

affirm!  
challenge!



## twenty-pound trout

The cab ride from David's office at Business Legends to George's office was only twenty minutes, but David couldn't keep his legs still, as if their nervous movement could make the traffic go any faster. Eager for his follow-up interview with the man he had come to admire, he reflected on the close connection he felt with George.

How did this guy do it? What instilled such trust? Certain themes came to David's mind, comments that tied together in ways he hadn't seen before. George seemed to be so committed to knowing people at a level much deeper than facts and figures and the usual "What can you do for me?"

Still in thought, David stepped from the elevator and entered the lounge outside of George's office. Five minutes later, the receptionist escorted him to the round table in George's sitting area.

George set a stack of papers to the side and looked up with an expression of genuine delight as he rose from his desk. "If it isn't my favorite reporter! What's on the agenda for today?"

David, with pen and pad ready, said, "I need you to clear up a little mystery for me. As I've talked to people who work for you, I get two very different pictures in my mind."

"Sounds like you want to know whether I'm really Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde. Well, to misquote a famous line, I just give 'em the truth and they think I'm Mr. Hyde."

"Not exactly," David said. "I haven't run into anyone who thought that. Most of them just say they've never worked for anyone who pushed them harder. I assumed they must resent it, but when I asked, they would usually say something like, 'Oh, not at all. I'm jazzed by the challenge. He gets more out of me than anyone I've ever worked for, and somehow he does it without demanding it; he makes me want to.'"

"Wow!" George said. "If only I could really be that good. I think I'd quit my job and go to work for me."

"Seriously," David said, "What's the trick?"

“Seriously?” George said, “It’s so profound, it’s simple. Beyond wanting to be understood and cared for, people crave good feedback. They want to know how they’re doing—in your eyes. And if they trust your commitment to them, they want to know how they can do better; they’re willing to be corrected.”

David wrote furiously and then looked up. “You said, ‘if they trust your commitment to them’; tell me about that one.

“That’s a biggie,” George answered. “We all want to be accepted and appreciated for who we are—even more than for what we do. But a lot of people have trouble separating those two. If you challenge them, they feel threatened or even rejected, as though their value has just been diminished. It takes healthy self-esteem to embrace correction. When people feel that you value who they are, their trust in your commitment to them grows. It goes a long way toward building the esteem they need.”

David wrote and mumbled at the same time. “You value people and you correct them. Affirm and challenge.” Then, looking up again, he said, “Inspirational. Great-sounding theory, but how do you do it?”

“I can’t give you the details in a sentence, but I can give you a picture. It’s pulling in a twenty-pound trout on ten-pound test line; you don’t jerk it around and you don’t just let it go. Affirm and challenge. Both. Over and over. A little differently with each person. One principle, many applications.”

“Sounds like raising kids. Now, if I can make that work with my kids, I’ll have a legitimate miracle on my hands.”

“Great thought, Dave. That’s the best practice field in the world.”

“Let me guess,” David interrupted. “It has a lot to do with knowing the person you’re working with and adjusting accordingly.”

George smiled.



## understanding the journey

We invest with the expectation of receiving a return. Although some investments result in losses, others result in gains far beyond expectation. Especially investments in people.

In **connect!** we learned about strengthening relational bonds by getting to know people in a way that goes beneath the surface level of the typical team. This is primarily about you as a leader receiving the highest quality input. In **invest!** we move in the direction of your output into the lives of team members.

Wise investments depend on quality information—information that is both accurate and timely. Your team needs feedback that shows them where their assumptions diverge from reality. Without it, they may continue a self-defeating strategy, or they may miss seeing the full potential of an opportunity. Whether they realize it or not, reality is their friend; it enables them to make adjustments.

But because we are all self-deceived to varying degrees, we require the input of others to align our self-image with reality. Some people are inclined to overemphasize the importance of their own contribution; others tend to minimize their own contribution. Misperceptions abound, and any misperception is counterproductive.

