Veema Education

Leadership Conversations – Managing Difficult Discussions & Staff Underperformance

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Session Outcomes

- Understand the emotional dynamics behind difficult conversations
- Use practical strategies for professional, constructive dialogue
- Address underperformance fairly and confidently
- Apply a clear framework for follow-up and feedback

Webinar

Difficult Conversations with Staff

We're Human…

International/Independent Sector

- School Directors or Owners

- Small community

- Board of Governors

- Friends of Friends

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What type of difficult conversations do we have in school?

"What matters anywhere in your organization, matters everywhere in your organization."

Susan Scott

What does underperformance look like in your context?

CONSISTENTLY…

❑ Not meeting the expected standards for getting things done.

❑ Acting out in a disruptive, negative, or unacceptable way.

❑ Not adhering and following school expectations, procedures, or policies.

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What causes underperformance in our school/s?

- ❑ Lack of commitment
- ❑ Lack of skills
- ❑ Personal issues
- ❑ School environment
- ❑ Boredom
- ❑ Dissatisfaction
- ❑ Inadequate training and development opportunities

Stars, sloths, sinners and saints. Do you recognise these differences? Do you differentiate your response? 1/2

Managing individual performance
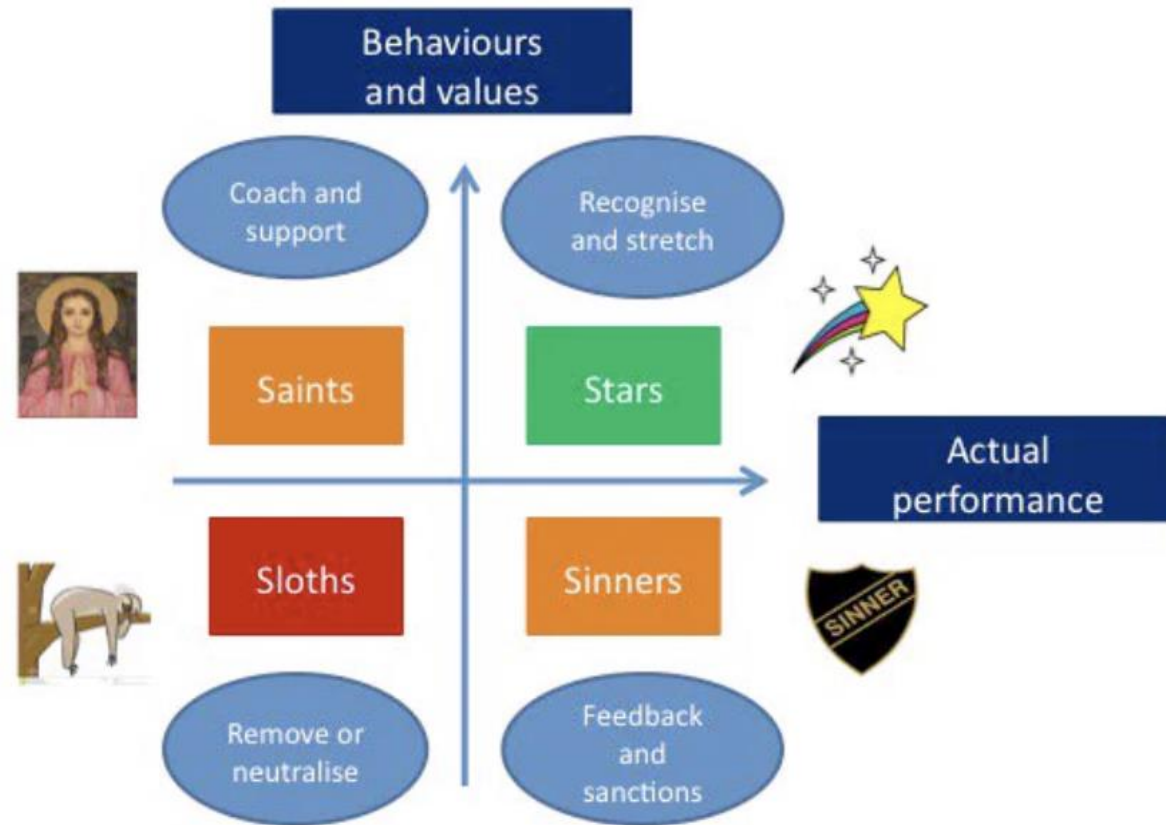
Pendleton and Furnham

Do you ask yourself this question?

How can we effectively manage employees who are not meeting performance expectations?

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- ❑ Recognise there is a problem
- ❑ Meet and ask questions (informally or/and formally)
- ❑ Reiterate job expectations
- ❑ Listen to the other side
- ❑ Develop an action plan
- ❑ Agree check-ins, follow up and support. Recognise improvements
- ❑ Professional Development
- ❑ Retain good documentation
- ❑ Decide when to refer to the next stage (HT)

Low-level/High Level Conversations

Is a conversation needed?

- Low level

- Mid-Level

- High-level

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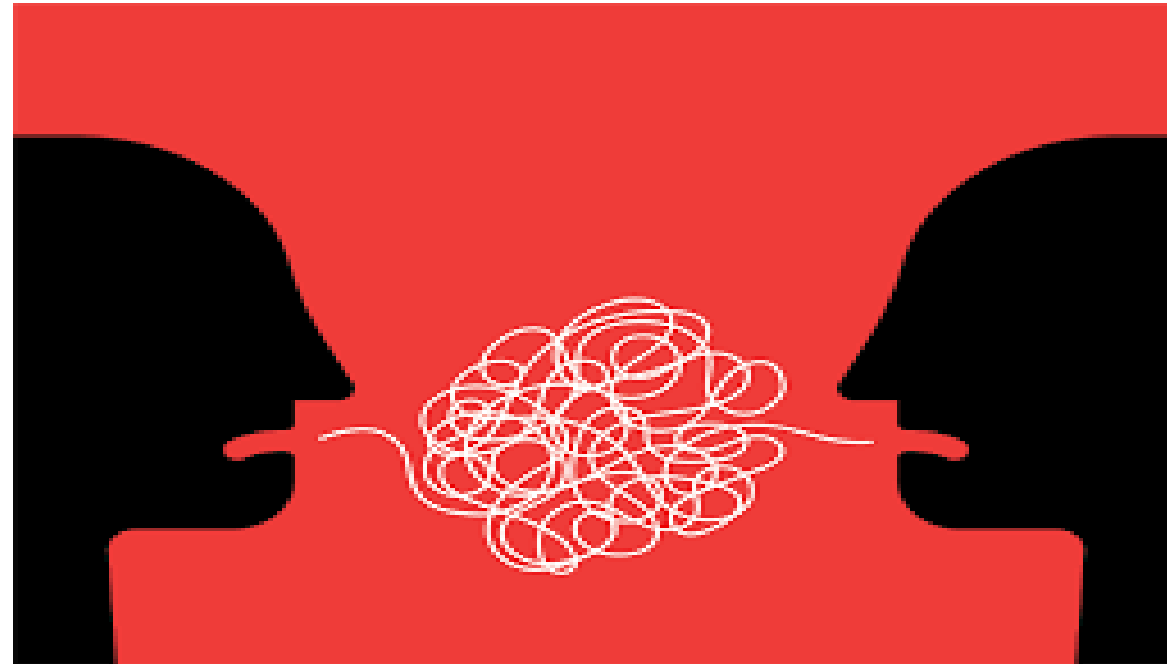
Scenario 1

Chris is consistently late for their break duty. When they do arrive, they appear visibly stressed and angry.

