CORE RESPONSIBILITIES

Chapter 9

CORRECTING PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS

> **Strong relationships, careers, organizations and communities all draw from the same source of power—the ability to talk openly about high stakes, emotional, and controversial topics.**
>
> *Kerry Patterson*
> *Crucial Conversations*

9.1   The Basic Principles

ABOUT THIS TOOL—Fairness, good faith, and timeliness are fundamental to addressing employee performance problems. These three principles apply to all interactions between a manager and an employee over concerns with the employee's performance.

APPLICATION—Keep these principles in mind by periodically asking yourself: Am I timely? Am I being fair? Am I being clear about my concerns and making time to hear the employee's perspective?

Timeliness
- Raise concerns with the employee as soon as feasible after an occurrence of problematic performance.

Fairness
- Clearly inform an employee of the deficiencies you observe in their performance. Equally important, give the employee a reasonable amount of time to correct them.
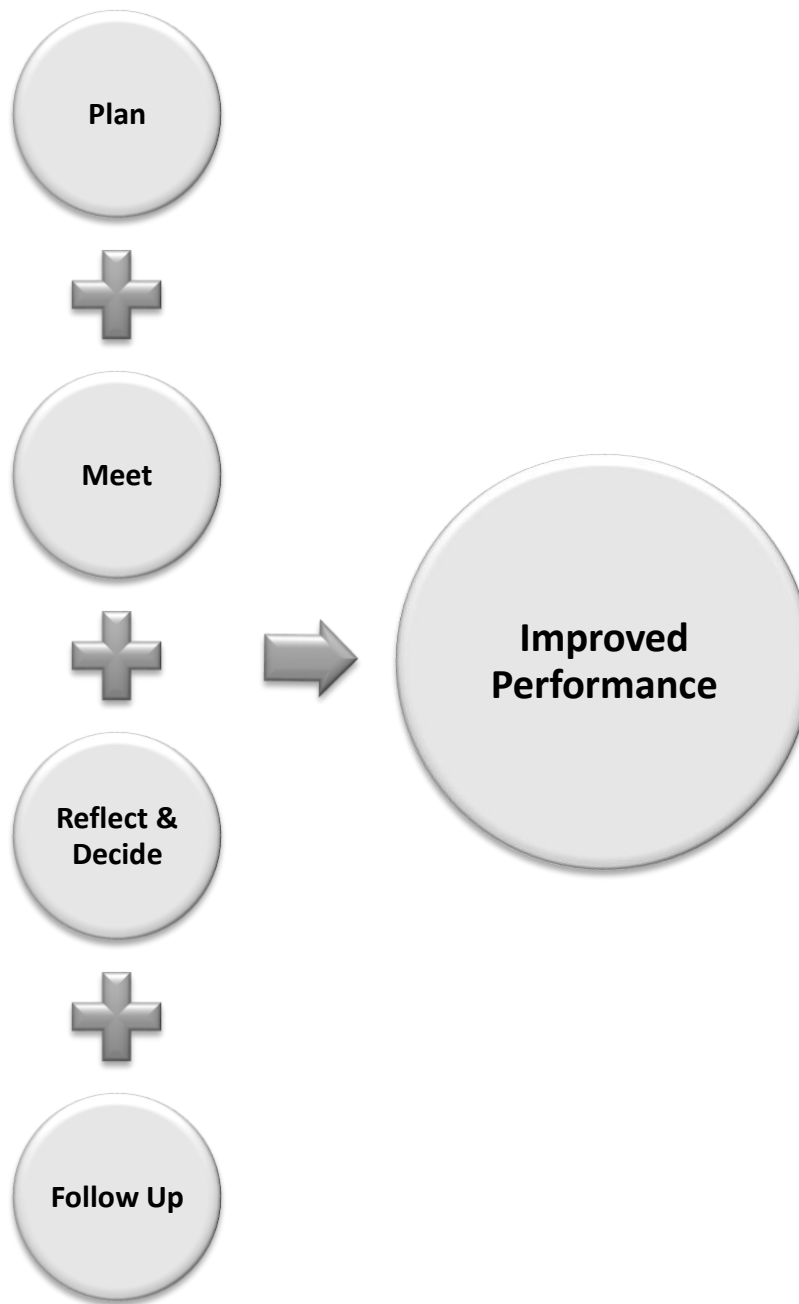
Good Faith
- Give the employee a fair chance to respond to your concerns with their performance. You do not have to agree with their point of view; you do need to hear them out.

