

Dr. Rikki Turner

Say the Thing: Navigating Difficult
Conversations for Campus Business
Leaders



Your first task: Get rid of them

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What type of difficult conversation do you most often delay?

- A. Employee performance/accountability
- B. Vendor/contract issues
- C. Scope creep from another unit
- D. Budget/resource conflict
- E. Defensive colleague/partner
- F. Conflict with someone who outranks you
- G. All of the above, higher ed is uncomfortable and so am I



Why do you tend to avoid difficult conversations?

- A. I don't want to damage the relationship
- B. They'll be angry, defensive, or emotional
- C. I am not sure how to start the conversation
- D. I don't have enough evidence or documentation
- E. I hope the issue will resolve itself
- F. I'm worried I will say something to make it worse
- G. I do not have the energy for the ensuing circus.



5 Questions to Answer Before You Say the Thing

1. What is the real issue?

Not Appropriate Examples:

- Jared is a j@ck@\$
- They suck and should burn
- They never do anything right
- I hate them, everyone hates them

Appropriate Examples:

- Missed deadlines
- Incomplete work
- Contract noncompliance
- Poor communication
- Unclear ownership
- Boundary violation
- Repeated pattern

5 Questions to Answer Before You Say the Thing

2. What evidence do I have?

Not Appropriate Examples:

- A feeling
- A hunch
- Vibes
- Rumors
- Everyone knows
- They've always been a problem

Appropriate Examples:

- Job description
- Contract language
- Emails
- Missed deadlines
- Reports
- Meeting notes
- Service-level expectations
- Prior conversations
- Written procedures

5 Questions to Answer Before You Say the Thing

3. What outcome do I need?

Not Appropriate Examples:

- I want them to understand
- Do their dang job
- Be a better employee
- Stop being terrible

Appropriate Examples:

- Revised timeline
- Corrected work product
- Performance improvement plan
- Documented expectations
- Contract remedy
- Follow-up meeting
- Escalation plan
- Service correction
- Change in process

5 Questions to Answer Before You Say the Thing

4. What resistance can I expect?

Not Appropriate Examples:

- They will blame me for everything
- They will lie and trash my name

Appropriate Examples:

- Denial
- Blame-shifting
- “That is not my job”
- “We have always done it this way”
- “Nobody told me”
- “You are micromanaging”
- “The contract does not say that”
- “We are short-staffed”

5 Questions to Answer Before You Say the Thing

5. What needs to happen next?

Not Appropriate Examples:

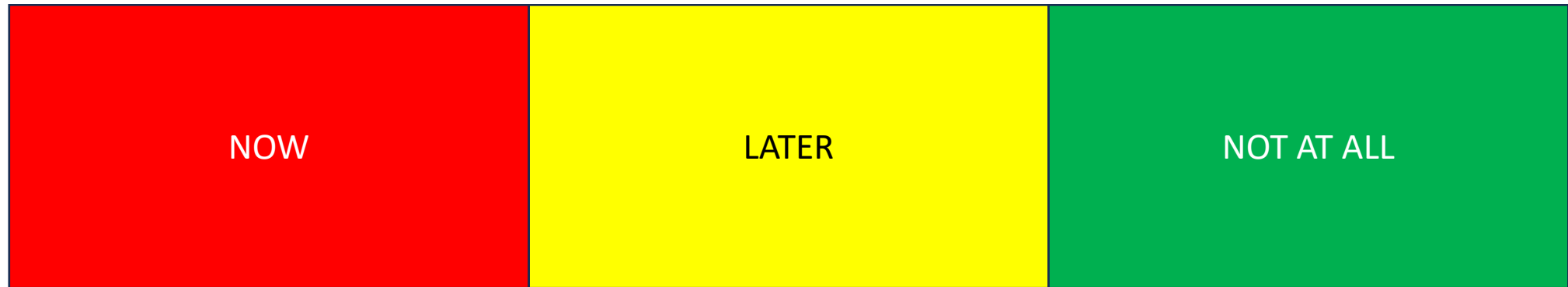
- Continue to remind them of what they did wrong so it doesn't happen again
- Leave it in the past 100%
- Trust that everyone understood and we are all good

Appropriate Examples:

- Who does what?
- By when?
- How will it be documented?
- What support is available?
- What happens if the issue continues?
- How will I know its handled (follow-up)?
- IN. WRITING.

