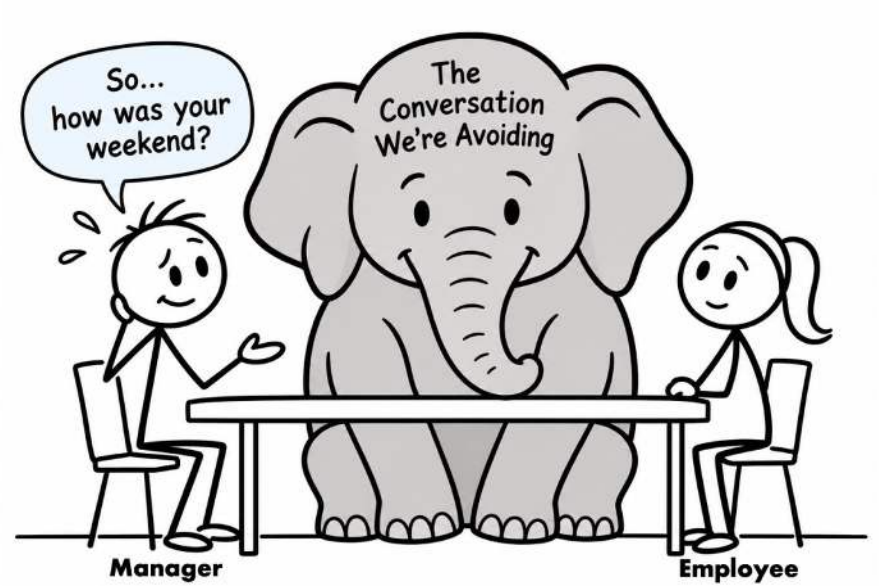
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Why Do Managers Avoid Conversations They Know They Need to Have?

And How to Make It Easier!

By Tina Hallis, Ph.D. | October 17, 2026



An employee repeatedly misses deadlines. Another spends too much time socializing. Someone interrupts their manager throughout the day with questions that could wait. And then there's the employee whose gossip creates tension across the team.

The manager sees what's happening. They know something needs to change. But instead of addressing it directly, they drop hints, make excuses, complain to another manager, or hope the problem will resolve itself.

Sound familiar?

I recently heard someone describe how managers in her organization feel like they're babysitting employees. It's an interesting description because it suggests managers are spending an enormous amount of energy trying to manage other people's behavior.

But here's a question worth considering: **What if part of the problem isn't just the employee's behavior, but what's happening *inside* the manager when they think about addressing it?**

Sometimes knowing what to do isn't enough

We often assume managers avoid difficult conversations because they don't know how to have them. And sometimes that's true. Clear expectations, constructive feedback, and accountability are important leadership skills.

But what about managers who already know what they should do and still struggle to do it? Maybe they've attended leadership training. They understand the importance of timely feedback. They even know the words they could use.

Yet when the moment comes, something holds them back. They tell themselves it's not that big of a deal. They decide to wait until the next incident. Or they soften the message so much that the employee doesn't understand what needs to change.

This may not be a knowledge problem. It may be an ***access*** problem.

The parts of us that get in the way

One of the ideas I love from Internal Family Systems (IFS) is that we all have different parts of ourselves that influence how we think, feel, and behave. For example, a manager might have a part that wants to hold people accountable and maintain high standards. But another part wants everyone to be happy. It worries about disappointing people or damaging relationships.

An avoider part may be afraid of conflict. A people-pleaser part may worry about being disliked. Another part might imagine the employee getting angry, crying, or complaining to HR. These parts aren't necessarily trying to sabotage the manager's effectiveness. They're often trying to protect the manager from an experience they anticipate will be uncomfortable or threatening.

And when those protective reactions take over, the manager may find it difficult to access the clarity, confidence, and compassion they need.

So what can help?

I see three levels of understanding that can make a meaningful difference.

Level 1: Recognize what's happening inside yourself

Before having a difficult conversation, a manager can pause and notice their internal reactions. Perhaps a part of them is anxious about how the employee will respond. Instead of criticizing themselves for being afraid or trying to force that anxiety away, they might get curious.

> *What am I worried will happen?*
>
> *What is this part of me trying to protect me from?*

Can I appreciate its concern without letting it make the decision for me?

This is where a shift can begin. Rather than thinking, "I'm terrible at confrontation," the manager might recognize, "A part of me is afraid of confrontation."

That small distinction can create space. The fear is still there, but it no longer has to define the manager or determine what happens next. They can acknowledge the part that's worried about the relationship while also making room for the part that knows accountability matters.