Case Study Two

You are a senior leader and line manager in a secondary school. You are meeting with a teacher, Mr. S, who has been underperforming in several key areas of his role. The Head of Faculty, Ms. A, is attending the meeting with you. This is the second conversation following a previous meeting held by Ms. A.

Summary of Concerns:

- Inconsistent lesson planning

- Marking and feedback: Books have not been marked in line with school policy, with gaps of 4–6 weeks in feedback.

- Low expectations and classroom management: There are increasing reports of disengagement and low-level disruption.

- Failure to act on previous support: Despite two structured meetings with Ms. A, there has been minimal improvement, and agreed targets have not been met.

Response…

We'd like to talk about the ongoing concerns regarding your performance, as there has been insufficient improvement since your previous meetings. This includes a failure to follow through on previously agreed actions, such as:

- Not marking books in line with school expectations
- Low levels of student engagement in lessons
- Ongoing issues with classroom behaviour management

We want to support you in addressing these challenges and developing confidence in your teaching practice. We understand that improvement takes time, and we're prepared to offer support—this may include assigning a school mentor and providing access to relevant professional development.

However, it is essential that we see clear progress in the following areas:

- Planning and delivering purposeful, well-structured lessons
- Creating a classroom environment that supports student engagement
- Marking and giving feedback in line with policy
- Meeting professional expectations and deadlines

We want to work with you to help you succeed, but these areas must improve moving forward.

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Any Questions?

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We need to address poor performance quickly, but with care…

- Culture

- Ethos

- Accountability

- Retain good staff

- Undermines the school community

I'm off!

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Successful difficult conversations help make great schools!

System®
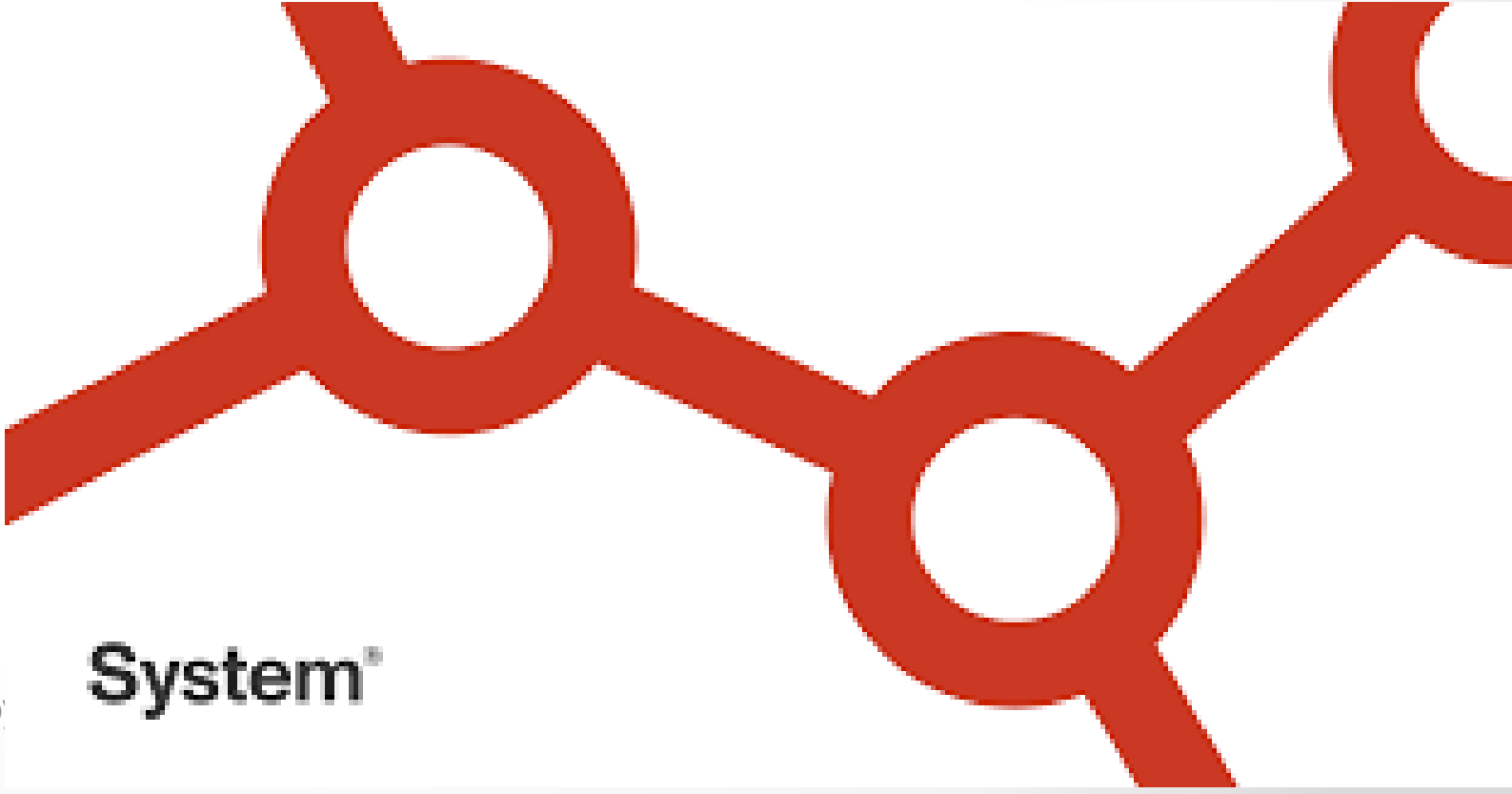
THRIVE

Key features of a successful conversation

- Structured/well delivered so the messaged is crystal clear!

- Appropriate time and follow-up

- Manage emotions

- Evidence & examples

- TRUST

Think about where you should have the conversation and who attends
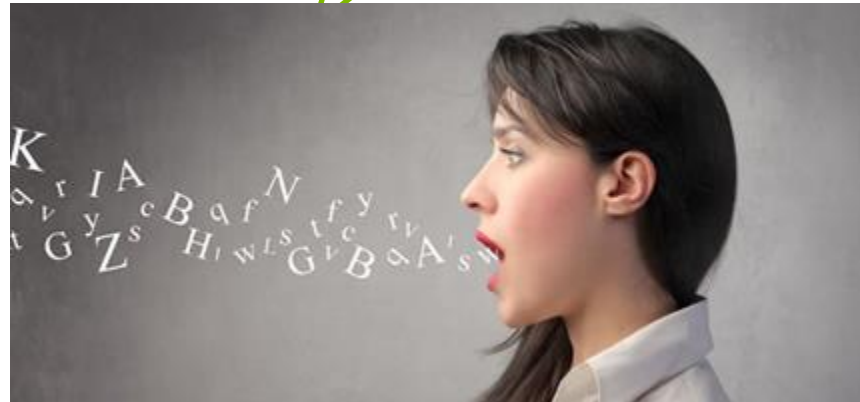
- Avoid Foggy Words

- Simple Language

- Clear examples. Be specific.