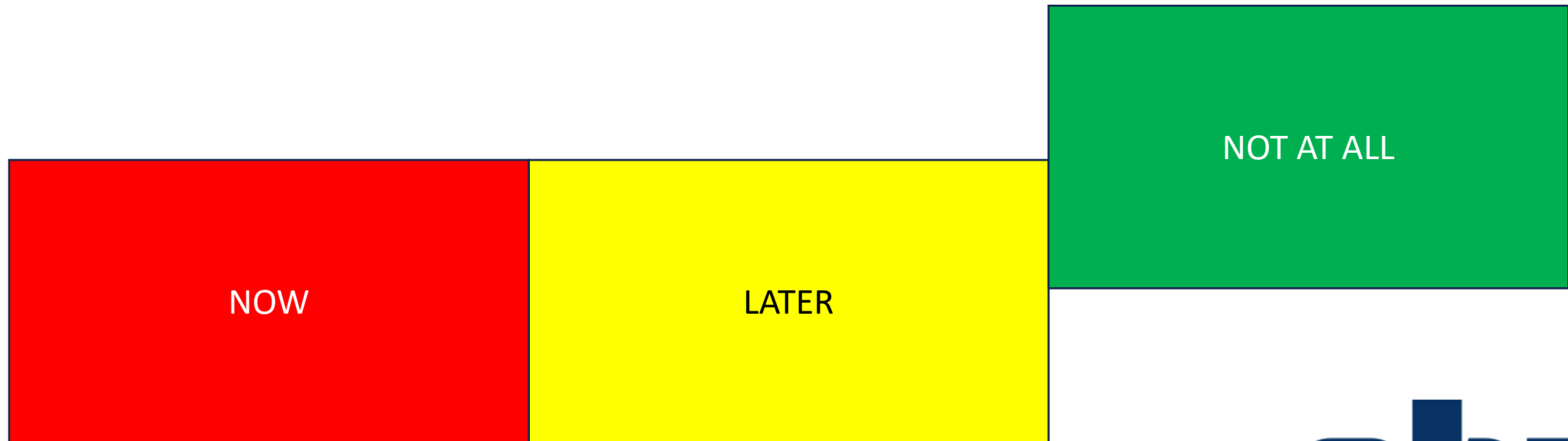
Now, Later, Not at All

A team member misses one internal deadline but communicates early and has a plan.



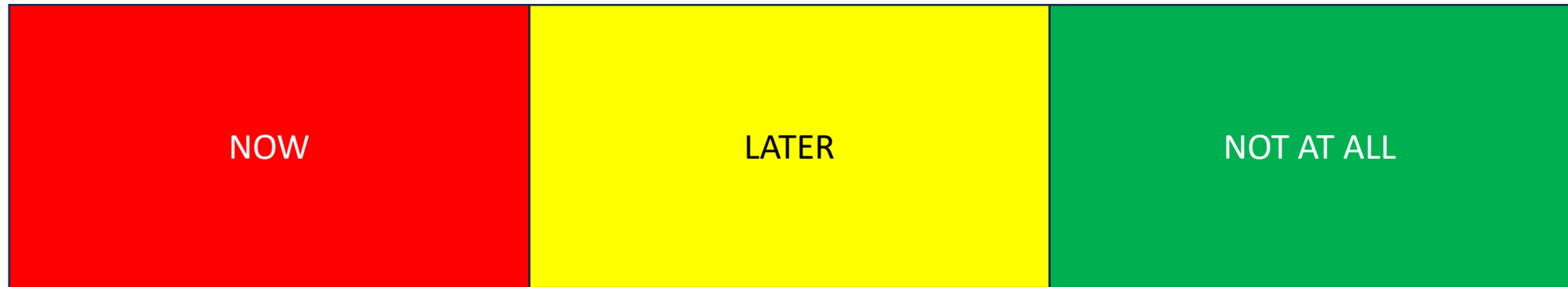
Now, Later, Not at All

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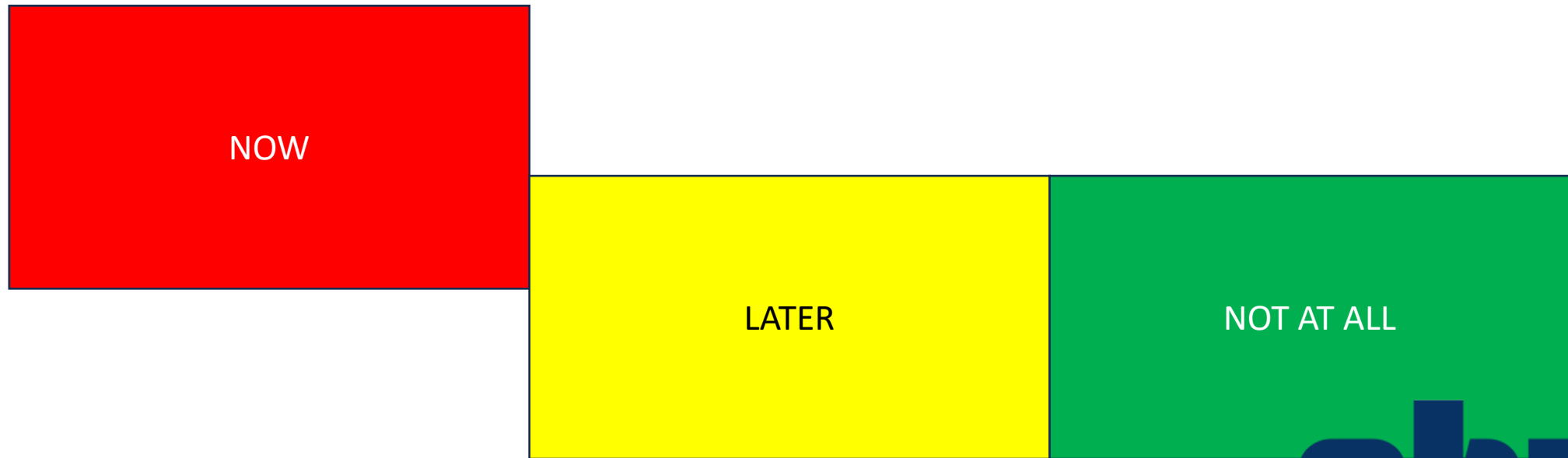
Now, Later, Not at All

