

FRICTION

INTERPERSONAL

Believe Hard, Push Harder

The Experiment: Know Your Person, Know Your Defaults

Duration: 2 weeks

Time required: 20 minutes for the audit, 5-10 minutes per feedback conversation

Goal: This experiment combines a relationship audit—do you know the people you are coaching well enough to challenge them effectively—with a self-awareness practice around your own feedback defaults to close the gap between the feedback you intend to give and the feedback that lands effectively.

Phase One: The Relationship Audit (Week One)

For each direct report or person you regularly coach, answer the following honestly in writing:

- What are this person's stated goals—not just their job description, but what they have told you they want for themselves?

- How do they prefer to receive hard feedback? Do I know this from conversation, or am I assuming?

- When I have challenged them in the past, how did they respond? Did it land as intended?

- On a scale of 1-10, how much does this person trust that my feedback comes from investment in them rather than frustration or judgment?

- Is there feedback I have been avoiding with this person? If so, what is the real reason I have not delivered it?

Be honest about the gaps. A low score on trust does not mean the relationship is broken. It means there is work to do before the high-stakes conversation. Frese spent 24 years building the kind of relationships that allowed a moment like that sideline exchange to land as belief rather than attack.

Phase Two: Feedback Default Audit (Week One, Continued)

Reflect on the last three pieces of significant feedback you delivered—positive or corrective. For each one, ask:

- Was my feedback about a behavior or a pattern of behavior—or did it slide into characterizing the person?

- Did I anchor it to a specific situation, observable action, and concrete impact—or was it general and interpretive?

- If the person received it defensively, is it possible the framing triggered identity threat rather than behavioral reflection?

Most people discover one of two defaults. They either pull punches until the message evaporates, or they drift into characterizations—“you always,” “you tend to,” “the problem with you is”—that land as verdicts rather than observations. Neither produces the outcome you want. Knowing your default is the first step to interrupting it.

Phase Three: One Conversation, Restructured (Week Two)

Choose one piece of feedback you identified in the audit, something you have been avoiding, or something you have delivered before without it landing. Structure it using the CORE model from Credit in Public, Correct in Private, but before you deliver it, add one element that CORE alone does not make explicit and that the Frese and Okananwa story makes impossible to ignore. Belief. Name what you believe this person is capable of, and make clear that the challenge comes from investment, not frustration. That single addition is what separates feedback that lands as an attack from feedback that lands as support.

Yeager and colleagues, in a 2014 article, *Breaking the cycle of mistrust: Wise interventions to provide critical feedback across the racial divide*, showed that a relatively simple statement can help someone absorb hard feedback: “I am giving you these comments because I have very high expectations; I am confident you can reach them.” Nineteen words can change whether someone can really internalize your feedback.

The most common discovery in this experiment is that leaders who believe they know their people well often discover they have been making assumptions about how feedback lands rather than testing those assumptions. The second realization (seen in so many of our own coaching engagements) is that the feedback they have been avoiding is often the feedback the person most needs and, if the relationship is strong, is most ready to receive.