- Check your sentences with someone

HELPFUL TIPS

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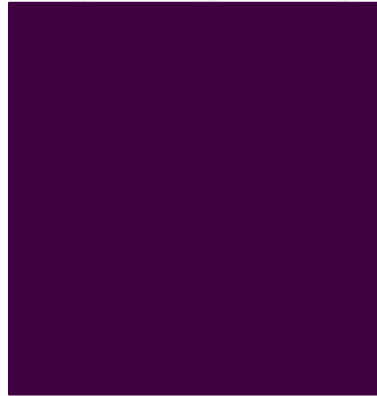
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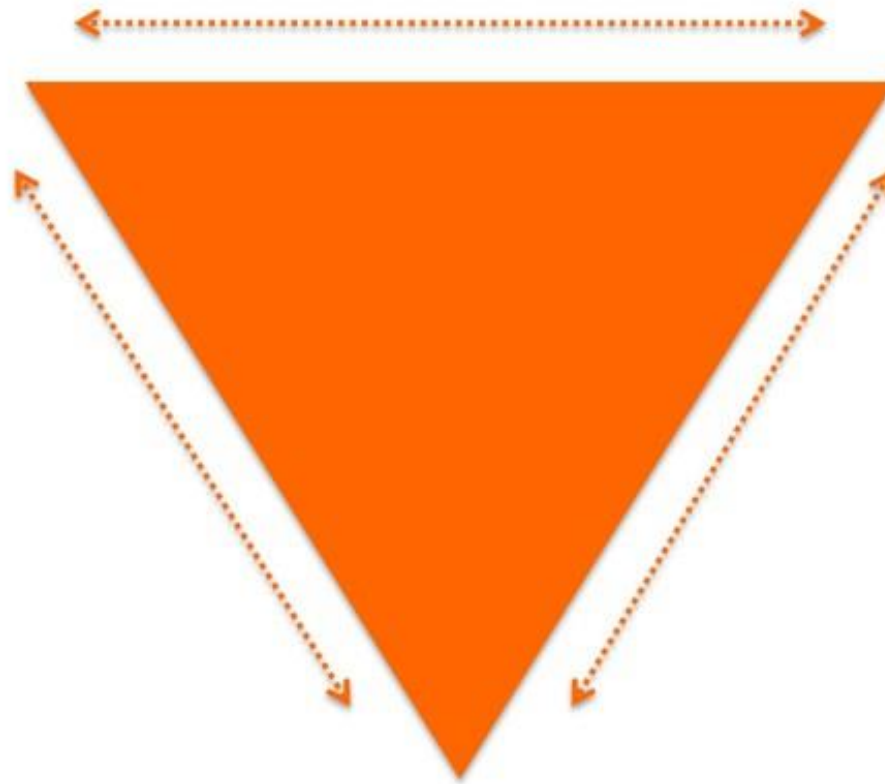# Use their words/Show you are listening

DRAMA TRIANGLE

(Steven Karpman)

RESCUER

PERSECUTOR

VICTIM

The Healthy Triangle

| Drama Triangle Role	Healthy Triangle Role	Skill to be Developed
Victim →	Vulnerable →	Problem solving
Rescuer →	Caring →	Listening
Persecutor →	Assertive →	Assertiveness
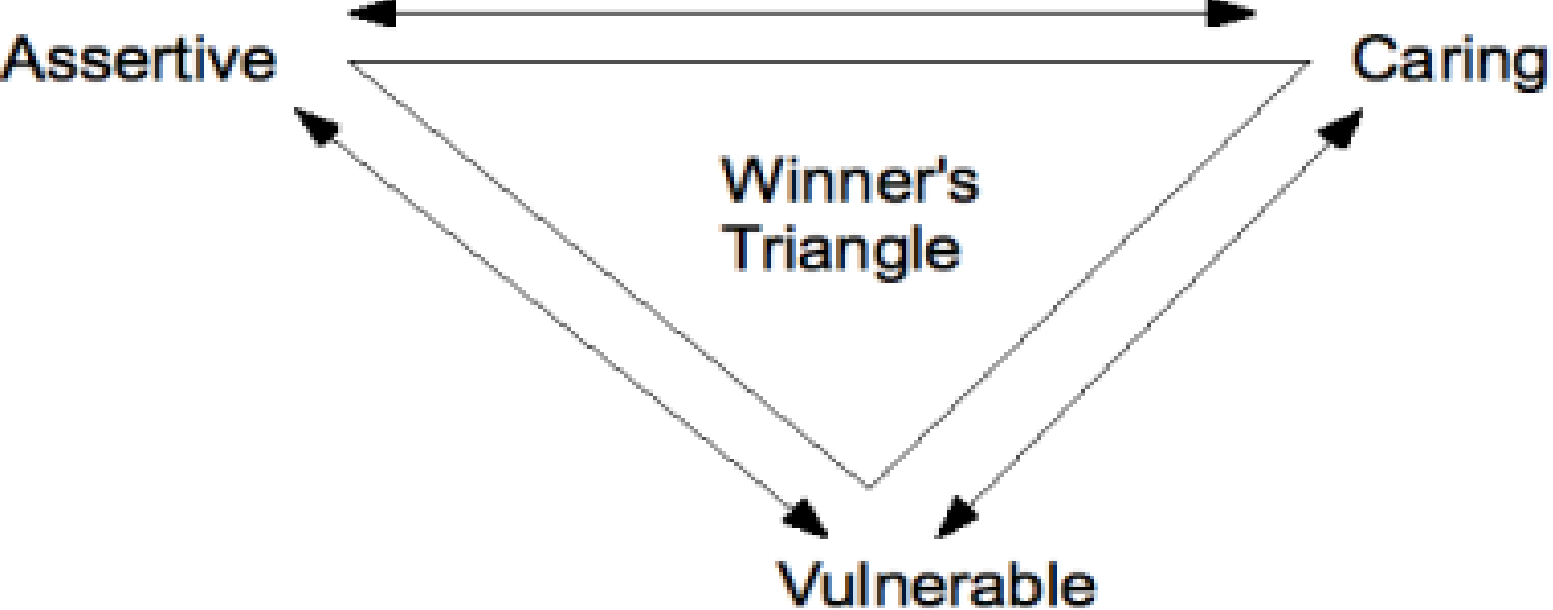
A **PERSON** framework for conversations

- **P**urpose: What is the desired outcome? What do *we* want to achieve?

- **E**vidence: What facts and information do *we* have to support our points?

- **R**elationship: How can *we* maintain or build a positive relationship during this conversation?

- **S**trategy: What approach will *we* take? What questions will we ask? What might the other person's perspective be?

- **O**utcome: What are realistic and achievable outcomes for *us*?

- **N**ext Steps: What actions do *we* need to take after the conversation?