A team member has missed three deadlines and other staff are quietly compensating.



Now, Later, Not at All

A team member has missed three deadlines and other staff are quietly compensating.

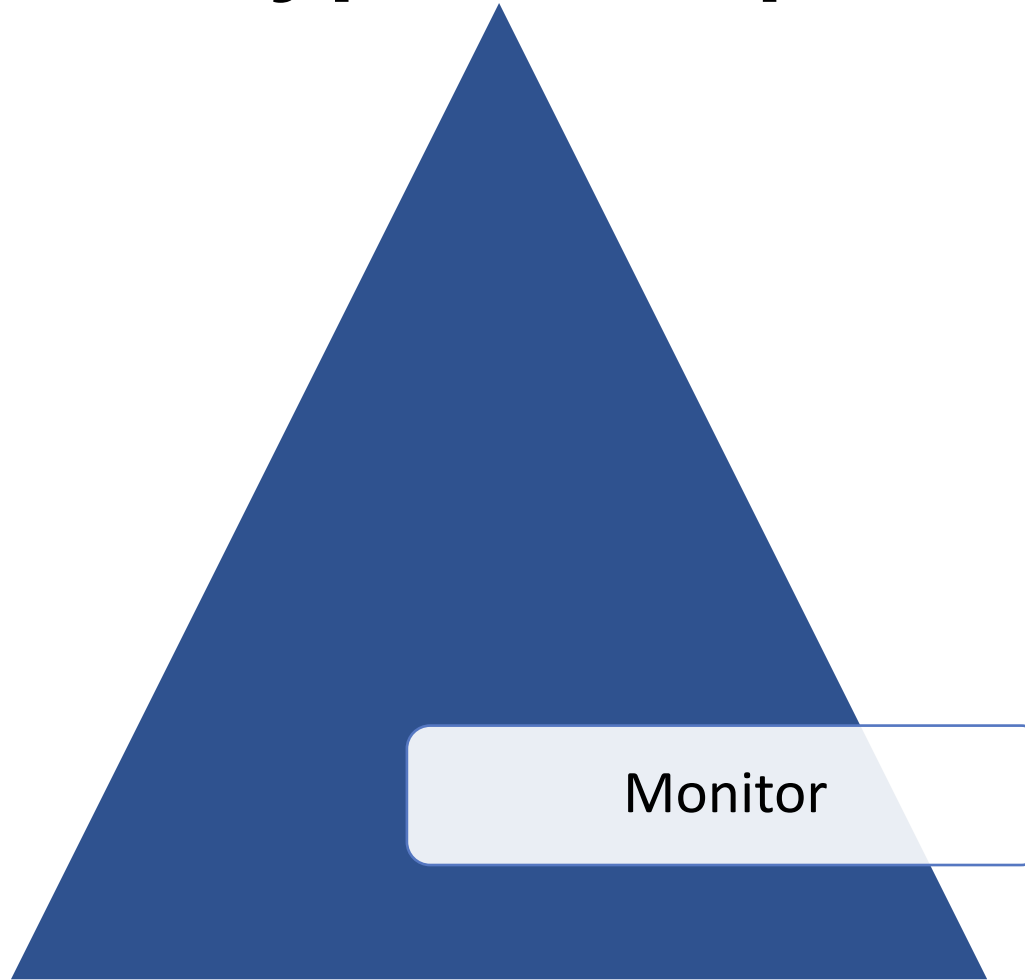


Now, Later, Not at All

A vendor missed a service expectation once during a weather-related campus closure.

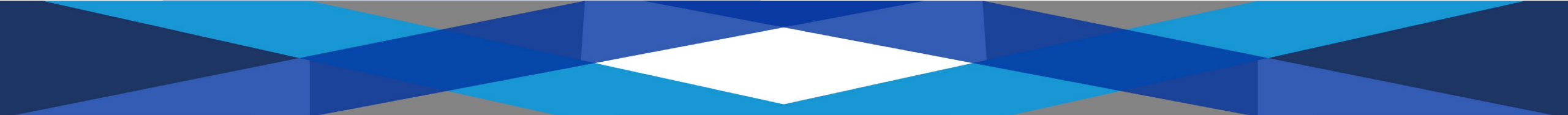
- A. Ignore it – probably won't happen again
- B. Informal check-in
- C. Direct accountability conversation
- D. Formal documentation
- E. Escalate

What type of response is needed?