Source: Developed by the author

9.2 The Four Steps to Address Performance Problems

ABOUT THIS TOOL—Most discussions between managers and employees about problematic performance are best described as performance counseling. Such discussions alert the employee to the seriousness of a concern and how the employee can get their performance back on track.

APPLICATION—Follow these four proven steps to assure the employee has a clear sense of the nature of the performance problem and the necessary steps to address them. *See Tool 9.3 for more detail.*

Plan

Meet

Reflect & Decide

Improved Performance

Follow Up

Source: Developed by the author

9.3   The Four Steps in Detail

PLAN

- Analyze the problem (*Tool 9.4)*
- Seek help *(Tool 9.5)*
- Clarify what you want for yourself, others, and the relationship (*Tools 9.6, 9.7*)
- Anticipate the employee's point of view. How might they see the situation? *(Tool 9.8)*

MEET

- Be specific about the problem, the desired performance, and the consequences of improving or not improving. (*Tool 9.9)*
- Maintain your composure and handle employee emotions with patience and grace. *(Tools 9.10, 9.11)*
- Listen actively and patiently to the employee's point of view. *(Chapter 3)*

REFLECT & DECIDE

- Reflect on what you heard from the employee. Did they appreciate the gravity of the situation? Did they have a plausible explanation or compelling alternative perspective?
- How does what they said influence your expectations for changes in their performance? (*Tool 9.12*)

FOLLOW-UP

- Send an email summarizing the conclusions of your meeting and the expectations for improved performance. Set follow-up appointments, as needed. *(Tool 9.13)*
- Document the meeting for future reference. *(Tool 9.14)*

Source: Developed by the author

9.4   PLAN—Analyzing Performance Problems

ABOUT THIS TOOL—Successfully helping an employee correct their performance begins with analyzing the true nature of the problems created and their impact on others.

APPLICATION—Create a four-column table, then answer the questions in each column for the problematic performance that needs addressing.

SEE	FEEL	SEEK	CONSEQUENCES
What do you see the employee doing that concerns you?	*How do you feel about what you see? How are others affected? How do they feel?*	*What specifically do you want the employee to do differently in the future?*	*What happens if the employee changes or fails to change their behavior?*
Describe the behavior you observe as if it were viewed through a video camera.	Describe the impact of the behavior on yourself and others. Is the problem worth solving?	Describe the desired behavior with the same level of specificity with which you described the problem.	Describe what the employee gains by correcting their behavior and what they lose if they don't.
WHAT?	*SO WHAT?*	*NOW WHAT?*	*WHAT THEN?*

9.5   Sources of Help

Your boss	In addition to letting your boss know your concerns, they can be a tremendous sounding board for how best to deal with the performance problem and help the employee get their performance back on track.
HR	Among the most important of HR's many jobs is helping managers deal constructively with performance problems. Use their experience and expertise—it's what they're paid to do.
Trusted Colleagues	Like your boss, a trusted colleague can help you gain perspective on the performance issue you need to tackle.
Friends & Family	Friends and family members have expertise and care the most about your success. Don't just vent to them, ask for their advice. Use them to practice the conversation you're planning to have.
Employee Assistance Program	Employee assistance programs often have unlimited support for managers. Use them especially when dealing with issues where emotions are highly charged and complex.
Internet	The websites of professional associations as well as those of general business-related sites or business journals often provide practical tips and tools on dealing with a variety of management challenges.
Legal Counsel	Attorneys help solve problems. If you have access to an attorney, their experience and expertise can be invaluable in giving you confidence in how best to address a challenging performance problem.
Internal Organization Development Consultant or Ombudsman	Larger organizations often have in-house experts skilled at facilitating conflict resolution. They can be especially useful in helping mediate or facilitate conversations involving conflict between two people.

Source: Developed by the author

9.6   PLAN—Clarify Your Goals and Approach

ABOUT THIS TOOL—Success in sharing concerns with an employee relies on the quality of the manager's analysis and preparation. These questions will help point you to the best way of sending a clear message communicating your concern.

APPLICATION—Take a moment to write down your answers to these questions as you consider the concerns you want to raise with the employee.

What are your hopes for…

1. YOURSELF—What do you hope for yourself as a result of this conversation?

2. THE EMPLOYEE (and others)—What do you hope for the employee as a result of this conversation? For others?

3. THE RELATIONSHIP—What is the relationship you hope to have with the employee following this conversation?

4. YOUR APPROACH—What will you say, what will you do, and how will you set the stage to achieve these results?

Source: Developed by the author

9.7   Example of Tool 9.6 in Practice

What are your hopes for…

YOURSELF—What do you hope for yourself as a result of this conversation?