Get out of my face …

Intimate space
Personal space
Social space
Public space
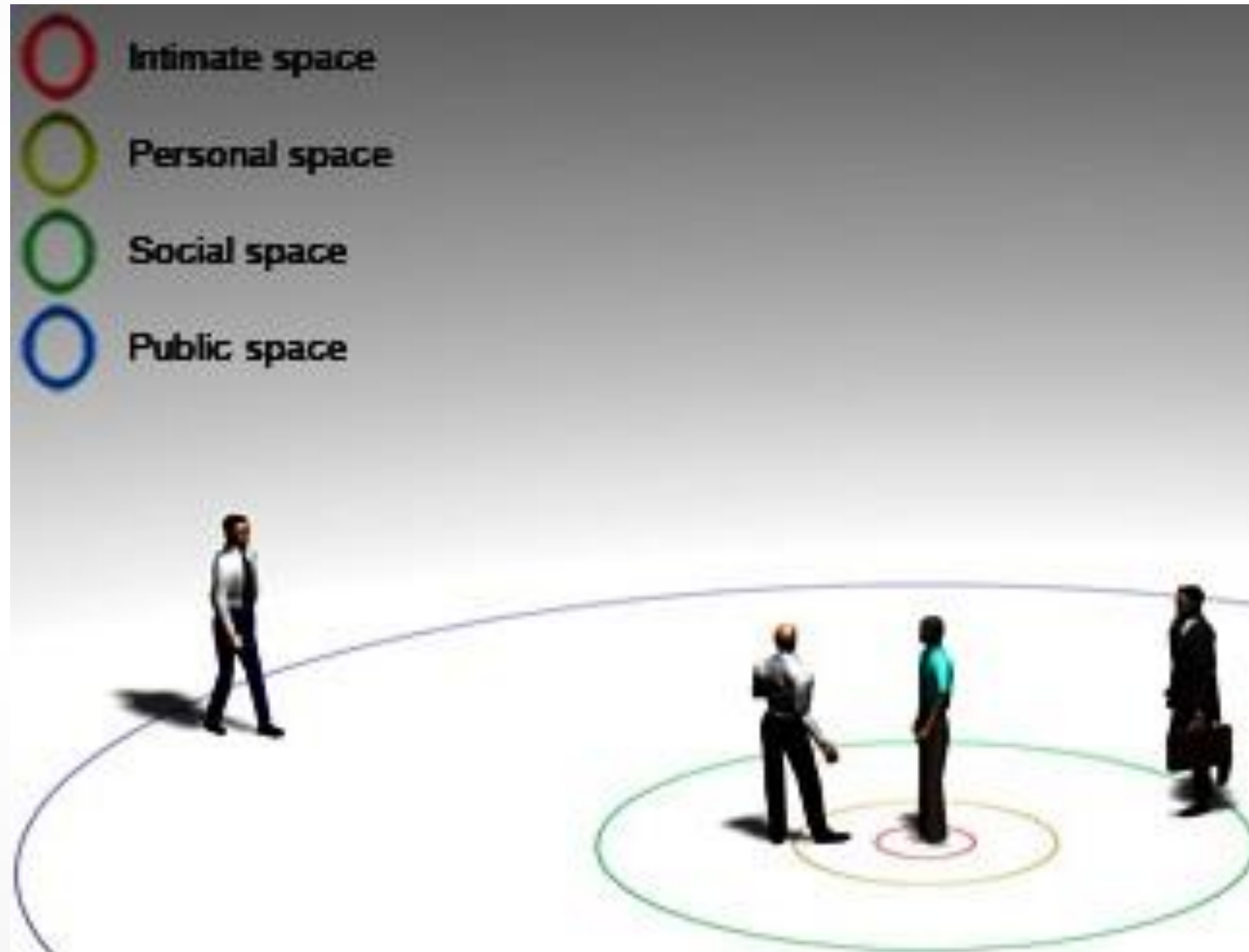
Goleman's 6 Leadership Styles

Visionary	Motivates people towards a vision	"Come with me"	Self-confidence, empathy, change catalyst
Coaching	Developing people for the future	"Try this"	Developing others, self awareness, empathy
Affiliative	Creates harmony and builds emotional bonds	"People come first"	Empathy, building relationships, communication
Democratic	Forges consensus through participation	"What do you think?"	Collaboration, team leadership, communication
Pacesetting	Sets high standards for performance	"Do as I do now!"	Conscientiousness, drive to achieve, initiative
Commanding	Demands immediate compliance	"Do what I tell you"	Drive to achieve, initiative, self-control

Based on **Primal Leadership** by Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee