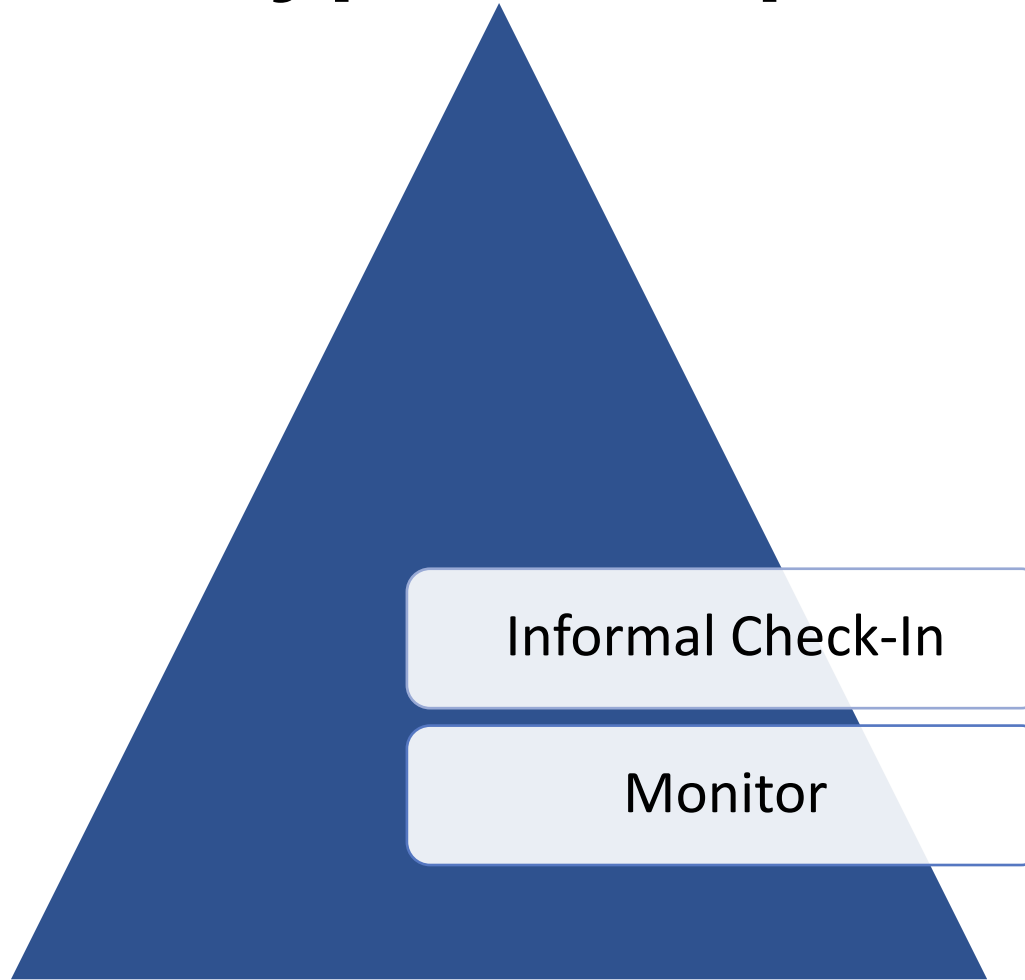


Monitor

Isolated, minor, corrected, or low-impact



What type of response is needed?



