

MBA LAB

Instructor & Classroom Resource Pack

Facilitator guides, discussion questions, and an evaluation rubric for teaching compassionate accountability through MBA Lab's six leadership scenarios

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How to use this pack

This pack supports six leadership scenarios published at mbalab.net/leadership, each built around the same underlying framework: pairing genuine care with real accountability, and diagnosing whether a problem is really about one person's effort or about the system around them. Each scenario guide below is designed to run as a standalone 45-60 minute session, or to be combined into a longer course module.

Every guide follows the same structure: a scenario summary, learning objectives, suggested timing, discussion questions sequenced from observation to application, common pitfalls to watch for in student responses, and a debrief framework. A shared evaluation rubric and a framework primer are included at the end for instructors who want a consistent grading approach across sessions.

Before running any session: have students read the relevant scenario article at mbalab.net/leadership beforehand, or read it aloud as a group at the start of class. The discussion questions assume the group has already encountered the "conventional," "poorly executed people-first," and "high-care/high-accountability" responses laid out in the article.

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Framework primer

Every scenario in this pack applies the same underlying model. Introduce this before the first session; refer back to it in every debrief.

Care and accountability, paired

	Low accountability	High accountability
High care	<i>Protective indulgence</i> - standards quietly erode to avoid discomfort	<i>Compassionate accountability</i> - standards and support coexist (the target)
Low care	<i>Neglect</i> - problems drift until they become a crisis	<i>Coercive pressure</i> - compliance without candor, information, or trust

The eight-step protocol

1. **Regulate before entering.** Notice anger, anxiety, or the urge to rescue.
2. **Separate facts from interpretations.** Observable behavior vs. story.
3. **State the standard and the impact.** Direct, not vague.
4. **Invite the other person's perspective.** Genuinely, before concluding.
5. **Diagnose the system.** Capability, clarity, capacity, motivation - not just effort.
6. **Agree support and commitments.** Specific, checkable.
7. **Specify review and consequences.** Real checkpoints.
8. **Follow through and learn.** Reinforce, repair, or escalate.

This is MBA Lab's own operationalization, informed by public research - not a proprietary or officially published instrument of any institution.

Scenario 1: Difficult Feedback to a Valued Employee

SCENARIO SUMMARY

A previously strong performer's last three deliverables have each needed significant rework. The manager has to raise a real pattern without treating a generally excellent employee as if they've suddenly become unreliable.

Suggested timing: 45 minutes | **Group size:** works individually, in pairs, or full class

Learning objectives

- Distinguish a specific, addressable pattern from a character judgment
- Practice diagnosing capability, capacity, clarity, and motivation before assuming low effort
- Recognize how a manager's own disappointment can distort a feedback conversation

Discussion questions

1. What specifically changed between how this employee performed a year ago and now? What do we actually know, versus assume?
2. Why does the "conventional response" (batching everything into the formal review) usually make the conversation harder, not easier?
3. The "poor people-first response" avoids naming the pattern directly. What is it protecting - the employee, or the manager's own discomfort?
4. Role-play the "ask, then listen" step. What are three genuinely different explanations for the same pattern, and how would the next step differ for each?
5. What would a "checkable" commitment look like here, versus a vague one?
6. Where is the line between reasonable support and unequal treatment that other team members would notice?

Common pitfalls to watch for

Students often jump straight to a solution ("just tell them to be more careful") without doing the diagnosis step. Watch for responses that treat "give feedback" as the whole task, rather than "diagnose, then agree on a specific fix." Also watch for students assuming the cause is motivation by default - push them to generate at least two non-motivation explanations first.

Debrief framework

Close by mapping the group's proposed response onto the care/accountability matrix: did it name the standard clearly (accountability) while genuinely making room for context (care)? Which real responses

from the discussion would have landed in "protective indulgence" or "coercive pressure" instead?

Scenario 2: Conflict Between Two High-Performing Team Members

SCENARIO SUMMARY

Two individually excellent team members can't collaborate - every joint decision becomes a standoff, and the rest of the team has started routing around both of them.

Suggested timing: 45-60 minutes | **Group size:** small groups of 3-4 work well

Learning objectives

- Separate a relationship-framed conflict from its underlying structural cause
- Practice identifying unclear decision rights as a root cause of recurring conflict
- Recognize status bias and the leader's own urge to pick a side prematurely

Discussion questions

1. Why does "tell them to work it out" usually fail to resolve a conflict like this one?
2. What questions would you ask each person separately, before bringing them together?
3. What decision, specifically, is unresolved between these two people? Who should own it, and why?
4. How would you know if this is really a personality conflict versus a structural one?
5. What would "addressing a high-performer exception" look like here, concretely?

Common pitfalls to watch for

Groups often propose a single joint meeting as the entire solution, skipping the separate fact-finding step. Watch for a rush to "make them get along" rather than resolving the actual decision-rights question underneath the friction.

Debrief framework

Ask the group to name the specific decision right that, if clarified, would resolve most of the day-to-day friction - even if the two people never become friends.

Scenario 3: Leading a Restructuring or Layoff

SCENARIO SUMMARY

A division needs a real reduction in force. There is no version of this that isn't a genuine loss for departing employees - the question is what separates an honest process from a merely fast one.

