



Dialog 2: Fred and Lamont

Manager Helps Employee / Employee Complains / Example of Positional Power

Lamont works for a company that engineers and manufactures equipment for water processing plants. He is working on a white paper describing the need for a new product, which is due on his boss Fred's desk by Friday. And he's behind schedule, waiting for Aisha to send him the data he needs to finish it.

Lamont drops by Fred's office to give him the bad news.

Step 1: Permission

The Conversation

Lamont: Aisha hasn't given me her report yet, so I can't get you the white paper by the Friday deadline.

Fred: Do you want to think this through together?

Lamont: No, there's nothing I can do here. She's the bottleneck.

Fred: I'm sorry you're struggling with Aisha. That said, I still expect the white paper by Friday. Do you want to think through how to approach Aisha?

Lamont: There's no point brainstorming this.

Fred: OK, I'm sure you'll figure it out. I still need to see the white paper from you by Friday.

Lamont: I just explained that it's out of my hands. I can't get it to you on Friday.

Fred: I understand that you are struggling with Aisha. That said, I expect you to honor your commitments to me. The offer stands: I'm happy to think it through with you. Otherwise, I have confidence that you will figure it out on your own.

Two hours later...

Lamont: Can we talk about the white paper? Aisha hasn't replied to any of my emails or Slack DMs. I don't know what to do.

Step 2: Outcome

Fred: Sure. Come on in. Let's start big picture. What's the outcome you want?

Lamont: I want to turn in a white paper that makes you say, "Lamont deserves a raise and a promotion."

Fred: OK. And what do you need in order to finish the white paper?

Lamont: I need the data that Aisha's been compiling on the link between arsenic levels in municipal water supplies and rates of skin cancer. We know they're related, but

The first attempt to get permission. Fred doesn't blame Lamont, or show any disappointment or frustration. He immediately positions himself as Lamont's ally (chapter 10).

Leading with empathy (chapter 10), while not negotiating on the deliverable (chapter 12).

Fred didn't insist on the conversation. A looming deadline, reinforced by Fred, provided all the natural consequences that Lamont needed to change his mind (chapter 12).

I need numbers and graphs if we're going to get media coverage.

Fred: Got it. So you need that data. Tell me: what's the outcome you want with Aisha specifically? Is this a one-time thing, or do you two have to work together on a regular basis?

Lamont: This is our first time working together, if you can call it that, but I think we'll need to collaborate much more in the coming months, especially as we introduce the new activated alumina filter and sell it to municipal water authorities. Those people make buying decisions based on two things: validated data, and public outrage. The white papers and press releases I'm developing are meant to create both. And Aisha is the person who does research, compiles data, and runs the analyses.

Fred: So it sounds like in addition to getting the data for this white paper, another outcome is a strong working relationship with Aisha going forward.

Lamont: Yes, or find someone to replace her.

Fred: Great. So to be more general, you want a great working relationship with someone in R&D who can get you the data you need in a timely fashion. Is that accurate?

Lamont: Yes, absolutely.

Step 3: Opportunity

What's happening now?

Fred: Got it. So tell me, what's been happening with Aisha?

Lamont: Well, she's in the Flagstaff office, so I've never met her. I talked to her on the phone for the first time about two weeks ago, and told her what I was working on, and she said she'd get me a spreadsheet and line graph as soon as she could. I left her alone until Monday, when I emailed, then DM'ed, then called and left three voicemails. And I've heard nothing back.

Fred: Tell me about that first phone call.

Lamont: I told her what I wanted and she said she'd get it for me.

Fred: The part where you and she agreed on what would

Is there a longer-term outcome than just getting the white paper done? (chapter 14).

Don't get hung up on Aisha specifically. The meaningful outcome is a good working relationship is with someone in Research and Development (R&D) (chapter 17).

Asking for specifics, to separate data from interpretation (chapter 19).

happen next — can you take me there? What did you and she say, exactly? If I were listening in, what would I have heard?

Lamont: I don't remember word for word.

Fred: Roughly, then.

Lamont: She said, "I'll have it for you by next week," and I thanked her.

Fred: OK. And you've already told me what you've tried since then to get the report from her. Can I share an observation with you?

Lamont: Sure.

Fred: Technically, this is still "next week." If Aisha gets you the report by Friday at 4:59pm, she will have fulfilled her part of the agreement.

Lamont: Yeah, but she knew that's not what I meant.

Fred: How do you know that?