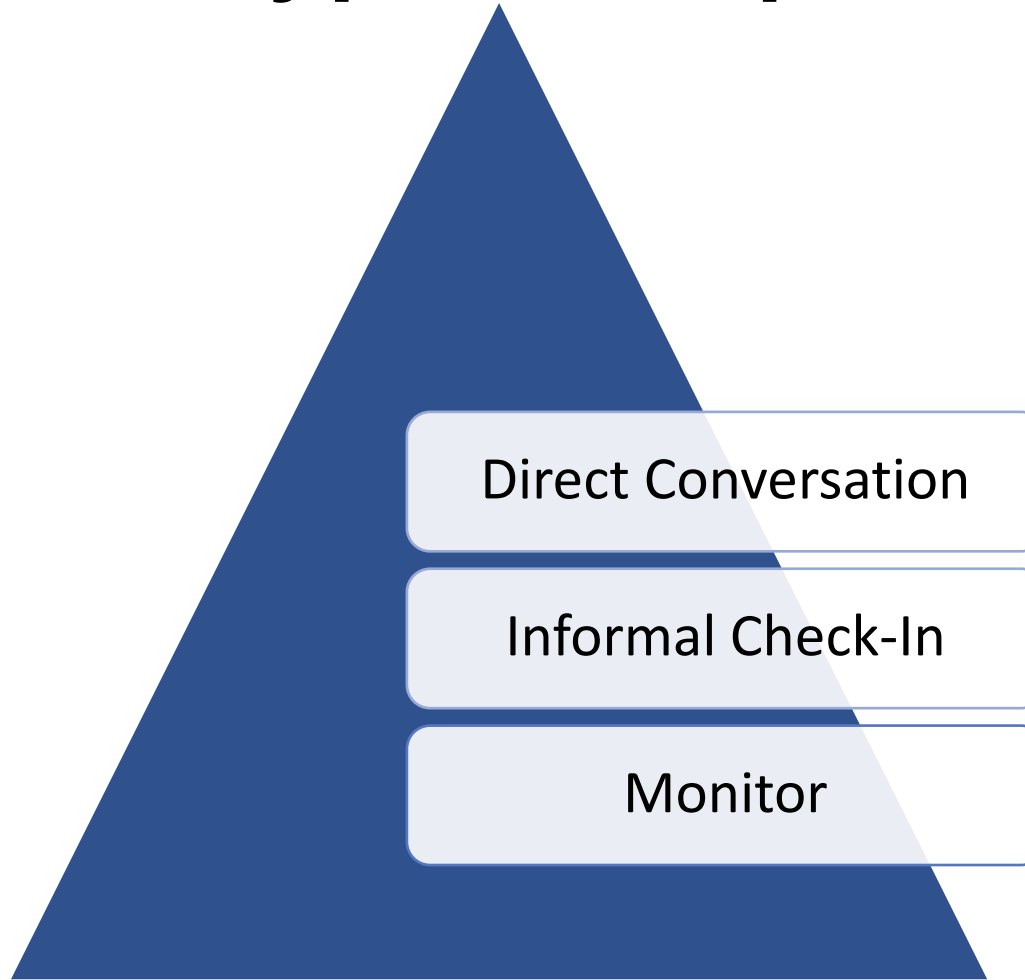
Informal Check-In

Early clarification, context gathering, or minor course correction.

Monitor

Isolated, minor, corrected, or low-impact

What type of response is needed?



Direct Conversation

Pattern, impact, unclear expectations, or behavior needs to change.

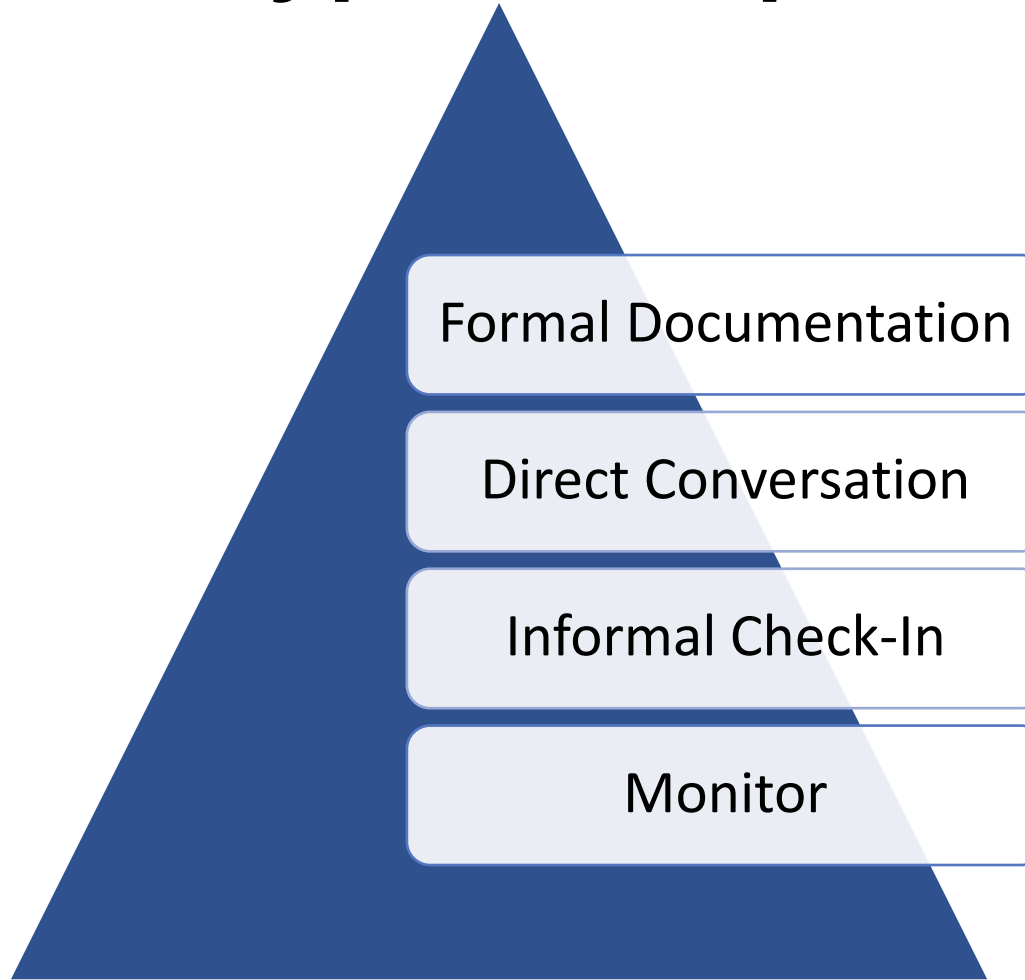
Informal Check-In

Early clarification, context gathering, or minor course correction.