A misperception's lack of accuracy does not translate into a lack of importance. Simply dismissing it invites a growing snowball of related errors, because when something is perceived as real, it generates real consequences. Effective leadership requires dealing with the "reality" of those you lead, not just your own reality.

One of the greatest investments we make in others is bringing light and truth to their self-perception. This performance-building investment requires both affirming and challenging them.

Many people have great difficulty getting the maximum benefit from corrective challenging; when they lose confidence, their performance

**affirm!**  
declare support of a team member's value and contribution.

**challenge!**  
give correction and direction regarding a team member's performance.

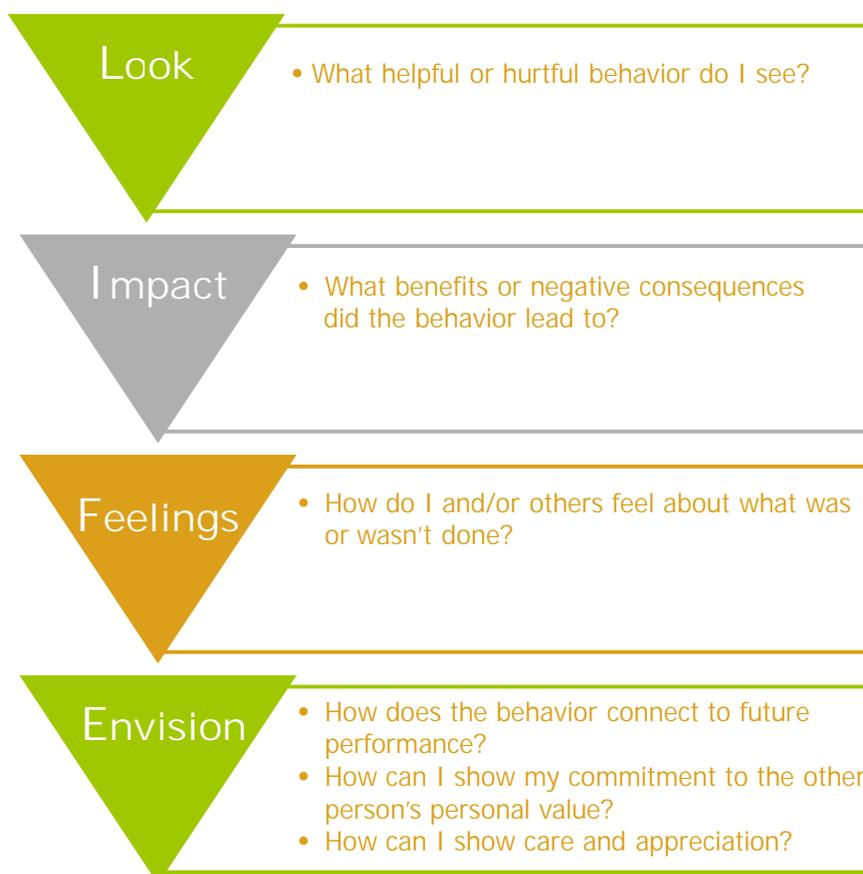
suffers. Understanding this, leaders often struggle with the question, How do I maintain the highest level of correction and confidence within my team?

These are not two separate processes to be balanced; think of them as two atoms in the same investment molecule—always bound together by their common purpose of elevating a team member’s contribution. This means that **affirm!** and **challenge!** are a single process.

**affirm! and challenge! are a single process.**

The process of affirming and challenging is so crucial to high performance that we use the acrostic of **L I F E** to describe it. It is life-giving in the sense that it deepens emotional bonds and boosts confidence—all of which maximize the team member’s contribution and the team’s performance.

## affirm! challenge!



## getting started

### L I F E – Look, Impact, Feelings, Envision

Affirming and challenging are bound together in a single process by their

common purpose of investing in a team member's contribution to high performance. Although it is a process that contains four distinct steps, it can occur in the span of a minute.



#### Look

• What helpful or hurtful behavior do I see?