- Maintain my composure
- To be heard
- To get the employee's commitment on the need for improvement
- To be flexible on the how
- Balance the message of concern with a message of support

THE EMPLOYEE—What do you hope for the employee as a result of this conversation?

- A way forward that's fair
- A chance to share their perspective
- Clarity of the performance issues and their impact
- Clarity of the support you're willing to provide as the employee works to improve their performance
- Alleviation of the problematic performance

THE RELATIONSHIP—What is the relationship you hope to have with the employee following this conversation?

- Keep it professional and productive
- Lay the foundation for future collaboration
- Continuing a relationship of mutual respect and support
- Sustain appropriate two-way communication

YOUR APPROACH—What will you say, what will you do, and how will you set the stage to achieve these results?
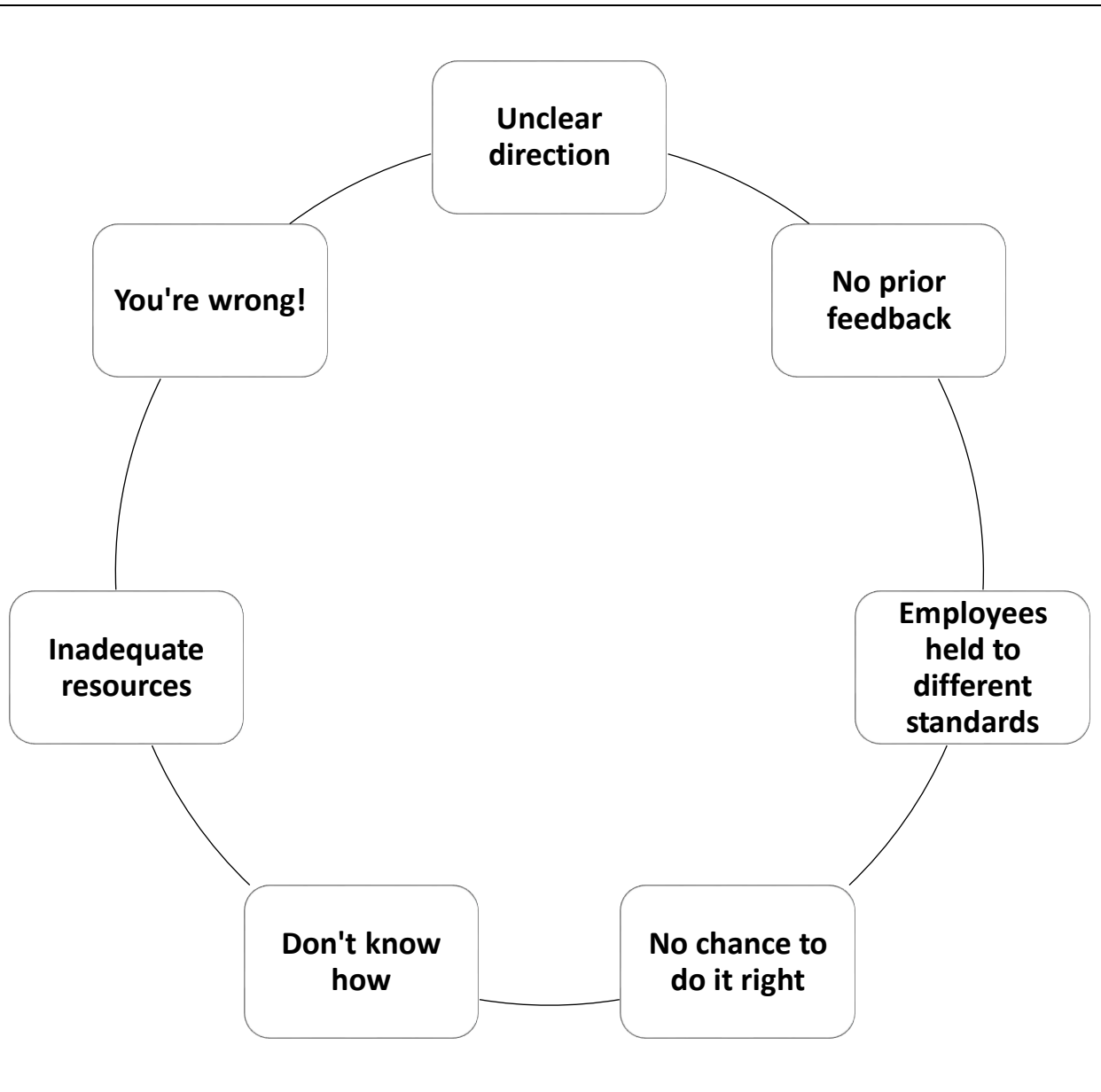
- Stay focused on the performance issue
- Ask clarifying questions
- Allow the employee time to express their point of view, as well as their emotions
- Ask "What if...?"
- Don't rush
- Explain
- Reinforce that the employee is valued
- Express support for the employee
- Clarify at the end whatever is agreed upon