Effectiveness of leadership styles

Visionary + .54
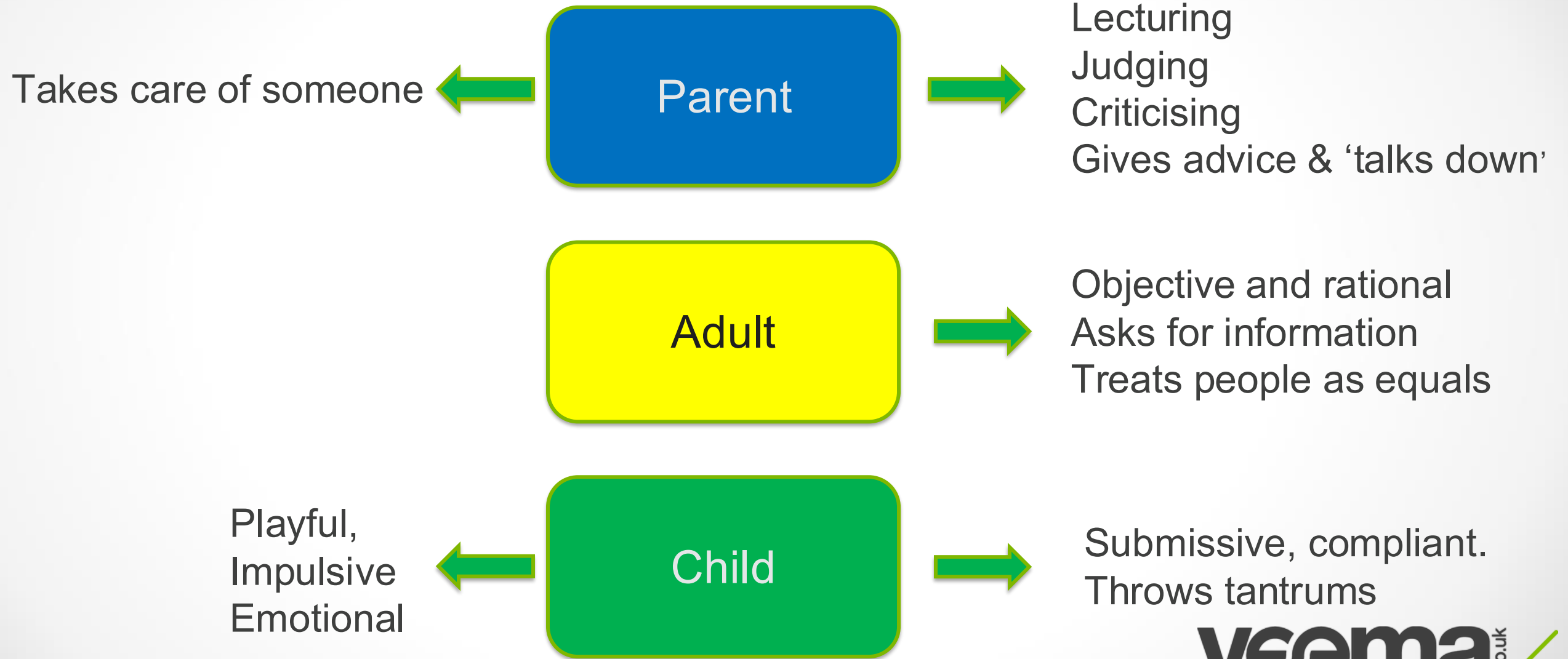
Coaching + .42

Affiliative + .46

Democratic + .43
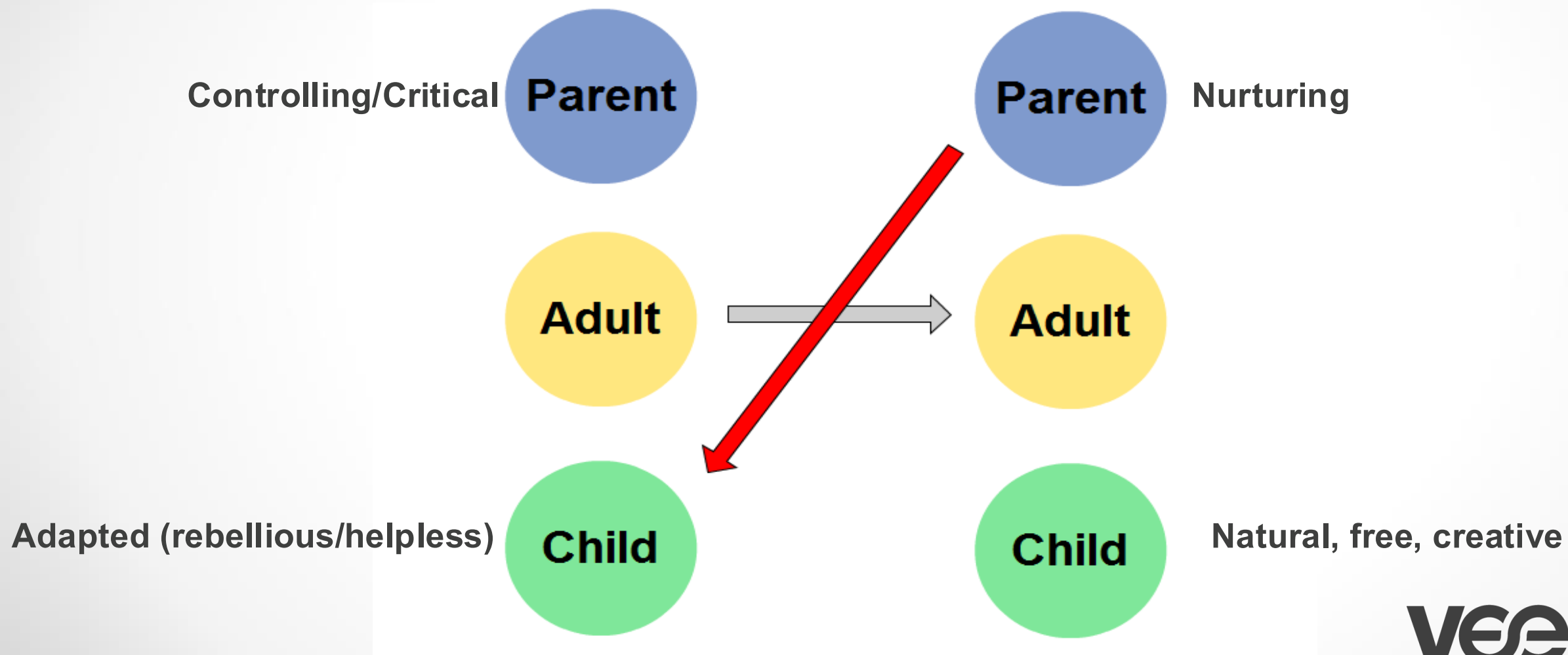
Pacesetting - .25

Commanding - .26

Daniel Goleman (2000)

Transactional Analysis Eric Berne (1964)

We move between three ego states:

Takes care of someone ← **Parent** → Lecturing
Judging
Criticising
Gives advice & 'talks down'

Adult → Objective and rational
Asks for information
Treats people as equals

Playful,
Impulsive
Emotional ← **Child** → Submissive, compliant.
Throws tantrums

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Transactional Analysis Exercise

Think of a key person in your life, which of these states are dominant?

Controlling/Critical Parent

Parent **Nurturing**

Adult → Adult

Adapted (rebellious/helpless) Child

Child **Natural, free, creative**

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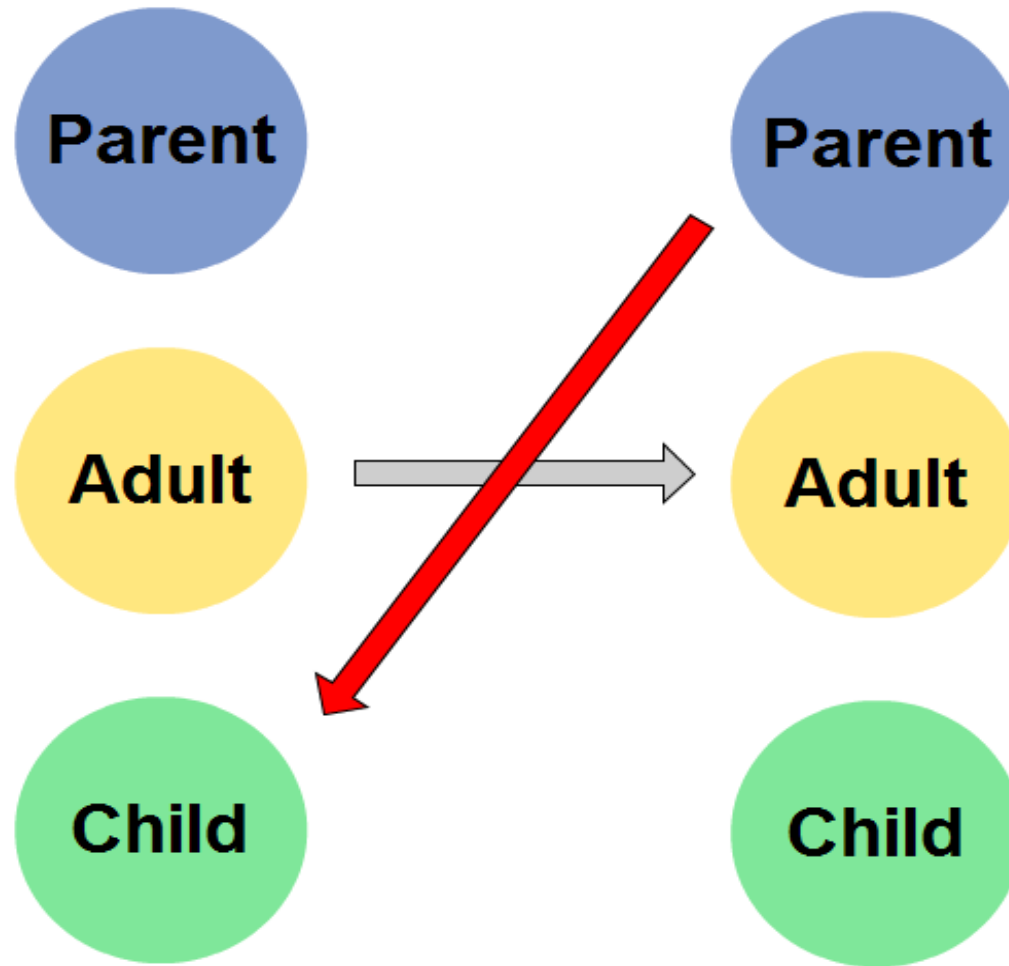EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

