

Crucial Leadership Conversations

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All of the scenarios can be used in one of three ways.

1. They can be used individually to foster and focus your thinking around conversational strategy.
2. They can also be used to drive small group (2-3-4 people) discussion around options for handling the scenario.
3. And finally, they can be used to drive a Crucial Conversation / Pivotal Conversation role play in a Coaching Dojo format.

Let's kick things off with a real-world example. I have a coaching colleague who posted the below scenario on a coaching slack channel – looking for guidance.

What do I do?

I would like to get your collective opinions on a recent conversation with a knowledgeable and coachable CIO:

"I know we're overcommitted, but (coach), I can't go on record with a WIP limit for organizational capacity. I would lose my job. IT is a services organization. I have to run my group like a business. If I have a project sponsor come to me with \$10M USD, I can't just tell him to wait until my teams are free in 6 months. He'll take his money to an outside vendor, and further marginalize our brand within the company. So, for years, we've responded to that demand with outsourced teams, each following direction from our best thought leaders. But I know that dilutes our talent across too many coming/going initiatives and drives us statistically towards mediocrity."

*"My mandate from the senior executive team is very clear. They have defined organizational agility as having BOTH a high performing innovation function (**agility**) AND the ability to scale capacity up/down to match demand (**elasticity**). But everything we've tried reveals that one side of the mandate pulls at the other. That's the problem.*

What do I do?"

1. **(Upward)** If you worked for this individual, in this culture, as a senior leader...what might you say? What sorts of feedback or challenges would you give them, if any? What would that crucial conversation look like?
2. **(Peer-to-Peer)** If you were the Chief Product Officer and a peer of this person and you historically overcommitted (2x to 3x capacity) and underdelivered to your clients. What would your crucial conversation look like?
3. **(Upward)** If you were coaching this individual, how would you approach it? What might you suggest or say? Is it even a problem?

Do the core Scrum values help at all – **Courage, Focus, Commitment, Respect, and Openness** in guiding our thinking, our preparation, and our conversations?

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Dojo Scenarios

1. **(Downward)** Mark is one of your finest managers. He has tremendous domain experience, you trust him, and has been with you for a long time. It's been escalated to you though that he isn't letting go with respect to trusting his agile teams. Every time the teams have a challenge, Mark engages to help them solve it. The Scrum Masters have even coined a term for it, they call it "swooping". As in – Mark swooped in five times today and interrupted how the team was handling their work.

Of course, he is well-intentioned. However, it's severely impacting several team's ability to drive their own solutions and accountability. What does your first Crucial Conversation one-on-one with Mark look like? Particularly if he's not very self-aware and unaware of his behavior and the impacts?

And finally, fast forward 3-6 months and the situation hasn't changed a bit. You're heading into another one-on-one conversation with Mark. How are you going to approach it? What if he pushes back...hard?

2. **(Upward)** After the last Sprint Review the VP of Development (Penelope) stopped you and inquired about being "truthful" in providing demo feedback. It seems that they use a Fist of Five as a feedback technique and she "voted" a 5 for all of the teams. But the reality was Penelope thought it was 2 or even 1. She's looking to you, Samir, the direct Manager of the team, to convey her overall "true feedback" to the teams in their next retrospective.

You quietly pull Penelope aside in a one-on-one in your office and have a conversation around this. What does that look like?

What if she pushes back on her responsibility to be honest and transparent. Preferring that you do it. How do you handle this delicately, but firmly?

(Downward) What if you're the CTO (James) of the organization and Penelope reports to you. You overhear this conversation after the demo. How would you respond? Let's assume you schedule a one-on-one with Penelope for follow-up. How would you prepare for that coaching conversation? What would it look like? Is it even a problem?

3. **(Peer-to-Peer)** You observed the Chief Product Owner (Francie) influencing estimates on more than one product backlog refinement session. The "good news" is that she is very interested and engaged in these team meetings. The "bad news" is that she is influencing the estimates, and

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more importantly, the conversations. You've brought this to her attention several times before, but the behavior if anything has gotten worse.

