

Coaching to Empowerment

Skills to create ownership and accountability

by
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A Message from Marlene

Dear Leader,

If you're like most managers, you've been taught to avoid negativity like the plague. After all, who wants to get sucked into complaints, gossip, or that endless game of verbal ping pong?

I used to think the same way. My advice back then was to shut it down, change the subject, or simply remove negative people from your life. Negativity is not only draining, it's like a virus, spreading from person to person, department to department. Chronic complaining is not just a mindset issue, it's a performance issue.

But here's what I've learned after decades of coaching leaders: Avoidance doesn't make you a better leader. It just makes you better at avoiding leadership.

You can't fix people, but you can coach them, and this includes those with a negativity bias, and those who continuously complain. In fact negativity is one of the most underutilized coaching opportunities you have.

In this guide, you'll learn my A-B-1-2-3 Method—a simple, powerful approach to help you:

- Stay calm in emotional conversations
- Shift from blame to ownership
- Build real ownership and autonomy

If you're ready to stop avoiding hard conversations and start leading through my Coaching to Empowerment Method, let's begin.



Why Do People Complain?

Before you coach others, you have to see complaining for what it really is. Most leaders think complaining is just negativity or a bad attitude. But here's the truth:

- Complaining is often an unmet need, plus an unconscious belief that they can't have what they want.
- It's easier to vent than to do the hard work of naming an outcome or facing obstacles.
- It can also be a habit—some people have been rewarded for complaining all their lives.



Key Insight

Negativity is a coaching moment in disguise.

What Not to Do

When someone complains, the temptation is to:

- Jump in and fix it.
- Argue or prove your point.
- Debate blame or fairness.

This is what I call Verbal Ping Pong—an endless back-and-forth that solves nothing:

"Yes I did." / "No you didn't."

"You never listen." / "You're so closed-minded."

"That's just your opinion."

"I'll prove it."

Personal relationships aside, effective leaders don't waste time on these circular conversations that go nowhere.

Key Reminders

Don't rescue

Don't get distracted

Don't play verbal Ping Pong





AB

Listen-Acknowledge

What to Do Instead

A = Listen

- Stay calm.
- Don't interrupt.
- Stay curious.

Example Phrases

- "Tell me what's on your mind."
- "Help me understand what's frustrating you."

B = Acknowledge

- Recognize their emotional reality.
- Show them you heard.

Example Phrases

- "It sounds like you're frustrated with the new system."
- "I can see this really bothers you."

Once they say, "yes, that's right" you've likely connected with them emotionally; they feel heard. If they say, "no" that's not how I feel, ask them to describe their feeling, then acknowledge their reality.

Leadership Lesson

Radical listening isn't agreement. It's control of yourself and the conversation.

If people don't feel heard, they'll keep repeating themselves until you "get it."

1 2 3

What do you want?
What are your choices?
Are you willing?



1 = What do you want?

(Shift them from venting to clarity.)

Ask: "In your perfect world, what do you want?"

If they dodge or blame:

Ask: "What would that give you that you don't have now?"

Rephrase: "So what you want is better teamwork—is that right?"

If they say "I don't know"

Ask: "If you did know, what would it be?"

Say: "Take some time and let's talk tomorrow."

2 = What are your choices?

Ask: "What choices do you see to help you get there?"

Trap to avoid: Don't give them the answers. Your role is to help them own their choices. Ownership begins with recognizing choice.

3 = Are you willing?

Ask: "Are you willing to take those steps?"

Change doesn't happen without willingness.

Expect resistance that begins with "but..."

- "But it's difficult."
- "But I might fail."
- "But it's expensive."

These are signs of resistance. Be careful not to "resist their resistance. Instead, help them to overcome their obstacles.

We teach this method in [The Performance Coaching Model](#).



Practical Examples

A-B Listen Acknowledge

When someone complains listen and acknowledge their reality. By acknowledging their reality I mean their emotional reality. Example: “Stephanie, I hear you. It sounds like you're frustrated by the new system.”

As I said before, when people feel heard they're usually open to being coached. If you miss this important foundation (listening and acknowledging) you'll get caught in a non-productive conversation, which only means that Stephanie is trying to make sure you “get it.” Once Stephanie knows you understand, then you can ask the most important question: What do you want?

Question 1: What Do You Want?

“So, Stephanie, in your perfect world, what do you want?” Wait for it...wait for it. Chances are, you'll get a distraction or a barrier. Stephanie will talk about why it's not fair, why what she wants is impossible, and how she is not going to put up with it, and so on. You have to maintain your presence and go back to the original question. It sounds something like this:

“Yes, Stephanie, I know how you feel. The question is, **what do you want?**” Get comfortable with the pregnant pause. Real leadership is about focusing energy.

Beware of Distractions

Quick answers are distractions; not the core issue, for example:

- “I just want Michael to be fired.”
- “I don't know what I want.”
- “I just wanted to vent.”

If Stephanie says, “I just wanted to vent,” respond with “OK.” (This is proof that you listened and she felt heard.) Here's where you go with the other two statements.

“I just want Michael to be fired.”

Recognize blame as a distraction. Your employee probably thinks that Michael being fired is the answer to their problems. Don't get triggered. Dig deeper to uncover the real issue.

Follow up Question: What would that give you that you don't have now?

Be careful not to engage in a back and forth conversation. Listen to uncover the root.

Practical Examples

Question 2: What are your choices?

When you help your employee recognize choices, they are empowered to make decisions.

Suppose your employee says, “I want to become a director.” Your next question is **“What choices do you see to help you get there?”**

Avoid the tendency to give the answer even if you know it.

Your objective is to see if the employee can take ownership of the choices available, not to tell him what the choices are.