Suggested timing: 60 minutes | **Note:** handle with care - some students may have direct personal experience with layoffs

Learning objectives

- Evaluate a difficult organizational decision for necessity, proportionality, and fair distribution
- Distinguish performed empathy from substantive support
- Consider obligations to both departing and remaining employees

Discussion questions

1. What does it mean to "challenge whether the action is necessary" before executing a decision that's already been made at a higher level?
2. Why can empathetic language make a poorly-run layoff feel worse, not better?
3. What should a manager be able to tell their team honestly on the day of an announcement, even without full information?
4. What obligations exist to remaining employees that are easy to overlook in the planning process?
5. What structural or strategic choices might have created the need for this decision - and who should be asking that question?

Instructor note

This topic can be personal for some students. Consider a content note before starting, and give students the option to observe rather than actively role-play the manager's position.

Debrief framework

Close on the tension the article names directly: no compassionate process removes the real harm of job loss. Ask what the honest goal of a good process actually is, if not eliminating that harm.

Scenario 4: Responding to Employee Burnout

SCENARIO SUMMARY

A reliable employee has become withdrawn and started missing small deadlines. The question is whether to treat this as a personal resilience problem or a workload and system problem.

Suggested timing: 45 minutes

Learning objectives

- Practice diagnosing burnout as a system/capacity issue before an individual one
- Identify concrete tradeoffs (stop, defer, automate, staff, reduce scope) rather than vague solutions
- Recognize the boundary between a manager's role and a need for professional support

Discussion questions

1. Why does "offer wellness resources" often fail to address the actual cause of burnout?
2. What's the difference between quietly lightening one person's load and actually fixing the system?
3. Generate three concrete tradeoffs a manager could make here, each with a real cost.
4. When does a burnout conversation move beyond what a manager should try to handle alone?

Common pitfalls to watch for

Students often propose solutions that help one person without addressing team-level workload - watch for this and push toward system-level fixes.

Debrief framework

Ask the group to name who owns the capacity decision that led to this point - and what "accountability" looks like when it's the system, not the employee, that needs to change.

Scenario 5: Resistance to a Major AI Implementation

SCENARIO SUMMARY

An AI tool rollout is stalling. Some resistance is open skepticism; more of it is quiet non-adoption. The question is what's actually driving it.

Suggested timing: 45-60 minutes

Learning objectives

- Segment resistance into distinct causes rather than treating it as one problem
- Practice building in real guardrails (oversight, escalation, harm-reporting) rather than pure adoption-pushing
- Recognize technology-enthusiasm bias in leadership

Discussion questions

1. List every plausible reason someone on this team might be resisting the tool. How many are really "inertia"?
2. What's the difference between a listening session that changes the plan and one that doesn't?
3. What guardrails would you put in place before scaling this rollout further?
4. What would it look like to be honest about roles that may change, without overpromising or underpromising?

Debrief framework

Close by asking which specific resistance "segments" from the discussion have a legitimate point the rollout plan hasn't yet addressed.

Scenario 6: Leading Through a Crisis With Incomplete Information

SCENARIO SUMMARY

A system outage has an unknown scope. Leadership must say something now, while the actual picture is still forming.

Suggested timing: 45-60 minutes | **Format:** works well as a timed, high-pressure simulation

Learning objectives

- Practice separating immediate containment from longer diagnostic work
- Draft honest "known / unknown / being tested" communication under time pressure
- Understand when directive action is appropriate versus when it becomes over-control

Discussion questions

1. Draft a two-sentence internal update using only what's genuinely known at this point. What's hardest about keeping it honest?
2. Why can early false confidence cost more credibility later than early honesty about uncertainty?
3. What decision rights need to be clear in the first ten minutes of a crisis like this?
4. What's the risk of over-consulting in a moment like this? What's the risk of under-consulting?

Debrief framework

Ask students to identify one moment in their draft response where they were tempted to sound more certain than the facts supported - and what they'd say instead.

Evaluation Rubric

A general-purpose rubric for evaluating a student's written or verbal response to any of the six scenarios. Adapt point values to your own grading scale.

Dimension	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
Facts vs. interpretation	Blends observed facts with assumptions without noticing	Separates facts from interpretation when prompted	Separates them unprompted and names what remains genuinely uncertain
System diagnosis	Defaults to an individual-effort explanation	Considers at least one system-level cause	Systematically checks capability, clarity, capacity, and motivation before concluding
Care and dignity	Response is purely procedural or purely emotional	Balances standard-setting with genuine listening	Response protects dignity while keeping the standard fully visible
Accountability and follow-through	No concrete commitment or review point proposed	Proposes a commitment, though vague or unchecked	Proposes a specific, checkable commitment with a real review point
Tradeoff awareness	Treats the response as a guaranteed fix	Names at least one real risk or limitation	Names the risk and explains what would change the recommended approach

Sources and Further Reading

This pack draws on MBA Lab's independent research report on transformative leadership, available in full at mbalab.net/leadership/transformative-leadership-report, including a complete, graded bibliography of more than 60 peer-reviewed and primary sources at mbalab.net/leadership/transformative-leadership-research-sources.

The six scenario articles this pack is built from are published individually at mbalab.net/leadership, each with additional detail on the mindfulness, care, and accountability lenses applied to that specific situation.

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