Knowing that positive reinforcement is extremely motivating, you are always looking to catch team members doing something well. This provides an opportunity for immediate affirmation.

While looking, you will also see negative behaviors—opportunities for immediate challenging. The process is the same, and both depend on being specific and timely for maximum effectiveness.

In the Look step, you focus on performance and identify specific behaviors. Although attitudes may be inferred from behaviors, attempting to deal directly with attitudes can be very difficult—particularly on the “Challenge” side. Common self-deception allows people to misperceive their attitudes; believing in their good intent, they are likely to perceive their attitude as better than their behavior shows.

Following the same L I F E process for both affirming and challenging does not mean that affirmation must be accompanied by challenging. Affirmation that includes, “You can do better,” has been described as “never rewarding and often damaging.” Even “A” performers who exude self-confidence have hidden vulnerabilities relating to concerns of poor self-worth.

look to catch team members doing something well—even “A” performers who exude self-confidence have hidden vulnerabilities relating to concerns of poor self-worth.

If you tend to be more intuitive in how you process information, you will need discipline to address specific behaviors rather than underlying

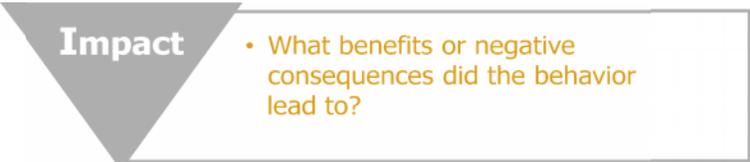
attitudes. Even on the “Affirm” side, people will sense more sincerity and validity in your praise when it is tied to specific behaviors.

High achievers are not very impressed by generic praise. Whatever value it has initially diminishes quickly with repeat applications. This does not mean praise is unimportant to them; it means that it must be discerning in order to be truly meaningful.

This is why the Look step is so important in both challenging and affirming; it finds specific behaviors that you can address clearly and effectively.

### LIFE – Look, Impact, Feelings, Envision

The Look step is followed by the Impact step. As soon as you have identified a specific



#### Impact

- What benefits or negative consequences did the behavior lead to?

behavior, expose its positive or negative impact on the team member’s contribution and the team’s performance. This further separates affirming from general compliments that are ineffective and may even feel like flattery. It also further separates challenging from general negative remarks that discourage rather than inform.

Connect specific behaviors with likely consequences. What benefits did the good behavior lead to? What negative consequences did the bad behavior inherit? These can be pointed out in a sentence: “You did a great job drawing Melanie and Jason into your consideration on this; that broader perspective raised the quality of the product. And everyone learned in the process.”

Or, for the flip side: “I understand your desire to dig in and get it done yourself, but your perspective is not the only one that should be considered in something this important. That resulted in a weaker product, and we all took a hit.”

When challenging is needed, consider an advance warning—even if it’s only the opening remark. Signaling something potentially uncomfortable ahead

helps team members prepare, reducing the shock and its potential for a defensive response.

Public or Private?

Conventional wisdom is to affirm (praise) in public and challenge (reprimand) in private.

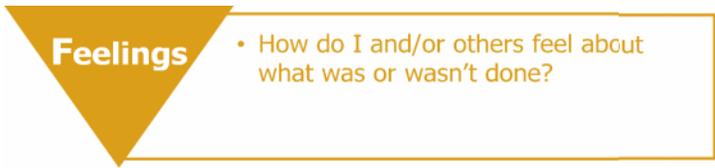
However, a team comprised of high-trust relationships can benefit from both challenging and affirming in a team setting. New or less-secure members grow in their ability to handle challenging in front of others through coaching to help them separate performance from personhood. By emphasizing a continuing commitment to the person simultaneous with recognition of the need to improve behavior, team members can feel valued rather than devalued or rejected.

The larger and less cohesive the group, the less likely it is to experience the benefits and avoid the liabilities of public challenging.

