/), and in particular, observe how you feel about things in the present moment, let your judgements roll by, and return to the present state.
3. Use empathy, really try to understand the perspective of the other by putting yourself in their shoes.

* Pro tip: One great technique if you have time to plan before your conversation is to role-play the specific scenario with a neutral third party, however you should role-play the person you are expecting to have a supportive confrontation with, and the third party should role-play you. You will likely develop new insights having to role-play outside of yourself.

1. Repeat your understanding of what the person said before you respond.

For advanced level discussions, a variety of other feedback techniques may be used.

Please see the various supporting documents from Hugh Keelan such as:

1. [Power Talk and Supportive confrontation](https://github.wdf.sap.corp/IT-Agile-DevOps-CC/Playbooks/blob/master/AgilePlaybook/Building_a_team/Interacting/8-9-201813-0Power%20Talk_A%20Hands%20on%20Guide%20to%20Supportive%20Confrontation.pdf)
2. [Gender and Feedback](https://github.wdf.sap.corp/IT-Agile-DevOps-CC/Playbooks/blob/master/AgilePlaybook/Building_a_team/Interacting/8-9-201813-0Gender%20%26%20Feedback.pdf)
3. [Traps in the Feedback process](https://github.wdf.sap.corp/IT-Agile-DevOps-CC/Playbooks/blob/master/AgilePlaybook/Building_a_team/Interacting/8-9-201813-0Traps%20in%20the%20Feedback%20Process.pdf)

#### Running the basic supportive confrontation practice role play:

1. Find a partner or a few partners on your team who you are willing to role-play with you.
2. Choose a recent scenario where you provided feedback that didn’t go as planned, or an upcoming scenario where you plan to provide feedback.
3. Explain the context of the scenario to the role-play partner. Stay within the shared reality of the situation (e.g. try not to explain your intent or how you felt).
4. Utilize the technique:
   1. When you \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (behavior), I feel \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (insert feeling)

Some additional variations include (in level of ratcheting up the levels) (for more detail see this [link](https://github.wdf.sap.corp/IT-Agile-DevOps-CC/Playbooks/blob/master/AgilePlaybook/Building_a_team/Interacting/8-9-201813-0Power%20Talk_A%20Hands%20on%20Guide%20to%20Supportive%20Confrontation.pdf))

1. This is the effect of your \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ behavior on me, such as the statement, “I feel patronized and controlled when you interrupt”.
2. Your \_\_\_\_\_\_ behavior is not meeting your apparent goals or intentions, such as, “You are making it difficult for us to explore the issue to the extent that we must in order to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (stated goal). I don’t think that is the effect you want. Was this the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (stated goal) you are trying to achieve?
3. Your \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ behavior may meet your goals, but it is very costly to you. For example, “Your \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ behavior may make you win this decision, but if you haven’t noticed, it seems like myself and others on the team are less willing to express their views”. Note that this approach can be dangerous as it starts to get into realities of others as you discuss the costs.
4. “In what ways am I part of the problem?” In this variation, you state the situation in which you are part of the problem. For example, “It seems like every time we discuss \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (topic), we fall into a negative cycle and I find myself becoming defensive when I anticipate your response. This makes me tense and dig in on my points. That must make you frustrated as well. Can we discuss?”
5. See how the conversation goes, you may want to practice it a few ways.
6. (Optional, but commended) Switch the roles, now you should play the person receiving the feedback. This will likely give you some additional insight

#### Running the basic supportive confrontation problem solving and commitment play:

1. Utilize the supportive confrontation that you practiced.
   1. Reticence or not resolving the issue will lead to larger problems.
   2. Resist the urge to attack.
   3. Position Power doesn’t matter.
2. Begin to jointly problem solve and achieve commitment:
   1. First, address the behaviors, with the clear assumption that both sides have the best intentions, and aligned team goals in mind. You don’t need a single reality, knowing that there is a Reality for person A, a Reality for person B, and a shared reality.
   2. Try to gain agreement on mutually acceptable behaviors, and what specifically would change. For example, “Whenever we are in a brainstorming session, we will not interrupt until a person has finished speaking.” This can also be put into a working agreement if the team decides it applies.
      1. Be aware of the statement, “I am what I am.” Personality may not change, but behavior in the shared reality is controllable.
      2. Be wary of the desire to end the conflict quickly via generic platitudes, such as “I promise to be more considerate” versus, “in our next meeting, please signal me by raising your hand, and I’ll remember to include you and others in the conversation by not interrupting.”
   3. Once you can have open discussions, you can begin to jointly talk about the issues without the context of behaviors. It may be worthwhile to have a joint discussion and be open and transparent on the goals and concerns.
   4. Once all sides have presented their opinions, remember to commit to the consensus, even if it’s not specifically the outcome you wanted to achieve. Do not let decisions linger without action steps.
   5. Check-in frequently to ensure the commitment is there. Reinforce welcome behaviors, provide feedback on regressions.