Source: Developed by the author

9.8   PLAN—Consider the Employee's Point of View

ABOUT THIS TOOL—Conversations with employees about performance problems typically involve some combination of the employee listening intently, asking clarifying questions, and defending their actions in some way.

APPLICATION—Factor into your planning what you anticipate the employee will say on their behalf. Which of these common defenses is the employee most likely to use? How legitimate is their point of view? How will you respond if one of these issues are raised?

Unclear direction

No prior feedback

You're wrong!

Employees held to different standards

Inadequate resources

No chance to do it right

Don't know how
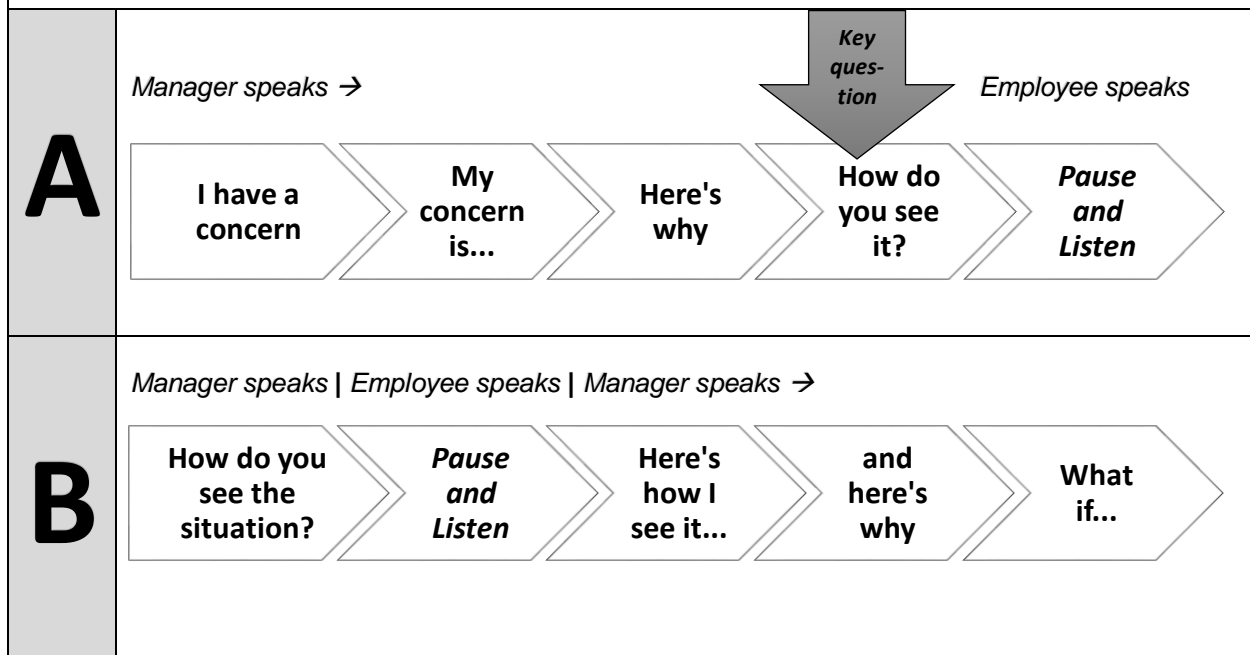
Source: Developed by the author

9.9   MEET—How to Share Concerns

ABOUT THIS TOOL—Combining a clear message of concern with patient listening is the key to having a successful conversation with an employee about the employee's problematic performance.
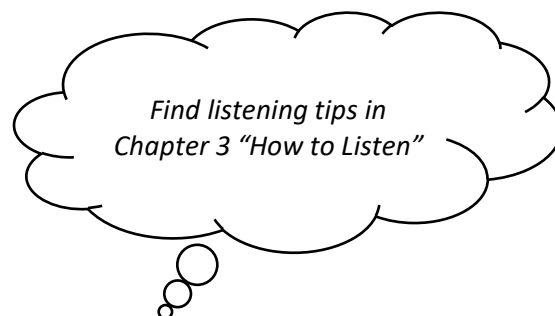
Either approach below achieves the same objectives—clearly making the employee aware of concerns and hearing their pint of view. "A" begins with the supervisor expressing their concern first and the reasons for the concerns.