As Connie, the VP of Quality, you don't really have a "dog in this fight", do you? The only reason you care at all is that the low estimates are impacting your testers at the end of each sprint.

How would you push back on the CPO? Clearly doing that in front of the teams is a bad idea. Enter a conversation with her about changing this behavior. What if Francie reacts with – it's her job to squeeze as much juice from the lemons as possible. Period!

4. **(Downward)** George is really struggling. He is a senior architect that reports to you and he's assigned to five Scrum teams, trying to guide your new Enterprise Architecture initiatives. Basically, feedback is that he listens to no one and is truly shoving the architecture decisions (macro and micro) on the team members without collaboration.

You approach George directly and have a one-on-one conversation. In this case, he seems receptive, but struggling to engage the teams and STILL maintain control.

Twist things around a bit, George pushes back on the notion that the team needs to participate in his architecture decision-making and rollout. He brings up that he's by far the most experienced and that the teams simply need to be told what to do. How do you handle this conversation?

5. **(Peer-to-Peer)** You (Marcelle) are the VP of Technology in a 500-person organization. You have a Product organization peer (Peter) and you both are trying to work thru the CTO's directive to "go Agile" as a strategic play for the next year. The challenge is that you are not aligned. The CTO is expecting a near immediate 3x capacity increase by simply adopting agile methods. Peter agrees and, in some cases, is "doubling down" on that forecast, promising a 5x increase.

However, the capacity of the organization has been "fixed" for years and you're trying to show the VP leadership team, most importantly Peter, the real-world capacity so that you can plan (and commit) more realistically. Schedule a Crucial Conversation with Peter to talk him down from his incredibly optimistic views. In fact, he's speaking for your teams, so what's up with that?

(Upward) If the conversation doesn't go well with Peter, what does the Crucial Conversation with the CTO look like if you remain unaligned? Do you succumb to the pressure? Throw Peter under the bus? Something else?

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6. **(Upward)** At the end of the day, there seems to be little to no trust from your leaders towards their teams. Sure, your VP of Technology (Gertrude) passed down the edict of going agile. In fact, the initiative is directly from the CEO. And everyone agrees that you, Fred, as the Director of the PMO, needs to be the person leading the effort. But what you notice in nearly every interaction is that leaders are second-guessing the teams in even the smallest of decisions.

The biggest challenge area is estimates. The teams are continuously pushing back saying they're full (capacity) and the leadership team doesn't accept it. They're view is that they've already made customer commitments and there are regulatory commitments that MUST be made. Almost regardless of the team's real capacity. The work just needs to be done!

You've scheduled a one-one-one with Gertrude to discuss how to reset the overall leadership stance and expectations so that there is more space and trust towards the teams. Your greatest fear is that Gertrude isn't going to support this change nor will she coach her leaders to change their behavior. But, let's see where it goes...

Run one Dojo where there is agreement and partnership on resetting expectations. Run another where this is disagreement, pushback, and fear of change.

7. **(Group)** It's release night. You've come up to your quarterly release point in your release train. This is the tenth release in a row for you and the teams that is: ON TIME and ON SCOPE. You've quickly migrated the release to production (yes, somewhere between CI and CD with automation a WIP) and are going through a final sanity test. You are Tim, the Release Director.

The QA Director (Frankie) comes running up to you and explains that there are several SEV-1 defects that have been found. Her recommendation is to cancel the release and fix all of the bugs. However, the Product team makes the point that the bugs are in peripheral, rarely used functionality. The entire leadership team gets in a room to "duke it out" whether to release or not.

Oh, BTW: your Definition-of-Done speaks to all SEV 1-3 level defects as needing to be fixed.

And the VP of Development (Ernesto) is yelling at Frankie because they found bugs so late in the game. And the VP of Product (Nicole) is fuming because we're going to miss a release date for the first time in her tenure.

Group meeting, crucial conversations, how do you guide them to a decision?