CHAPTER 7

The Eye-Roller

1 Recognize it

Picture a Tuesday staff meeting. One of your newer people, Taylor, is walking the team through a proposal for a new scheduling system, and about forty seconds in, Morgan, who's been on the team for eight years and is very good at the job, leans back, lets out a sigh everybody hears, and says "here we go" just loud enough to reach the far end of the table. Taylor loses the thread for a second, two people glance at Morgan, and the meeting goes on. Nobody says anything, and it's the fourth time something like this has happened in the last month.

Managers tend to get stuck on this one, and I understand why. Morgan hasn't said anything you can quote. It's a sigh and a muttered aside, and if you bring it up, you already know you'll hear "I didn't say anything." So you let it go. But over a quarter, Taylor stops bringing ideas to the meeting, because why would you walk into that? The two people who glanced at Morgan start glancing at Morgan every time, so the room waits for Morgan's reaction before it decides what it thinks. And the most senior person in your meeting now has a veto without ever having to say a word.

The usual mistake is to walk in wanting to fix Morgan's attitude. But an attitude lives in Morgan's head, and the moment you say the word "attitude," you've handed Morgan an argument you can't win, because Morgan knows what's in there and you don't. What you can see is behavior: a sigh at a particular moment, three words said at a particular volume, in a particular room, with particular people watching. Behavior you can name, and Morgan controls it. So the job of this conversation is to take something that feels like fog ("Morgan is contemptuous in meetings") and turn it into a short list of things Morgan did, with dates.

And this is happening more than it used to. One of my studies, called Fake News Hits the Workplace, surveyed more than 3,000 leaders about lying and other bad behaviors at work, and among the findings, 53% have seen an increase in criticism, 48% have seen an increase in dismissing others' ideas, and 36% have seen an increase in hostility or disparaging others. In other words, if it feels like there's more of this in your meetings than a few years ago, you're probably right. The eye-roll is a common form of it because it never has to defend itself. A sigh dismisses Taylor's idea as completely as "that's a dumb idea" would, and it leaves no evidence. Your feedback has to supply that evidence, with a description of what happened specific enough that "I didn't say anything" stops working as a defense.

2 Before you walk in

There are three things to settle, and the first one takes the longest.

First, convert the attitude into facts. Sit down with a notepad and write out two or three specific moments. "Morgan is dismissive in meetings" is an interpretation, and it's the thing Morgan will argue with. Instead, write something like "Tuesday, when Taylor was presenting the scheduling proposal, you sighed and said 'here we go' loud enough that people at the other end of the table turned around," and "last Thursday, when Priya suggested moving the review to Fridays, you rolled your eyes and looked at the ceiling until she finished." Each one has a date, a trigger, a behavior, and who was there. If you can't write down two or three of these, you're probably reacting to a general feeling about Morgan, and you're not ready yet.

Second, decide what you need instead. Morgan's been here eight years, and some of those sighs are probably attached to real objections. What you need is for the objection to come out in words, in the room or to you afterward, instead of in a sound. So the standard is something like: if you disagree with an idea, say so and say why, and if you don't want to say it in the meeting, bring it to me.

Third, keep disagreement and the behavior separate in your own head. If Morgan says "I think the new schedule skips a step, here's the gap," that's what you want from a veteran, and if you treat every bit of pushback as an attitude issue, you'll teach your most experienced people to go silent. You're addressing the sigh and the eye-roll, the delivery that dismisses an idea without engaging with it. Morgan is going to test that line.

3 The opening line

Say something like this:

> "Morgan, I want to talk about something from the last couple of meetings, and I want to be specific about it rather than vague. On Tuesday, when Taylor was presenting the scheduling proposal, you sighed and said 'here we go' loud enough that the far end of the table turned around. Last Thursday, when Priya suggested moving the review, you rolled your eyes and looked at the ceiling until she was done. Here's what I need going forward. If you think an idea is wrong, say so, in the meeting or to me afterward, and say why. What I can't have is the reaction without the words."

You never said "attitude," and you never said what you think the sigh meant. You described two moments, with dates and names, in language that would match a recording if there'd been one. Since you never claimed Morgan said anything, "I didn't say anything" has nothing to push against. And you ended on "the reaction without the words," which names the behavior and the alternative in one breath.

Of course, if Morgan is someone you've got a long and generally good relationship with, you can shorten it:

> "Morgan, two things from this month. Tuesday with Taylor, the sigh and the 'here we go.' Thursday with Priya, the eye-roll. You've probably got real objections in there, and I want them, out loud. What I don't want is the sound effects."

4 When they say…

Morgan says "I didn't roll my eyes" or "you're reading into it"

This is where managers tend to start doubting themselves. Don't argue about it, because an argument about whether an eye-roll happened is one Morgan can keep going forever. Say something like:

> "I'm telling you what I saw, and I'm telling you how it landed on the people at that table. You don't have to agree with my read on it. What I'm asking for is simple: when Taylor or Priya is talking, the disagreement comes out in words."