"B" reverses the order, with the manager beginning by first asking the employee for their point of view about a given situation, followed by the manager expressing their point of view. "B" is the sequence that may be preferred by cultures where "A" is seen as too aggressive.

APPLICATION—Decide which approach is most comfortable for you, and then follow the sequence exactly.

A	*Manager speaks* → *Key question* *Employee speaks* **I have a concern** › **My concern is...** › **Here's why** › **How do you see it?** › *Pause and Listen*
B	*Manager speaks* | *Employee speaks* | *Manager speaks* → **How do you see the situation?** › *Pause and Listen* › **Here's how I see it...** › **and here's why** › **What if...**

Source: Developed by the author

Find listening tips in Chapter 3 "How to Listen"

9.10 MEET—Personal Presence

ABOUT THIS TOOL—Discussions about performance concerns are difficult. Managers must manage themselves and their emotions when meeting with the employee.

APPLICATION—Use this tool as a mental checklist during your meeting with the employee.

Show respect	Be specific	Be patient
Listen	Stay calm	

9.11 MEET—How to Deal with Employee Emotions

ABOUT THIS TOOL—A major impediment to addressing employee performance problems is the manager's lack of confidence in dealing with the employee's emotional response. This list provides specific ideas for dealing constructively with strong emotional reactions to the performance feedback you give.

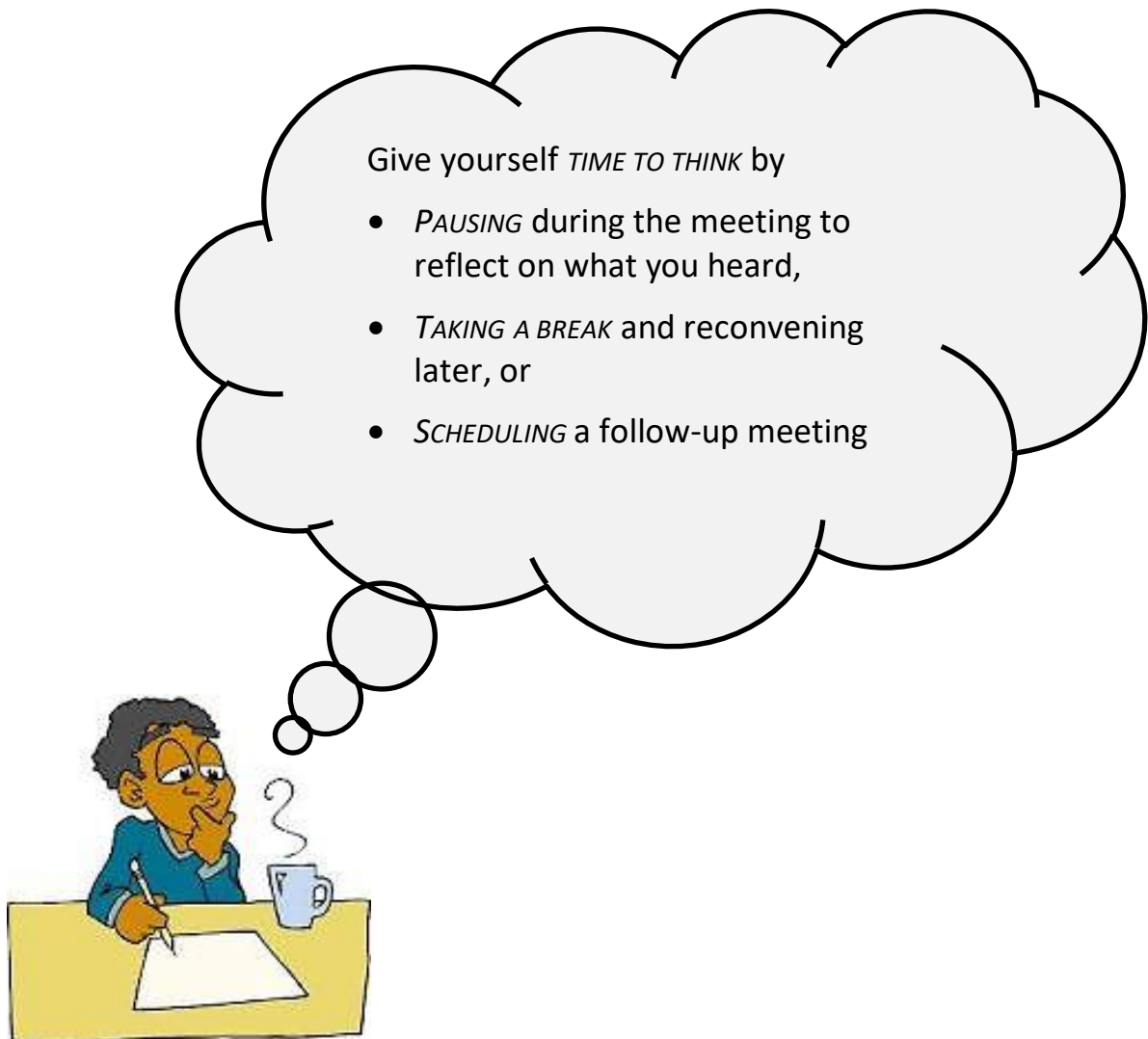**APPLICATION**—Review this list prior to meeting with the employee.