The primary purpose of the Impact step is to help team members see beyond their intent and to recognize the connection between a specific behavior and its impact on their contribution and the team's performance.

## LIFE – Look, Impact, Feelings, Envision

The first two steps, Look and Impact, are analytical and relatively free of emotion. But we are emotional



### Feelings

- How do I and/or others feel about what was or wasn't done?

beings, and meaningful relationships engender and acknowledge feelings. Step three, the Feelings step, connects a team member's specific behavior to its impact on you and others at the feeling level.

Many leaders disregard feelings as being counterproductive baggage. Some feel this way because feelings seem unreliable, subject to change without apparent cause. Others are uncomfortable with the complexity of feelings, thinking that they will never be able to understand them well enough to accurately interpret them.

It may be helpful to think of feelings as being similar to colors. Although our computers tell us they can discern millions of variations in color, we know that all colors can be reduced to mixtures of three primary ones: red, yellow and blue. Emotions are similar. A simple list of primary emotions is happy, sad, afraid, and angry. Using just these four labels, you can name a feeling you experience as a result of someone's behavior.

Naming the feeling—particularly if it is a negative one—does not mean acting on it in a threatening or destructive way. In fact, clearly acknowledging it is often the first step in removing its fangs.

Addressing your feelings exposes you as a real person as opposed to a management machine. According to Richard Farsib's "Praise Reappraised" article in the Harvard Business Review, it means "transparently exhibiting some of your own feelings and attitudes.... The inevitable consequence of exposing and sharing feelings is emotional closeness.... For some reason it is easier for most people to be honest about their feelings of anger than it is for them to be honest about their feelings of caring and love. In either case, the times when one can risk vulnerability are perhaps life's richest moments..."

### Your Display of Emotion

How can you use emotion to best effect? This is particularly important on the "Challenge" side when you are dealing with negative behaviors and their impact. Should you show reasonable anger or should you focus on encouraging?

There is no single best answer for all team members, because their level of emotional intelligence varies greatly. Some have a high desire and ability to process information thoroughly and grasp the meaning behind others' emotions. They can process an appropriate display of anger.

Those with lower emotional intelligence may react negatively and take offense, overlooking their contribution to the situation. This could cause them to miss the point and respond with defensiveness, anger, or discouragement.

part of emotional intelligence is the desire and ability to process information thoroughly and grasp the meaning behind others' emotions.

One important consideration in this question is the current environment and its overall mood. In high-stress times, everyone's emotional intelligence declines; even those who ordinarily respond well to reasonable anger may experience a negative impact on their performance. Be alert for mental fatigue and time pressure, and be especially careful in those times to maintain an encouraging posture.

As you share feelings related to a team member's behavior and its impact, be careful not to imply a devaluing of the person. Since feelings are usually less precise than logical analysis, be aware that the separation of personhood and performance is less likely to be felt. You could help draw the distinction by saying, "When you presented incomplete research on our project, it made me feel disrespected—as though you were trying to make me look bad. I don't believe that was your intent, so I talked myself out of

verbalizing your feelings identifies you as a vulnerable human being who cares and has the courage to admit it.

the feeling, but it was there."

Verbalizing your feelings identifies you as a vulnerable human being who cares and has the courage to admit it. Verbalizing the recognition that feelings are imprecise and generally exceed rational boundaries identifies

you as having enough emotional intelligence to be aware of and manage your feelings. The combination adds both power and credibility to your attempts to affirm and challenge.

"emotional investment can improve your relationships, increase trust, and promote satisfying, enduring agreements. and in a difficult economy, when other kinds of rewards are scarce, fostering positive emotions—making people feel upbeat and engaged—can be one of the greatest sources of value for your organization."—Daniel Shapiro

## LIFE – Look, Impact, Feelings, Envision

The Envision step enables you to:

1. Connect a team member's specific behavior with his future performance value.
2. Connect your commitment to the person's value apart from the specific behavior.
3. Connect to the person through meaningful touch as appropriate.