Monitor

Isolated, minor, corrected, or low-impact

What type of response is needed?



Formal Documentation

Repeated issue, operational impact, policy/contract implications, or possible future action.

Direct Conversation

Pattern, impact, unclear expectations, or behavior needs to change.

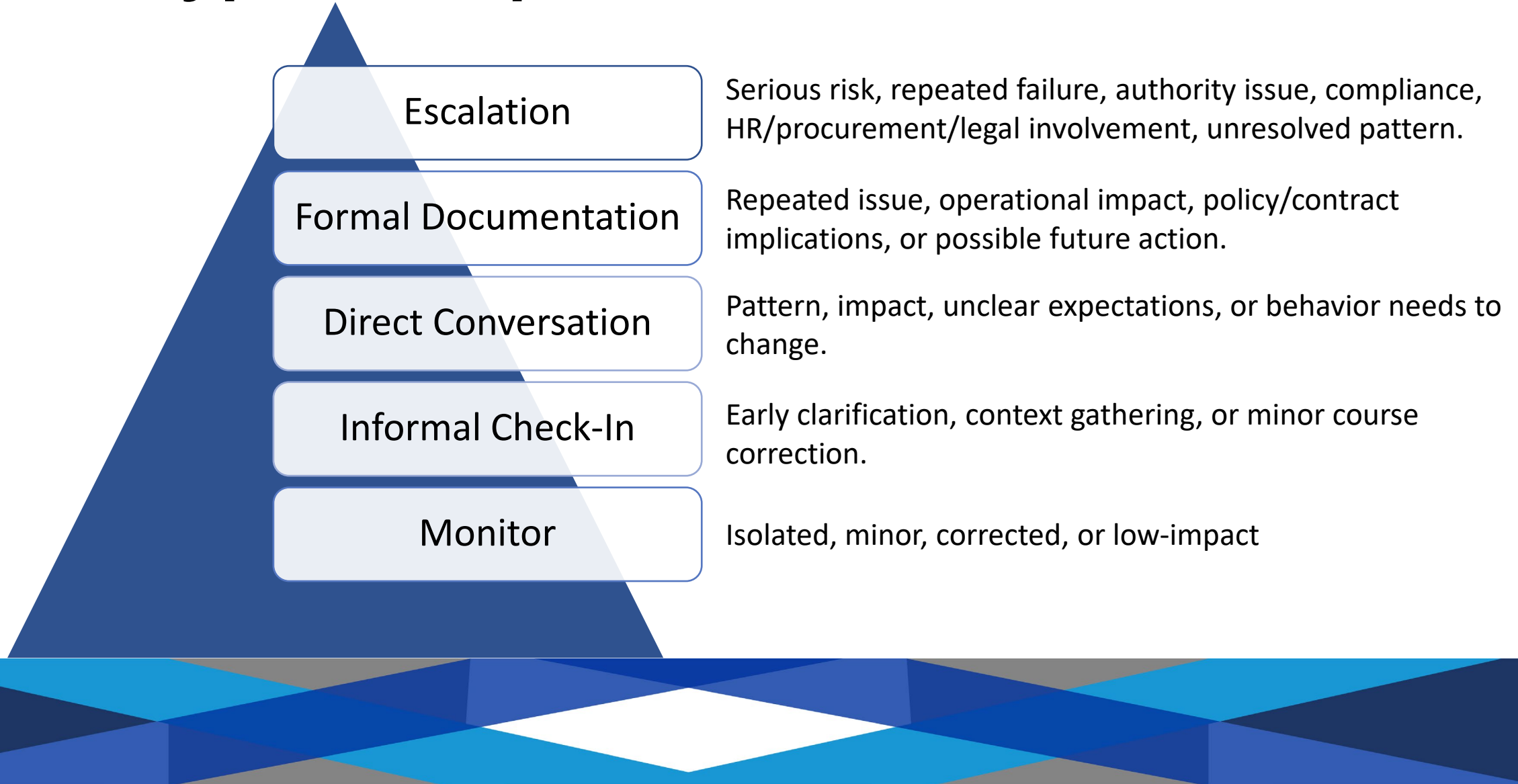
Informal Check-In

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Monitor

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What type of response is needed?



Case Study

1. What is the real issue?

2. What evidence do I have?

3. What outcome do I need?

4. What resistance can I expect?

5. What needs to happen next?

Packet includes:

- Scenario summary
- Supporting documents
- Evidence trail
- A difficult response or complication
- Group worksheet

Draft the opening:

I want to talk about _____.