- Separate issues from emotions

- Empathize with what the employee is experiencing

- Choose the right language - do not attack or accuse

- Acknowledge and respect the emotion, e.g., "I notice you're upset. What's going on? Tell me more."

- Choose an environment that's quiet and private; arrange for no interruptions

- Listen and be patient

- Know when to back off or exit the situation

- Ask the employee if they need some time to reflect and compose themselves

- Have tissues handy

- Allow for silence

- Schedule a follow-up meeting

- Clarify your message: "I'm <u>not</u> saying you're doing a terrible job. I <u>am</u> saying you need to do a better job meeting deadlines."

- Apologize, if appropriate

- Practice with a neutral party beforehand. By practicing you may be able to anticipate emotional responses or choose words that are emotionally neutral and not inflammatory.

Source: Developed by the author

9.12   REFLECT AND DECIDE

ABOUT THIS TOOL—You don't have to decide in the heat of the conversation on the approach you prefer to address an employee's problematic performance. Take time to think about what the employee has said before deciding what to do. Have their comments changed in any way the course of action you feel is most appropriate given the concerns you have?

APPLICATION—Consider the options you have in addressing the employee's problematic performance and then decide which approach will be most beneficial for the employee, team and organization.

Give yourself *TIME TO THINK* by

- *PAUSING* during the meeting to reflect on what you heard,

- *TAKING A BREAK* and reconvening later, or

- *SCHEDULING* a follow-up meeting

Source: Developed by the author

9.13 FOLLOW-UP—The Three Follow-up Tasks

ABOUT THIS TOOL—Following up with the employee after meeting with them is absolutely critical! It reinforces the message of concern, clarifies next steps and expectations, and establishes a baseline for evaluating progress.
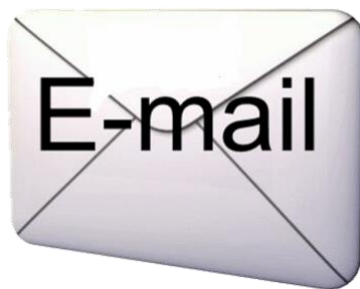
APPLICATION—Do all three of the following:

1. Complete a record of the meeting using Tool 9.14.

2. Send an email to the employee documenting what you have concluded and the expectations for future performance.

3. Make whatever appointments are necessary to support the employee's progress. Often, more frequent meetings with the employee are needed for a period of time to provide feedback and reinforce progress.

❶ Memo — **To record what happened [see Tool 9.14]**

❷ E-mail — **To confirm expectations**

❸ (calendar) — **To provide feedback and encouragement**

Source: Developed by the author

9.14   FOLLOW-UP—Create a Meeting Record

ABOUT THIS TOOL—Completing a meeting record serves as a personal reference for the manager. It will support agreed upon follow-up actions, serve as a reminder of the conversation and commitments made, and support subsequent disciplinary action, if necessary.

APPLICATION—Complete and save this record as soon as possible after meeting with the employee, preferably immediately after.

EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE MEETING RECORD

A. Names of individuals present

B. Date, time, and location of meeting

C. Overall nature of the problem as described to the employee

D. Outline of main points of the conversation and the employee's response

E. Consequences communicated to the employee

F. Commitment made by the employee

G. Follow-up plan

Source: Adapted from an in-house PATH manual, ~2002. PATH is a global health NGO headquartered in Seattle: www.path.org