

How to not make your feedback feel like a threat



When feedback feels like a threat

When was the last time someone gave you feedback that made you feel truly seen—not shamed, not belittled, but invited to grow?

If that kind of experience feels rare, you're not alone. In many workplaces, feedback is wrapped in frustration, judgment, or even veiled hostility. It might not always be explicit, but the message is clear: you're a problem.

This is especially true in accountability in leadership. There's a widespread belief—often unspoken but deeply ingrained—that in order to give corrective feedback, a leader must first feel angry, disappointed, or frustrated enough to “justify” the conversation. But when correction or feedback comes from a place of anger, it's not an invitation—it's a threat.

And threats don't transform people. They entrench them.

Why anger sabotages accountability

When we use anger as a tool—as a source of momentum to “finally say something” or “really get through to someone”—we are operating from an [inward mindset](#). That mindset sees others as objects: as obstacles to our goals, burdens to manage, or vehicles to get us where we want to go. In this view, our [feedback](#) becomes more about offloading our emotions than helping them succeed.

From this inward stance, corrective conversations feel adversarial, no matter how polished our words may be. People pick up on the undertone of resentment. They feel blamed. And blame breeds defensiveness. As *The Anatomy of Peace* puts it, the moment someone feels the need to defend themselves, they stop learning. They start surviving.

This is one of the central paradoxes in [performance](#) conversations: the more aggressively we try to correct someone, the more resistance we trigger—and the cycle reinforces itself.

So how do we hold people accountable without backing them into a corner?

Accountability as an act of care

[Accountability](#) at its core, is not about consequences. It’s about clarity and commitment—clarity about what matters and commitment to helping someone live into their potential.

In fact, the root of the word “accountability” points to being “answerable”— shares roots with the idea of being answerable—not in a punitive sense, but in a relational one. To be answerable to someone means there’s a relationship in place, a sense of mutual responsibility.

Making the subtle shift of thinking about accountability as

something we hold with people, not over them, unlocks a new kind of effectiveness. When feedback is grounded in respect, they can stop defending and start listening.

A regional manager in a large healthcare organization said it best:

“I used to wait until I was so frustrated I couldn’t NOT say something. And by then, it always came out sideways. I didn’t realize my feedback was more about me than them. Arbinger helped me see that accountability doesn’t require anger—it requires connection.”

What it looks like to invite growth, not demand it

So what does respect-based accountability actually look like?

It starts long before the feedback conversation.

Leaders who operate from an [outward mindset](#) begin by seeing others as people—with fears, hopes, and challenges just as real as their own. That changes everything. It shifts the goal from fixing someone to understanding them and supporting their success.

That’s why Arbinger-trained leaders often use the word *invitation* when talking about feedback. An invitation implies choice, dignity, and relationship. It doesn’t mean soft-pedaling the truth or avoiding hard conversations. It means delivering truth in a way that the other person can receive. In that kind of environment, people don’t have to brace themselves. They don’t have to protect their identity. They’re free to reflect, respond, and grow.

Respect doesn't excuse poor performance

It's important to note: this approach does **not** mean letting people off the hook. Quite the opposite.

An inward mindset often leads us to vacillate between two extremes—*avoidance* and *aggression*. We either suppress the need to say something, or we explode with built-up emotion. But an outward mindset gives us a third way: honest, timely, and relational accountability.

Respect-based feedback is direct. It's clear. But it's never dehumanizing.

When leaders are grounded in care and curiosity, they're able to ask powerful, non-defensive questions:

- What might be getting in the way for this person?
- How might I be contributing to the problem?
- How can I communicate this feedback in a way that affirms their value as a person while naming what needs to change?

And because the feedback is anchored in partnership, not punishment, it's far more likely to stick.

When people feel seen, they can see themselves

Most people want to do well. Few employees wake up thinking, "How can I underperform today?" But when feedback feels like a personal indictment, self-protection kicks in. People focus on defending themselves, not improving.

Respectful feedback flips the script. When people feel seen,

they can see themselves more clearly. They can recognize the gap between where they are and where they could be—not as failure, but as possibility.

That's the real opportunity in accountability in leadership. Not just to correct behavior—but to invite people into their own potential.

[Transformation](#) begins with how we see. If we see someone as a problem, they will feel like one. But if we see them as a person, they'll sense that—and become far more likely to rise to the vision we hold for them.

Letting care lead the way

True [leadership](#) requires courage—the courage to see others clearly, speak truthfully, and stay grounded in care even when conversations are hard.

When we stop using frustration as fuel for feedback, we unlock a better way forward. One where people feel invited—not indicted. One where accountability builds [trust](#) instead of breaking it. One where respect, not resentment, becomes the foundation for growth.

Because when people know they matter, they're far more likely to show up in ways that matter.