Lamont: Well, I guess I don't. I just figured that I explained that this is a top priority for us, and...

Fred: Yes?

Lamont: I guess I didn't ask for a specific deadline.

Fred: What stopped you?

Lamont: Well, it seemed rude, to be honest. I mean, she's basically doing me a favor — she doesn't work for me, and I'm not a senior person. So I didn't want to be like, "When exactly are you going to do this thing for me?"

Fred: Gotcha. Let me ask you another question. You mentioned a raise and a promotion earlier. I know you were kidding — sort of. But seriously, what are your near- and medium-term career goals?

Lamont: Well, I'm happy being a content creator right now, but I'd love to manage a team in the near future. I have a lot of ideas about how operations and communications can work together more effectively, based on what I've experienced. Reporters from industrial trade magazines would much rather interview someone like Aisha than someone like me. They prefer quoting PhDs with impressive publishing histories, even though they need me to translate what they're saying into words that their readers can understand. I'd love to organize cross-

Recalling facts undermines Lamont's interpretation that he was clear and Aisha was at fault (chapter 19).

Fred is looking for the hidden opportunity here, by asking Lamont about his larger goals. It's easy for people to lose sight of those goals when in the throes of a problem, which is why the question can be helpful in identifying bigger opportunities than just solving the immediate problem.

function working sessions to help the folks in comms brush up on their science, and the researchers become better spokespeople for the company.

Finding the Opportunity in the Problem

Fred: That's great. I like the way you're thinking, and I can definitely see the value in what you want to do. Let me ask you this: given that desire, is there a way to use this situation with Aisha and the white paper to take steps to develop yourself as a manager and leader?

Lamont: What do you mean?

Fred: Let me ask you something. Do you have a clear sense of my expectations of you? Like with this white paper, for example?

Lamont: Yes, very clear. It's due on Friday, and it's my responsibility to get it to you no matter what Aisha does or doesn't do.

Fred: That's right. Because I have to answer to the CEO. And in my position, it's unacceptable for me to tell her I don't have the white paper because Lamont didn't get it done on time. At my level, that would be an unacceptable excuse.

Lamont: And you're saying that it's an unacceptable excuse at my level as well?

Fred: I'm not necessarily saying that. But using that logic to explain your lack of deliverables works only at a very junior level. In fact, people who do that tend to stay at junior levels. What I'm looking for when I promote is the exact opposite attitude: I'll get it done no matter what, and I'll take full responsibility for its quality.

Lamont: I see what you're saying.

Fred: Tell me.

Lamont: If I want to get promoted and have more influence and responsibility, I have to start taking more responsibility. But what does that look like right now, when I also have to finish that white paper by Friday no matter what?

Lamont's question provides an opening for Fred to share advice (chapter 21).

Fred has offered Lamont an opportunity to use this problem to get what he ultimately wants: a promotion and more responsibility and influence (chapter 21).

Step 4: Plan

Identify Options

Fred: Great question. Given that opportunity — to develop as a manager — what are some things you could try?

Inviting options (chapter 24).

Lamont: Well, if I could go back in time, I'd get a specific commitment from Aisha about when. In fact, I'd ask her to get me the data by last Friday, so I'd be able to draft the key paragraphs. The visuals could wait until today.

Fred: Great. So going forward, what can you try next time?

Lamont: I can do what you do: end every discussion about deliverables with a clear deadline. What's your litmus test for whether the deadline is specific enough?

Fred: My rule is, we both know exactly when it would be late.

Lamont: OK.

Fred: So what can you try now?

Returning to the issue at hand, not getting distracted (chapter 13).

Lamont: Well, I could go to her boss and say that she isn't doing her job.

Fred: OK, what else?

Lamont: You could call her boss — it would be even more effective coming from you.

Fred: OK, let's put that on the list as well. What else?

Fred's thinking, "There's absolutely no way I'm going to do that." But when we're identifying options, we don't pass judgment on any idea, no matter how much we disapprove. So he doesn't agree or argue; he simply says, "Let's put that on the list." (chapter 24)

Lamont: I have a friend, Grady, who was transferred to her department in Flagstaff last month. He might be able to help me get the data.

Fred: Great. What else?

Lamont: I suppose I could try to dig up the data myself. There's a bit of a risk that I might not understand it fully, and write something that's not correct, which would be a disaster.

Fred: How might you mitigate that risk?

Lamont: I could ask Grady to review it for accuracy.

Fred: Great. What else could you do?