The first of these three connections continues to focus on the team member's behavior.



### Envision

- How does the behavior connect to future performance?
- How can I show my commitment to the other person's personal value?
- How can I show care and appreciation?

The last two focus more on the person, endorsing his value and reaffirming your commitment.

Connecting behavior with future performance value helps a team member envision her future more accurately in two ways. First, she gains an appreciation for the path of development. What may seem like isolated behaviors either help or hinder her on the path; they all relate. Second, she gains an objective view of her behavior. This is important in recognizing self-deception—especially with negative behavior—so that she can learn to identify its presence and deal with it constructively.

Connecting your commitment to the person's value apart from the specific behavior is part of the trust-building process. People who feel they have no more value than their specific performance see themselves as imminently expendable. This typically lowers both trust and motivation. Let team members know that you are committed to them personally and that the behavior you're addressing, as important as it is, does not totally define them.

Connecting your commitment to the person's value apart from the specific behavior is part of the trust-building process.

If a team member's performance is consistently under the required standards, the reality of an employment mismatch will have to be addressed. Even then, your concern for the person's welfare and future

success should be assured, including whatever assistance you can provide in a transition.

Connecting to the person through “meaningful touch as appropriate” defies a concrete definition. Some people welcome a pat on the back or a hand on the shoulder as a sign of care and appreciation; others feel it violates personal boundaries or indicates a patronizing attitude. Any hint of sexual attraction toward or from a team member should trigger a clear “no touch” policy on your part regardless of your policy with others.

In most cases, appropriate touch adds a meaningful dimension. It is simply an added connection that communicates care, appreciation, comfort, and reassurance—particularly in a setting that includes the discomfort of addressing a behavior problem or a performance failure.

### putting the steps together

The following examples demonstrate challenging and affirming in a brief, simple exchange. Elaborate speeches are unnecessary and usually undesirable. These examples—first introduced in the Impact step—are expanded here to show each step in the L I F E framework.

#### Example 1: Affirm

Look: The leader looked for behavior to affirm. Rather than simply affirming results, he noted the process.

Impact: “You did a great job drawing Melanie and Jason into your consideration on this; that broader perspective raised the quality of the product. I think everyone grew in the process.”

Feelings: “It makes me feel glad to see you working together as a team. And I’m sure Melanie and Jason were glad to have a part in it.”

Envision: “That approach shows growing leadership—a good thing for you and a good thing for us.”



## Example 2: Challenge

Look: The leader, looking for behavior to affirm, saw a problem. Rather than simply condemning poor results, he addressed the process.

Impact: "I understand your desire to dig in and get it done yourself, but your perspective is not the only one that should be considered in something this important. That resulted in a weaker product, and we all took a hit."

Feelings: "It makes me feel sad to see you not taking advantage of the strengths of others on the team."

Envision: "I think you're capable of much better, and I can see you taking the initiative to involve others. I'm committed to helping you become the best you can be, because I value you as a person and us as a team."



### going further

1. Describe someone in your life that motivated you to be or do more than you thought you were capable of. How did they go about doing this?

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2. Do you generally struggle more at affirming or challenging your team members?

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3. What team member behaviors do you think could be a result of your struggle with affirmation or challenging?

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4. A) Give one affirmation a day for the next week. Be sure to first take time to review your interactions from **listen!** and **discover!** to ensure that your affirmations are most appropriate to each team member.

OR

- B) Identify a team member's specific behavior that you have neglected to challenge. Review the L I F E framework and have a conversation with this team member within the next week regarding the behavior.

5. At the end of the week, take a few minutes to describe your feelings about this exercise and document any impact you've perceived from others. What do you think your team would look like if you continued to **invest!** in them regularly in this way?

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6. Discuss these questions with your coach.

7. Additional Resources:

- The One Minute Manager (Blanchard)
- The Way of the Shepherd (Leman and Pentak)
- Seven Secrets of an Emotionally Intelligent Coach (Livingstone)