Adult State

- Rational
- Tone of voice
- Slow the conversation down
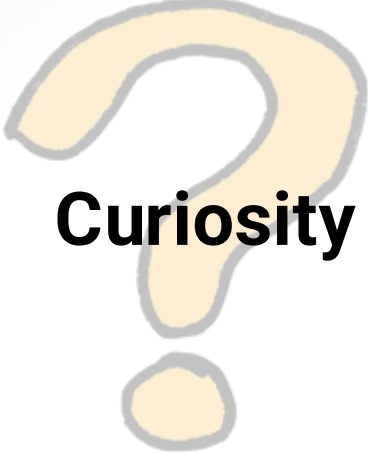- Ask open questions/Give examples
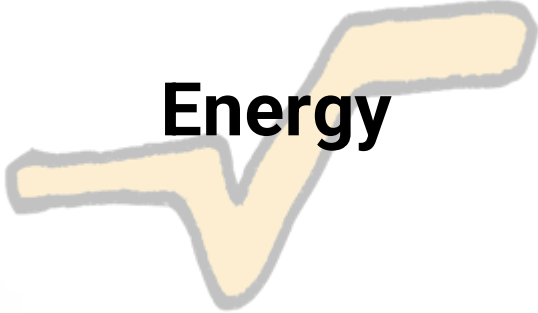
Transactional Analysis Exercise

If the adult part of you (or them) were dominant, how might the relationship be different?

Active Listening – phrases that grind your gears!

- *I think you'll find..*
- *Yeah, I know exactly how you feel.*
- *I already know where you're going with this.*
- *I know exactly what you should do.*
- *I don't have time for the full story.*
- *I think you're overthinking it.*
- *You shouldn't feel that way.*
- *I don't think that's relevant.*
- *I think the real issue is…*
- *Oh, that reminds me of the time when I …*

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Resistance
Resentment
Rebellion

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Curiosity

Compassion

Energy

Wisdom

Some thoughts about the brain – and how it works
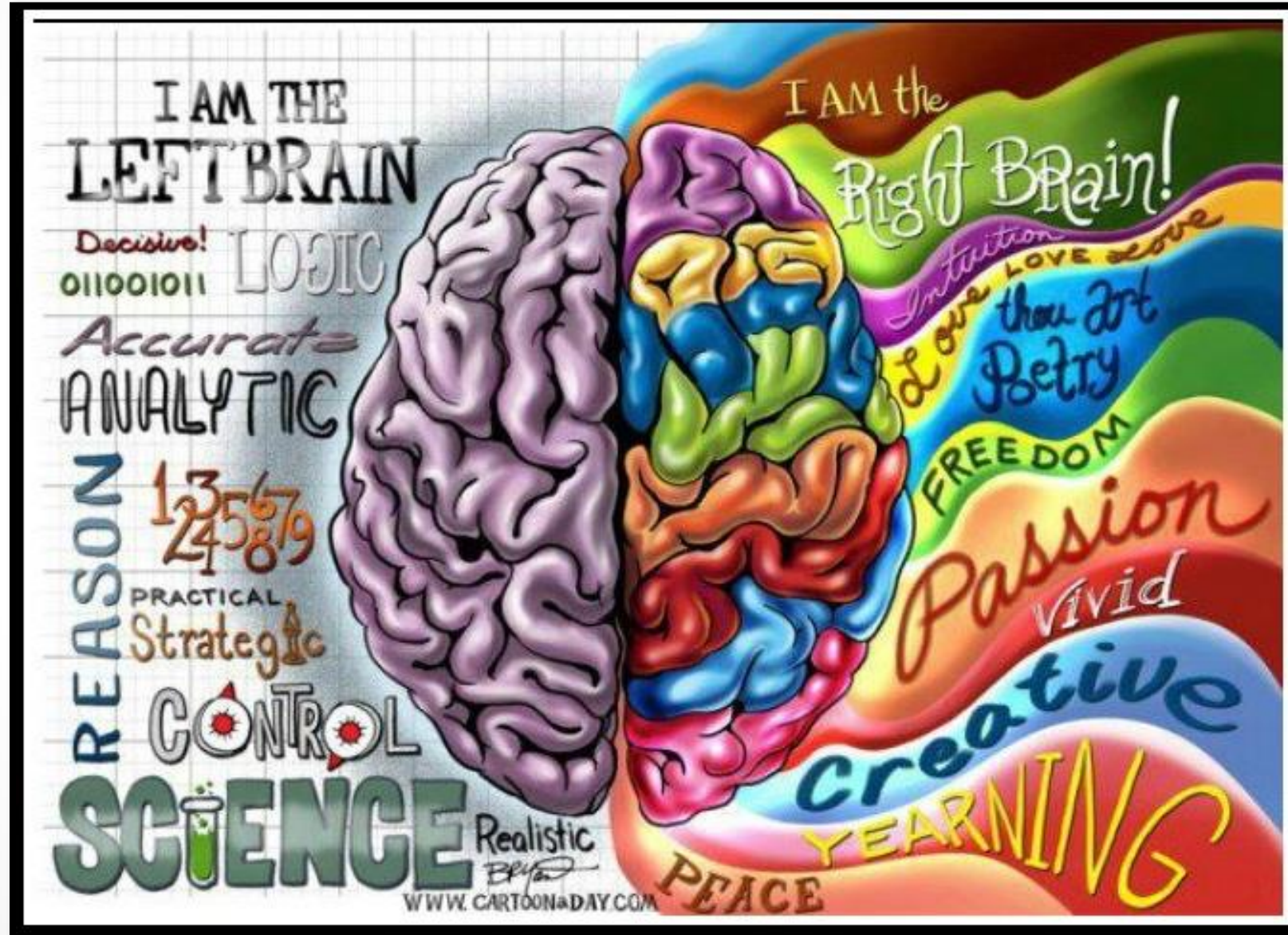
Connect to Re-direct

The right brain needs to *feel felt*

Connect Right Brain to Right Brain

• Acknowledge feelings and non-verbal signals

• Offer: touch, empathic facial expressions,

•Consider: pausing, tone of voice, breath

• Listen non-judgementally

Connect to Re-direct

Redirect to Left Brain

- Words
- Planning
- Solutions

- Negotiate
- Boundaries
- Logical explanations

Think about a time when you (or someone else) didn't connect to redirect but went straight into 'solutions'.

- How did that feel?
- How well did the conversation work out?