Lamont: Maybe Grady can tell me if anything's going on with Aisha. And get her to return my calls so I can talk to

her directly.

Fred: Great. Anything else?

Lamont: That's all I can think of.

Choose

Fred: So given the opportunity, and the options you have in front of you, what would you like to do that would give you the greatest probability of success?

Lamont: Let me reach out to Grady. If he can't help me right away, I'll get the data myself and do the best I can. If I get stuck, can I reach out to you for help with the write-up?

Fred: Sure. I'll do you one better. My assistant Esther has an undergrad degree in toxicology and a masters in public health. I'll send her a note to expect your call.

Lamont: Awesome, thanks! That will help with the white paper, for sure, but I'm also thinking about how I can work on being a better manager. I don't know what's going on with Aisha, but I need to talk to her. To find out what's going on, and to agree on how we're going to work together in future.

Fred: Let's assume you get her on the phone this afternoon. How do you begin that conversation?

Lamont: Well, I have to be more assertive. "Aisha, I need your report as soon as possible. And I need you to return my calls and not ghost me if there's a problem."

Fred: What's your goal in that conversation?

Lamont: To get the report, and to establish our working relationship going forward.

Fred: I see a risk there, that you'll alienate Aisha by making demands. She doesn't report to you. What are your thoughts?

Lamont: Yeah, I can see that. But then how do I get assertive if I can't assert?

Fred: When people ask you to help them, how do you decide who to help in terms of your priorities? When you don't work directly for them?

Lamont: Honestly, I do things for people I like.

There are enough options on the table to move to the "choose" stage (chapter 25).

When the opportunity is developmental, I usually recommend asking what would be most exciting. In this scenario, given the urgency of the deadline and what Fred wants to communicate about the high stakes of failure, having the highest probability of success is a better criterion (chapter 25).

Invitation to rehearse the difficult conversation (chapter 25).

Fred disagrees with Lamont's first idea. Rather than shoot it down, Fred asks about Lamont's goal. If it's a good working relationship, he may realize that making demands won't work (chapter 24).

Lamont doesn't get it right away. Fred shares his opinion, and invites Lamont to consider it. He's not insisting (chapter 24).

Fred: So my experience has been, the ability to influence others positively when you don't have control is a valuable skill as you move up the organization. You're accountable to me, and yet you don't have control over all the resources you need. You can't commandeer Aisha's time, for example.

Lamont: So I need to build a relationship with Aisha. How do I do that while getting this work done?

Fred: Do you know why Aisha hasn't delivered yet?

Lamont: No, not at all.

Fred: Are you curious?

Lamont: I guess I haven't been. I just assumed she was blowing me off.

Fred: That may be true. But as you said, you don't really know. I have a suggestion. Would you like to hear it?

Lamont: Yes.

Fred: When you get on the phone with Aisha, try to help her instead of focusing on how you need her to help you. Find out what's going on. Assume that she's juggling priorities — who around this place isn't? — and get curious about what she's working on. Maybe you can help her with something. But don't do it instrumentally. Really become her ally. That's how you get people to help you when you need something. And that's how you grow your influence and get promoted.

Lamont: OK. And once we have a good working relationship, it'll be easier and more comfortable for us to agree on deadlines. It won't feel like she's an order taker. We'll be working on it together.

Commit

Fred: Great. So what are you going to do by when, exactly?

Lamont: I'll text Grady as soon as we finish up here. If he can put me in touch with Aisha, I'll have that conversation with her, finding out what her priorities are, seeing if I can help, and communicating what I'd like from her. I'll take responsibility for leaving all those messages — I should have been clearer about my needs upfront. If she isn't available, I'll see if Grady can get those figures to me. If he's not able, I'll find them myself and ask Esther to help me interpret them for the document. I'll have the white

Training Lamont to think like a scientist (chapter 18).

Not dismissing or arguing with Lamont's interpretation (chapter 13).

Asking permission before offering advice (chapter 24).

Asking for a specific commitment (chapter 26). Also, modeling the kind of management Lamont needs to learn.

paper in your inbox by 3pm this Friday.

Fred: Great. Remember, asking for help is also part of taking ownership over outcomes. Reach out to me any time.

Lamont: Got it. Thanks, boss.

In this case, it's a judgment call to ask about 1-10 confidence. Fred opts not to, acting as if implementation is a foregone conclusion. If things don't work out, that's the next conversation between manager and employee (chapter 26).