If your employee says, “I have no choices,” then you know he’s not taking responsibility.

Most of the time, an employee will start to explore choices. The choice may be to get a certification, work a different shift, get mentoring or take a pay cut while learning new skills. When you help the employee look at all the choices, the only thing left to do is to determine his or her level of willingness to do what’s required.

Question 3: Are You Willing?

In three of my books, I teach a concept called The Fulcrum Point of Change: A state of willingness.

The Fulcrum Point of Change

The idea is that there’s a mindset or an energetic pattern that emerges right before personal change or transformation. That mindset is willingness. Nothing happens until someone is willing.

Conclusion

Coaching techniques can look easy on paper. (In workshops everyone knows the correct answer.) However, if you want to create a culture of empowered responsible employees, coaching to empowerment is a critical skill worth the investment in learning. It just depends upon what you want, what choices you have to practice and whether or not you are willing to do what is required to master the techniques.

See the cheat sheet below.

COACHING to EMPOWERMENT

Skills to create ownership and accountability

A

Listen

Calm down. Don't interrupt. Stay curious.

B

Acknowledge

Acknowledge their emotion and their reality.

1

What do you want?

(They may not know. Don't get distracted.)

2

What are your choices?

When you find your choice you find you power.

3

Are you willing?

Nothing changes without willingness.

Marlene Chism



An expert in conflict management, Marlene is known for getting to the root problem, simplifying the complex and increasing leadership clarity.

As a coach, Marlene works with decision-makers, offering frameworks and tools to navigate complex conversations and increase accountability.

As a seasoned facilitator and dynamic speaker, she brings executives and managers together to uncover blind spots, address the elephant in the room, and strengthen alignment.

A recognized expert on the LinkedIn Learning platform, Marlene has produced six educational video series on high-stakes topics such as working with high conflict people, having difficult conversations, and anger management.

She's the creator of The Courageous Leader Ecosystem a method to build confident leaders, collaborative relationships and accountable cultures. She's author of four commercially published books. Her latest, From Conflict to Courage was nominated for an international award from GetAbstract.

Marlene holds a bachelor's in communications with a minor in psychology, and a master's in human resources development. She's an enhanced practitioner in Narrative Coaching.

Mission & Values

The mission of Marlene Chism Consulting is to build confident leaders, collaborative relationships, and accountable cultures.

Over 25 years ago the original business name was ICARE which stood for Improving Communication and Relationships Everywhere. Today the same theme carries through with the core values.

Inner growth | Creativity | Alignment | Responsibility | Empowerment

Whether you're navigating resistance to change, low trust, or a breakdown in communication, conflict is not the problem: Mismanagement is.

Mismanagement costs companies millions in lost productivity, customer complaints, safety, lawsuits, and turnover.

We live by two truths: Clarity can change any situation; and If you want to change the culture you have to change the conversation.



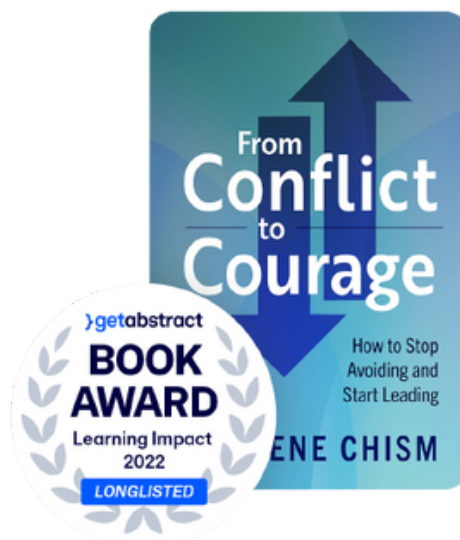
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What's Next?

Ready to Go Deeper?

If you found this guide helpful, there's so much more you can do to develop your leaders, and build a culture of accountability.

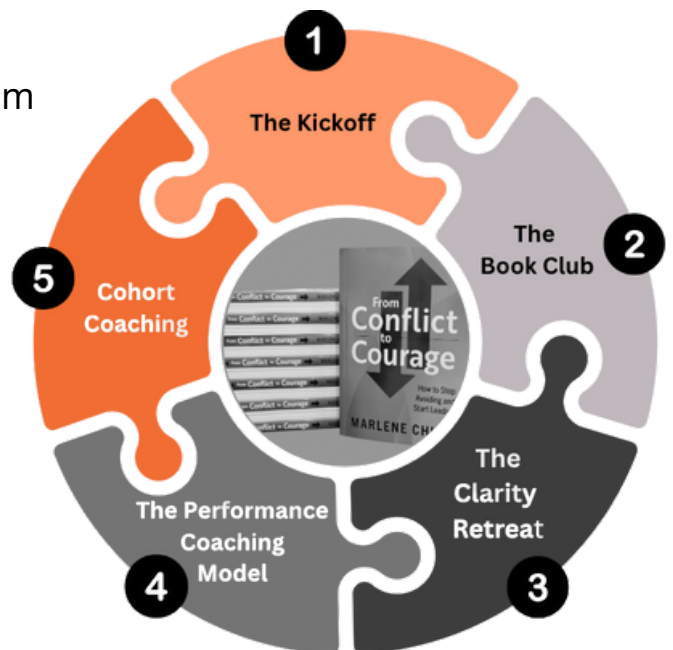
- Explore The Performance Coaching Model—my complete framework for transforming difficult conversations into leadership moments.
- Book an exploratory session with me to work through your specific challenges, or to learn more about The Courageous Leader Ecosystem.

Ready to build confident leaders, collaborative teams and accountable cultures?

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The Courageous Leader Ecosystem