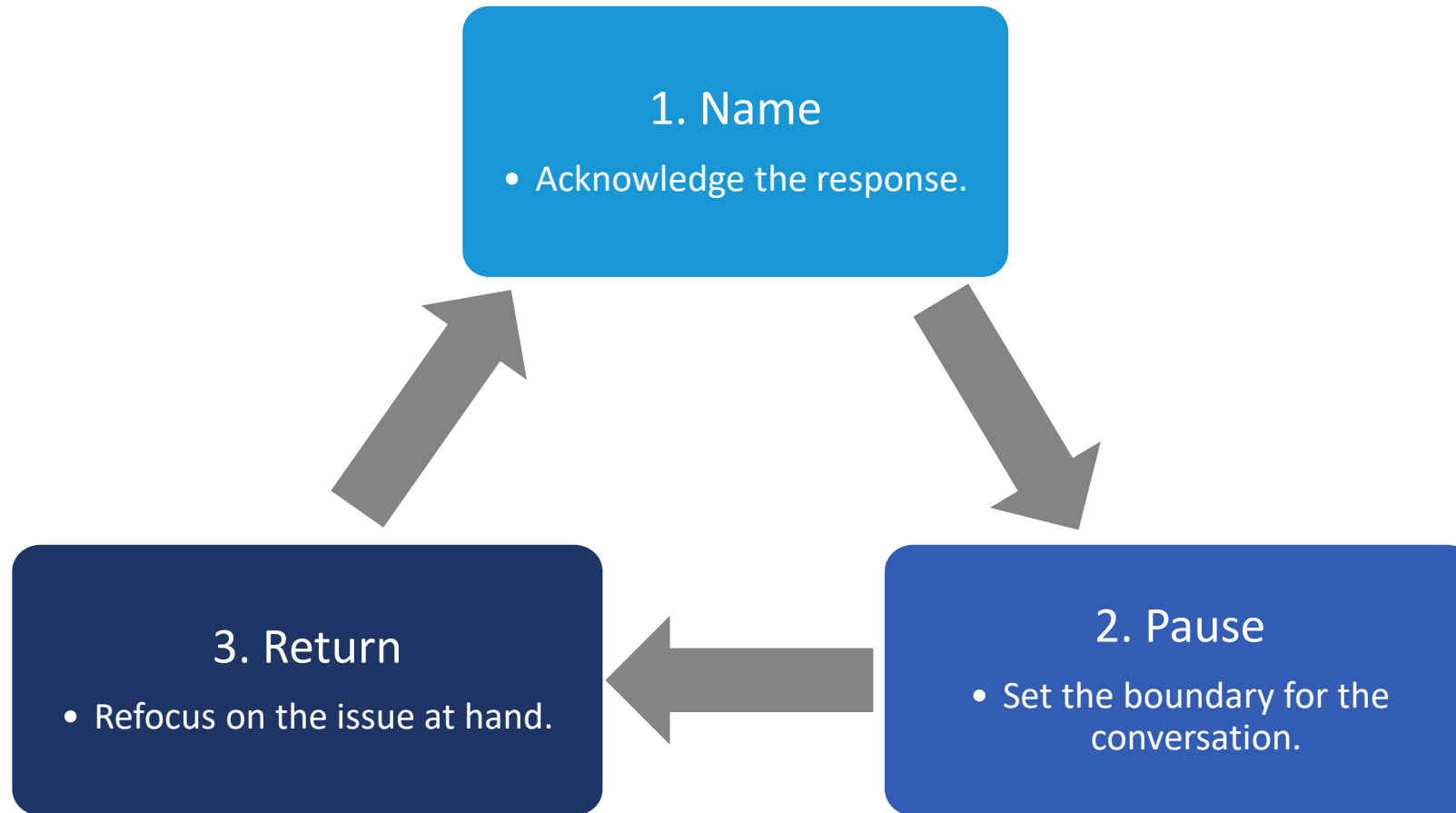
The expectation is _____.

What I am seeing is _____.