Honesty

Empathy

Autonomy

Reflect back
what is said
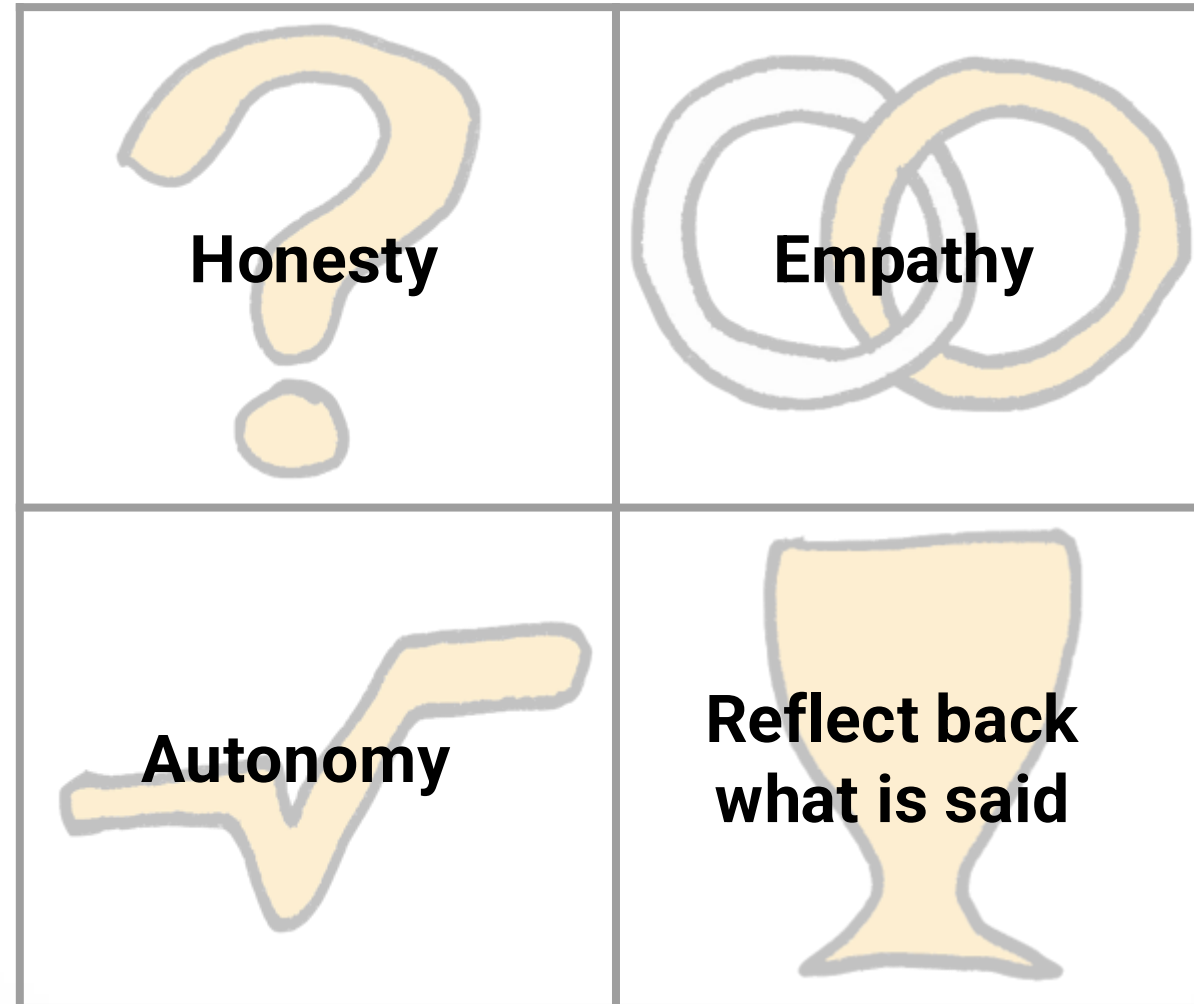
Some sentence starters

- *I'm hearing that…*

- *It sounds like you are…*

- *That must be very…*

- *I understand how this situation might be challenging for you...*

- *I can see why you would feel that way, given the circumstances...*

- *It's clear this is important to you*

- *I'm hearing that this is a source of frustration*

- *Your feelings are completely valid in this scenario...*

- *I appreciate you sharing this; it helps me understand your perspective better...*

- *It sounds like you've been dealing with a lot…*

- *I recognise the effort you've put into this and the challenges you've faced*

Pinches and crunches

When you…
I feel…

WING language

- *I'm wondering,*
- *I'm imagining,*
- *I'm noticing,*
- *I'm guessing*
- and provide an opportunity for them to be listened to

Idea #3:
Meet people where they are

"The art of working with people is found in meeting them where they're at, which means I must be willing to go where I am not."
— Craig D. Lounsbrough

