

5 ways to stop blindsiding your team — and hurting their morale

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You announce a change to your team's priorities, and your direct reports are shocked — *shocked!* You may think you laid the groundwork for this news, but their surprised, wary, or tearful reactions say otherwise.

Even well-intentioned managers can forget that their direct reports have access to only a sliver of the information they do. It's incredibly easy for your team to feel blindsided by a change, decision, or piece of feedback when they feel uninformed or when they haven't had a chance to weigh in. Lack of agency can hurt morale and erode trust, especially if your direct reports find themselves thinking *What else is my manager hiding?*



Of course, you don't want to tell your direct reports everything you think or hear (talk about overkill!). But you can increase your transparency in important areas that impact their work and future, helping them feel in the loop when it counts. Here are five tips to get started.

1. Give regular (at least weekly) feedback, so direct reports know where they stand long before a performance review.

You're giving Ernest his review: decent marks overall, but — deep breath — you tell him that he doesn't take enough initiative on new projects. In response, he stares at the table and his voice cracks: "I thought I was doing what you wanted ..."

It's easy for managers to delay giving feedback, especially the redirecting kind, because it's hard to fit into their hectic routine or they're worried about how the person will react or they hope the behavior is a one-off and so wait to speak up. But letting a performance issue fester can cause damage to your direct reports' reputation and standing, confusion during performance reviews, and anger that you didn't give them a chance to course-correct.

A much better way is to establish a regular and open feedback relationship with your direct reports, where you share feedback in real time (or as soon as possible), your direct reports have a good sense of where they stand, small issues don't become big ones — and you have zero surprises to share come review time.

To do so:

- **Leverage regular 1-on-1s with direct reports to give and receive feedback.** If you haven't before, talk with each direct report about their feedback preferences so you can tailor your message and establish mutual expectations for how frequently you'll each share feedback (be sure you're seeking feedback from your direct reports, not just dishing it out). With regular feedback exchanges, feedback will begin to seem, well, regular, and not something scary that happens only in performance reviews.
- **Set a weekly quota for giving feedback.** To build a habit of giving enough regular feedback, start with a goal of giving three pieces of reinforcing feedback and one piece of redirecting feedback per week to each direct report, bearing their feedback preferences in mind.
- **Plan your feedback.** Feedback is one of the most potent tools you have to guide your direct reports and help them succeed. Don't wing it. Use our feedback planner to help make it count.
- **Encourage direct reports to keep a log of feedback they receive from you and others.** Tracking feedback can help them spot, understand, and adjust their behavior patterns.

2. Keep your team informed about high-level discussions they're not a part of.

To you, a meeting with peer managers or higher-ups may feel like just another block on your calendar. But to your direct reports, it can feel like a black box, leaving them scrounging for scraps of information after a conversation happened or a decision was made that could affect their work — that is, if they know the meeting occurred at all.

Telling your team about these high-level discussions — and asking them to weigh in, when appropriate — can help them be more savvy and better-equipped to do good work and can arm you with their insights so you're better informed and able to contribute in those meetings.

- **Before the meeting:** Share what you know about what will happen, even if it's not much. In cases where you do know details, share the agenda and what decisions may result, and ask your team for input so you can bring their best thinking to the meeting. For example, *"I'm meeting with sales and finance tomorrow to discuss and decide on new software for managing our sales data. What considerations should we keep in mind? What programs do you think might work best for us?"*
- **During the meeting:** Ask questions and take notes, with your team in mind. And be careful about making team commitments on the spot (e.g., "Oh yes, we can do that!"). Better to say, *"I don't see a reason why we can't do that, but let me check with my team and get back to you this afternoon"* than to agree to something unrealistic.

- **After the meeting:** Share with your team the details relevant to them, emphasizing why something is happening — not just what’s happening. Answer their questions and concerns and, where appropriate, ask for input on next steps. For example, *“I met with sales and finance, and we considered several sales software options. We agreed that program X is best for us because it’s affordable and well-supported. Jonas suggested we roll it out in August. What questions or concerns do you have about the decision and the timing? How can we plan ahead for this transition?”*

3. Have your direct reports weigh in on team goals — or at least how to meet them.

Nothing makes people feel powerless quite like being told, “Do this — exactly the way I say.” Why even bring your brain to work when you feel like a cog, subject to the ever-changing whims of the machine?