You've moved the conversation from what happened to what happens next. Morgan can privately believe the eye-roll never occurred and still comply with "say it in words," and that's fine, because you're trying to change the next meeting.

Morgan says "well, it IS a dumb idea" and pivots to the merits

This one's tempting, because Morgan might be right about the schedule. But if you start debating the proposal, a conversation about Morgan's behavior has become a conversation about Taylor's idea, and the behavior walks away untouched. Say something like:

> "You might be right about the schedule, and I want to hear that argument. But notice what you just did. You had a real objection, and in the meeting it came out as a sigh instead of as the objection. That's the whole thing I'm raising. So here's the deal: give me the argument now, properly, and next time give it to the room."

What you've done here is take both issues seriously. You've agreed that Morgan may have a point, which is honest and which Morgan needs to hear, and you've used the moment as evidence. In fact, this is often the most useful of the three reactions, because Morgan has just shown you, in person, that there was a real objection and it didn't get said.

Morgan says "so I'm not allowed to have a reaction now?"

This is the victim turn, and it's designed to make you sound like you're policing Morgan's face. The mistake is to soften ("no, of course you can react, I just mean…") until the standard disappears. Instead, say something like:

> "You're allowed to have any reaction you want. What I'm asking about is what you do with it in a room where a junior person is presenting. A sigh and 'here we go' isn't a reaction, it's a message, and everyone at the table received it. I'm asking you to send the message in words instead, because words can be answered and a sigh can't."

You conceded what Morgan said (you can have a reaction) and held firm on what Morgan was arguing for underneath it, the right to express it any way Morgan likes. And your reason had nothing to do with Morgan's feelings. Taylor can respond to "this skips a step," but Taylor can't respond to a noise.

After a month of eye-rolls, you've probably got a theory about what they mean, and you'll want to tell Morgan. Resist it. The theory is where this conversation dies, and it's the difference the fact-based feedback study measured, 4% of people getting defensive versus 62%. "You rolled your eyes when Priya was talking" is a fact, and Morgan has to deal with it. "You've got no respect for anyone on this team" is an interpretation, and it starts the argument Morgan wants, about what's in Morgan's head, where you can never be right.

5 How to close

Get the next step in Morgan's words. Ask something like:

> "So in Thursday's meeting, when something comes up you don't like, what are you going to do?"

If the answer is "I'll keep it to myself," say why that doesn't work: you want Morgan's objections in a form the room can use. Keep asking until you get something like "I'll say 'I've got a concern about that' and explain it," or "I'll hold it and bring it to you after." Either one is fine, as long as it starts with a verb and involves words.

Then watch the next meeting, and follow up the same day, in passing:

> "Thursday, when you pushed back on the vendor thing, that was exactly it. Priya could actually answer you."

That shows Morgan you noticed, and that disagreeing out loud gets a different reception than the sigh did. For a veteran who may have spent years feeling unheard, hearing "that was exactly it" after a spoken objection tends to do more than the original conversation did.

For your file, one line: the date, the two moments you raised (with dates), what you asked for (objections in words, in the meeting or to you), and what Morgan committed to for the next meeting. Leave out your theory about why Morgan does it. That isn't a fact, and it doesn't belong in a record.

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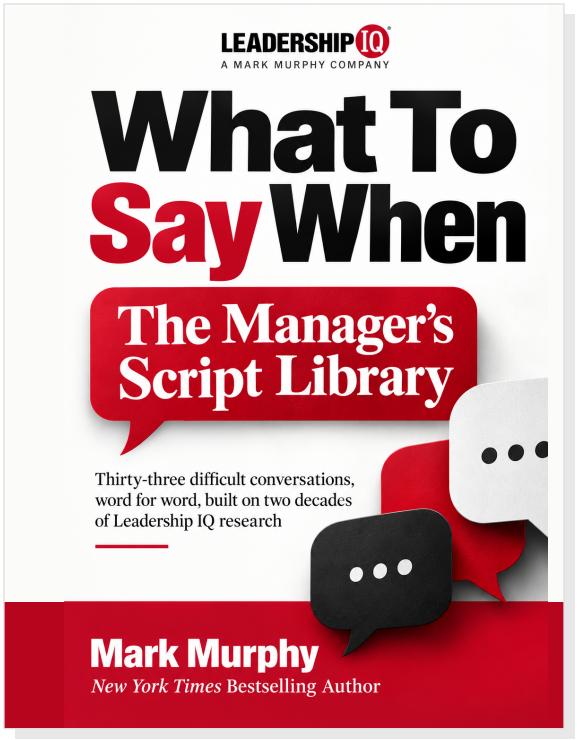

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