The goal isn't to eliminate discomfort. It's to have **more choice in how to respond.**

Level 2: Remember that employees have parts, too

Now consider the employee who's missing deadlines. It's easy for a frustrated manager to conclude that the employee is lazy, careless, or doesn't respect expectations.

But those interpretations may not tell the whole story. Perhaps the employee is overwhelmed and has a part that's afraid to admit they're struggling. Maybe a perfectionistic part keeps them from finishing work because nothing feels good enough. Or perhaps an avoider part keeps putting off a task they find intimidating.

We don't know unless we ask. And that's the point. Recognizing that other people have protective reactions can help us approach conversations with curiosity instead of assumptions.

A manager might say:

> *"I've noticed the last three reports were submitted after the deadline. Can you help me understand what's getting in the way?"*

That's different from:

> *"Why can't you ever get your work done on time?"*

The first approach still addresses the problem. But it creates an opportunity to understand what's happening rather than immediately putting the employee on the defensive.

Of course, understanding someone's behavior doesn't mean excusing it. The deadlines still matter. Expectations still need to be clear.

Compassion and accountability aren't opposites. In fact, they can work together.

Level 3: Create a shared language for what's happening

This is where I think things get especially interesting. Imagine a workplace where managers and employees understand that we all have different parts that show up in challenging situations. People learn that having a defensive, anxious, frustrated, or people-pleasing reaction doesn't mean that's all they are.

And they practice talking about their own reactions without shame or blame. A manager might begin a conversation this way:

> *"I want to talk about the missed deadlines. I'll admit that a part of me has been hesitant to bring this up because I value our working relationship. But I also know it's important that we address it."*

Notice what the manager is doing. They're being honest about their own hesitation without making the employee responsible for it. They're demonstrating that **it's possible to acknowledge discomfort and still have the conversation.**

Now imagine the employee responds:

> *"I can feel a part of me getting defensive because I hate feeling like I've let someone down. But I know the deadlines have been a problem."*

That doesn't mean the conversation is suddenly easy. But it can change the dynamic. Instead of two people reacting to each other's reactions, they may be better able to recognize what's happening and return to the issue they need to resolve.

The manager can explain the impact of the missed deadlines. The employee can share what's getting in the way. Together, they can agree on what needs to change and how progress will be measured.

There's an important point here I want to make. Using parts language together doesn't mean identifying or pointing out someone else's parts. Telling an employee, "I see your avoider part is showing up," could easily feel judgmental or intrusive. Nor should employees feel pressured to reveal their own parts or share personal vulnerabilities. The power comes from people voluntarily using this language to describe their own experiences.

And here's another possibility I find fascinating. When a manager works in an environment where it's safe to acknowledge reactions and talk about them openly, their own avoider and people-pleaser parts may begin to relax. They may no longer feel that an uncomfortable conversation automatically threatens the relationship.

Over time, the manager may become more willing to address problems early rather than waiting until frustration builds.

This doesn't require everyone to share deeply personal information or use therapeutic language at work. A team can start with simple phrases like, "Part of me is concerned," or "I'm noticing I'm getting defensive."

The important thing is developing a shared understanding that our first reaction doesn't have to be our final response.

A different way to think about accountability

Too often, we approach accountability as though we have to choose between being nice and being firm. We worry that addressing a problem will damage a relationship, so we avoid the conversation.

But when we don't address behavior that needs to change, the consequences often grow. Frustration builds. Other employees may feel resentful. Trust can suffer. And the employee misses an opportunity to understand expectations and improve.

What if we could approach these conversations differently? What if we could recognize the parts of ourselves that want to avoid discomfort, appreciate what they're trying to protect us from, and still choose to have the conversation? What if we could approach employees with curiosity without abandoning clear expectations?

And what if teams could develop a shared language that made it easier to acknowledge reactions rather than getting stuck in them?

> *We don't have to fix or fight the parts of ourselves that make difficult conversations uncomfortable. We can learn to work with them.*

Because how we meet ourselves shapes how we meet the people in front of us.

And sometimes, that changes the entire conversation.

THE TAKEAWAY

You can care about people, understand their reactions, and still expect them to take responsibility for their behavior.

About the Author

Tina Hallis, Ph.D., is a speaker, author, and thought shifter, and the founder of The Positive Edge. After 20+ years as a biotech scientist, she now bridges the science of Positive Psychology and the power of Internal Family Systems (IFS) with the realities of work. She helps people understand what's driving their reactions so they can respond with greater choice and meet the moment with more of their Best Self.

Helping teams build a Positive Edge through resilience, psychological safety & inner alignment.

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