It’s within your power to involve your direct reports in selecting and shaping your team’s goals, even if your team’s main objectives are dropped on you from above or change midstream. And when you get them involved, you can leverage your team’s good ideas (possibly leading to better outcomes) and help them feel more committed to goals they’ve had a hand in shaping.

To do so:

- **As a team, discuss the merits and challenges of possible goals.** Gathering your team’s input on which goals are feasible (or not) and which they think will have the biggest impact enables you to share those insights with your boss and peers, possibly influencing which goals are selected or at least informing preset goals. For more, see [How to select and shape team goals](#).
- **Seek input on the best way to reach goals.** Even if you’re told, “We need your team to sell 1,400 new subscriptions by August,” there’s likely some flexibility in *how* to reach the objective. Start by explaining to your team why higher-ups picked the number they did so they understand how it fits into the big picture. Then seek your team’s best ideas. For example, if the subscription target is being increased because the company wants to tap new markets, perhaps your team can brainstorm new audience segments. For more, see [Planning how you’ll reach a team goal](#).
- **If a goal changes midstream, explain the rationale for the change and address concerns.** Once you break the news, ask what your team thinks about the goal change, listen carefully, and address concerns honestly (it’s usually unwise to gloss over or put a happy face on genuinely difficult changes). Also, follow up — both in team meetings and 1-on-1s. For more, see [Team goals keep changing](#).
- **Consider adding a team-chosen strategic learning goal.** Adding a goal when your team already feels overbusy? Many managers resist the idea. But goals that can

improve how your team operates — including streamlining processes, adjusting team dynamics, and increasing professional development — are ripe for team input and can actually boost performance over time. For more, see [5 types of strategic goals that can help your team perform better](#).

4. Before rolling out a new initiative, seek input from your team.

Most new team processes or initiatives can succeed only with your direct reports' help. So, instead of formulating a full plan, charging ahead with it, and almost certainly denting their motivation, explain what you're thinking of doing — then listen. Doing so primes your team for what's coming, lets them share their insights, and maybe even gets them excited to help. In return, you get valuable information from the frontline people doing the work that's almost certain to make your plan better than if it comes from your brain alone.

To do so:

- **When you ask for input, make it clear how you plan to use it.** Will you use it to decide whether to do the initiative? Or the best way to do what you've already decided to try? Or something else? Be clear up front. For example: *"Kenya, I'm looking at changing the way we route customer orders to simplify the process. Here's what I have in mind. I'm interested to hear your thoughts."* And don't ask for feedback you have no plans to use, which could be worse for morale than never asking in the first place.
- **Ask about your direct reports' needs and concerns.** Depending on where you are in the planning process, you could ask questions like:
 - *"What issues do you have with the current process?"*
 - *"How might the new initiative address those issues?"*
 - *"What additional ideas do you have for improvement?"*
 - *"What challenges do you see with implementing this initiative?"*
 - *"What support would you need to make it a success?"*
- **Use what you hear to shape or refine your plan.** Then, share the plan with your team so they can see some of their ideas and input in play and feel they took part in shaping the initiative. And when you decide not to use an idea or address a concern, at least explain why — so your direct reports feel like you heard and considered their perspective and that it's worth sharing their thoughts with you next time.

For more tips, see [How to guide your team through change](#).

5. When possible, give advance notice of big organizational changes.

Managers really do need to keep some sensitive news confidential, like layoffs or a pending reorg. But if there's a change on the horizon that doesn't require strict confidentiality — perhaps an office move or shift in strategy or leadership — why keep your team in the dark?

The sooner they know what may happen, the more time they'll have to adapt to the idea and situation. And besides, better that they hear it from you than from the rumor mill. (If you're unsure whether news is OK to share, ask your boss or HR for guidance.)

What if all the details aren't settled or the change may not happen? In many cases, it's still more helpful to your direct reports to have incomplete information than no information — that way, if the change does happen, your team won't wonder if the sky is falling. Simply explain what you know and don't know, how it could impact the team, and how you'll keep them updated.

For example:

"I'm hearing that our VP, Charles, may retire next year, and he's training Sandeep to take his place. That might sound like a big shift, but Sandeep has a similar style, so it likely won't change our day-to-day work or the health of the company. It's not public knowledge, so please don't share beyond our team for now. I'll let you know when I hear more about the timing of a formal announcement."

Then, follow up as a team and individually in 1-on-1s to gauge how your direct reports are feeling about the change and how you might help them adapt. For more, see [How to communicate change to your team](#).

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