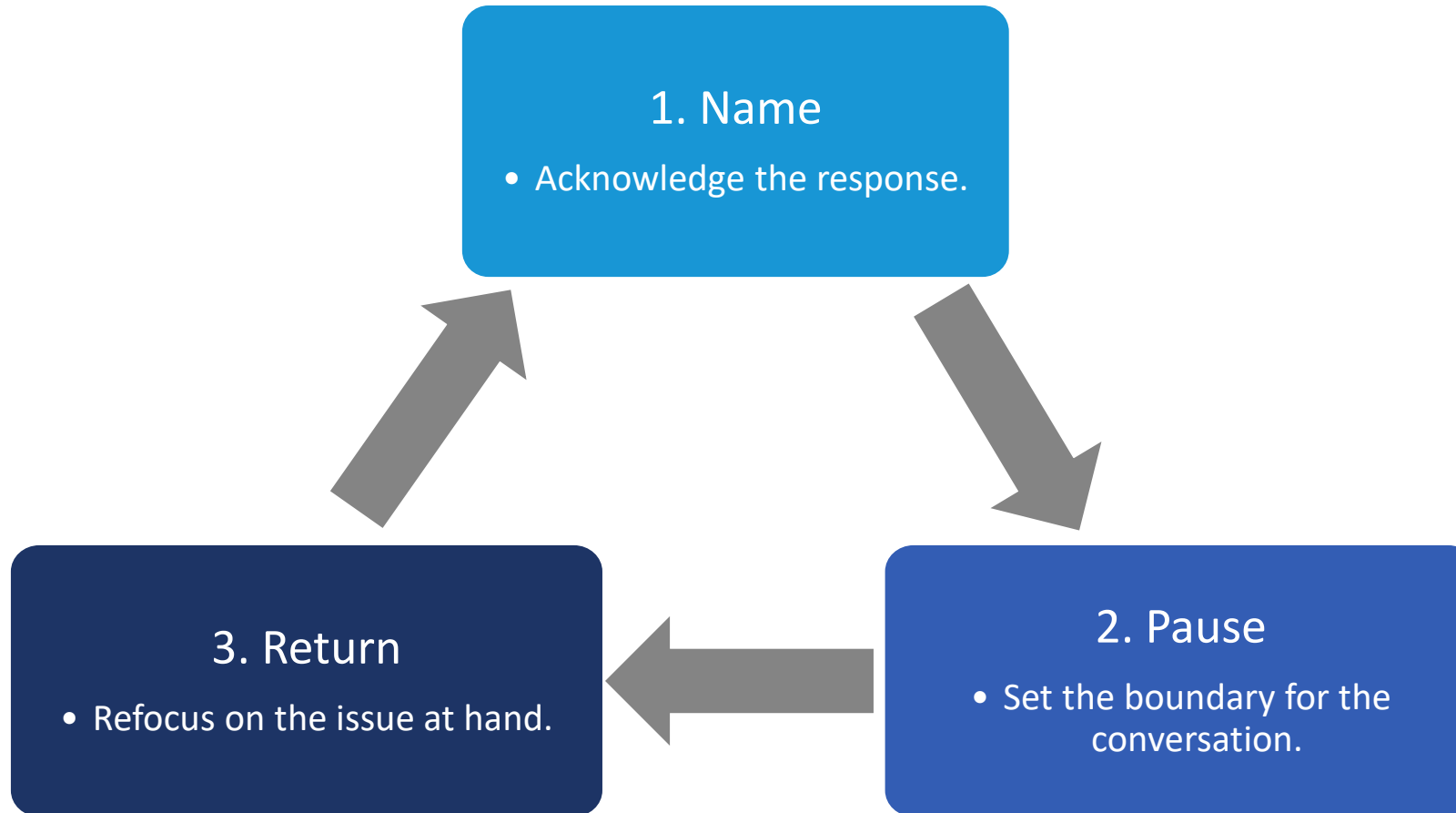
The impact is _____.

What I need moving forward is _____.

Handling Resistance



Handling Resistance



Response stem:

I hear

_____.

I want to stay focused on

_____.

What we need to resolve is

_____.

Handling Resistance

We are short-staffed, so I can't get this done any faster.

Response stem:

I hear

I want to stay focused on

What we need to resolve is

Personal Application

1. What is the real issue?

2. What evidence do I have?

3. What outcome do I need?

4. What resistance can I expect?

5. What needs to happen next?

Type of Response Needed:

- Monitor
- Informal Check-In
- Direct Conversation
- Formal Documentation
- Escalation

Draft the opening:

I want to talk about _____.

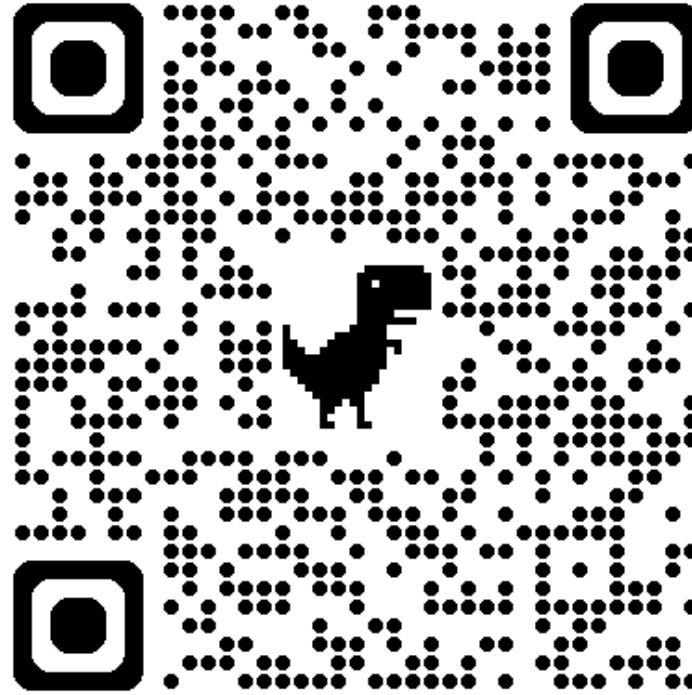
The expectation is _____.

What I am seeing is _____.

The impact is _____.

What I need moving forward is _____.

Closing and Discussion



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