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Control

Conflict

Cooperate

Capitulate

Good

Bad
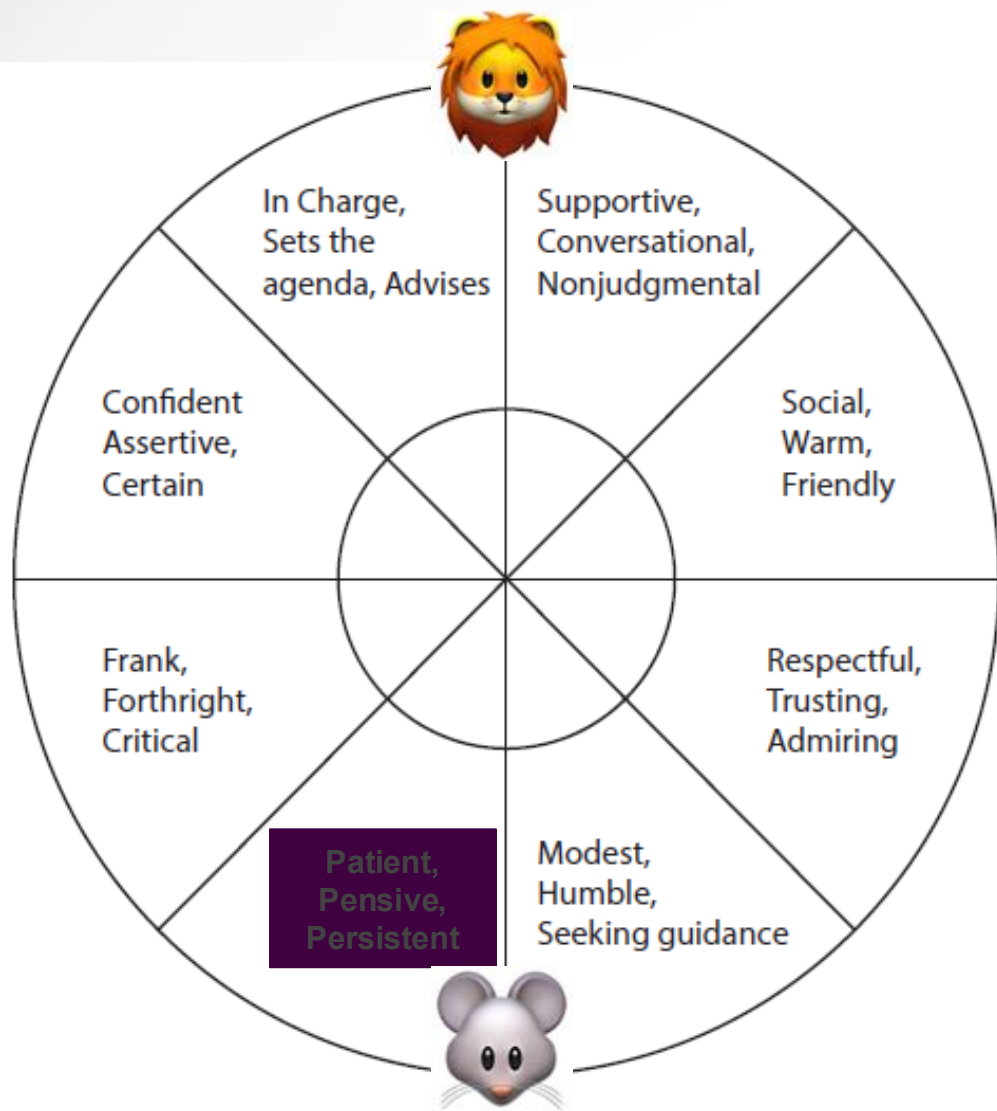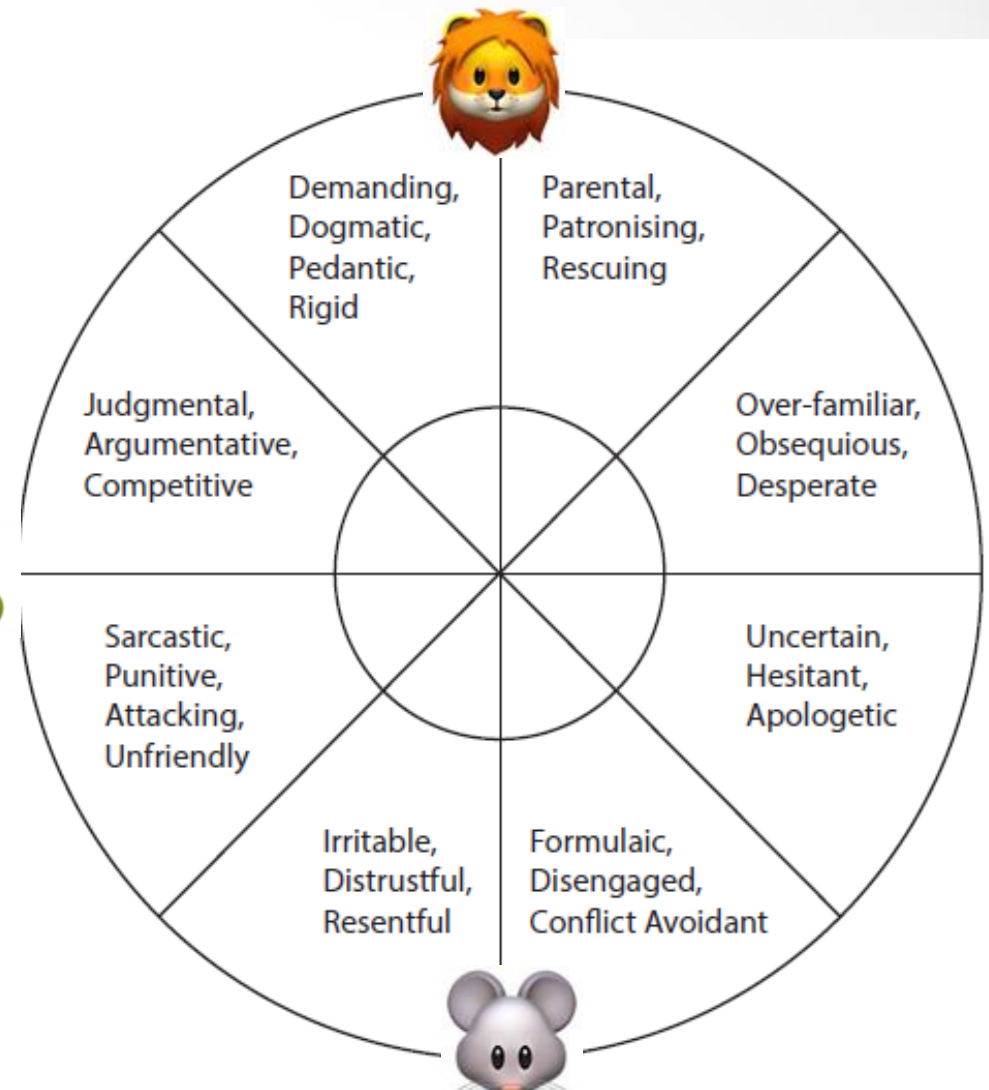
A CALM approach

C - Clear on goals.

A - Anger: avoid escalation And don't lose your cool.

L - Language: Don't personalise, be direct, firm and resolute.

M - Measured: listen more than you speak and seek to understand.

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Scenario 3:

During a staff night out, Sam sends Ali (a colleague), an inappropriate text message about their appearance, which they report and show to you.

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Another CALM approach

Calm scripts:

1. **C**onnect with yourself and the other person

2. **A**cknowledge the feeling beneath the behaviour

3. Set the **l**imits

4. **M**ove the behaviour forward

Ginny Lalieu

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Scenario 4

A KS4 Science Lead with five years at the school, is attending a formal meeting with the Deputy Headteacher (his line manager), the Head of Science, and his union representative following ongoing concerns about his professional conduct.

Despite two prior informal meetings, issues remain, including unprofessional emails, frequent lateness, missed duties, failure to meet data deadlines, and disruptive behaviour in meetings.

The purpose of this meeting is to address these concerns formally, present the evidence, hear the HoD's response, and agree on next steps—whether that involves a conduct improvement plan or escalation to formal disciplinary action.

When things become formal

Purpose
Understand roles, responsibilities and rewards
SMART plan
Action
Evaluate and embed

Formal Capability

1. Make a note of all the performance problems privately

2. Have an informal chat (you may need a few of these)

3. If the informal chat doesn't work write to person setting out the issue and request a meeting

4. Formal meeting 1 (keep notes)

5. Follow this up in writing and get the person to agree to the actions. Agree date for the next meeting

6. Hold a second meeting. Review progress

7. Confirm your decision in writing

How you can use this webinar session…

- Review the recording and highlight what's most relevant to your school.

- Share it with senior and middle leaders.

- Draft reflection questions for leadership discussion.

- Create 3–4 case studies based on the session and discuss them at your next SMLT meeting; consider role-play.

- Ask 1–2 leaders to deliver training on managing underperformance and difficult conversations.

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Online CPD

Forthcoming Online CPD

APRIL 29 TUESDAY
How to handle difficult Safeguarding conversations with young people and children
Free

MAY 27 TUESDAY
NPQ Information Webinar - Applications for September 2025
Free

MAY 22 THURSDAY
Leadership Conversations - Managing Difficult Discussions & Staff Underperformance
Member Event

JUNE 11 WEDNESDAY
Adaptive Teaching: Classroom Strategies for Secondary School Teachers
Online Course

OCTOBER - JANUARY
Advancing Teacher Programme - Helping Teachers to Thrive
9 Weeks

MAY 12 MONDAY
Enhancing Student Feedback with AI: Practical Strategies for Teachers
Free

JUNE 3 TUESDAY
Evidence-Based CPD: How to Plan Impactful Inset Days
Free

JUNE 10 TUESDAY
Supporting Neurodiversity and Inclusion in Schools
Online Course

JUNE 16 MONDAY
Understanding Sexualised Behaviour in Children
Online CPD

PRE-RECORDED SESSIONS
Leading Truly Effective Teaching - Webinar Series (4)
Webinar Series

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