

OPEN DRAWBRIDGE QUESTIONS

A quick reference for leaders to lower defenses, surface what matters, and move forward together.

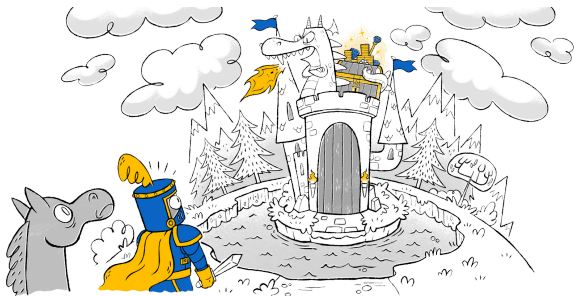
WHY EMOTIONS MATTER

Emotions—the fire in our fire-breathing dragon metaphor—aren't the enemy, and they can't be kept out of work. They give us vital information about what matters most.

Emotions ≠ feelings.

Emotions are automatic, physiological responses to changes in our environment. They signal that something we care deeply about—our safety, autonomy, credibility, or sense of worth—feels at risk.

Feelings are the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of those responses. When feelings go unprocessed, they can turn into drama—and drama is the real threat to performance, progress, and trust.



WHEN SOMEONE'S EMOTIONAL: FIND THE TREASURE

When someone shows a strong emotional reaction—anger, frustration, withdrawal—it's because something they care about feels under threat.

Fire-breathing dragon = The visible reaction (the feeling)
Treasure = What they care about (autonomy, stability, belonging, credibility, success, etc.)

Instead of building a wall of facts, your move is to convince them to lower the drawbridge and lead you to their treasure.

Once you understand what's at stake for them, you can work together to protect what matters and move forward productively.

ORIENT YOURSELF

Get curious about the person's perspective, context, and current frame of mind.

Open-ended, curious, non-defensive, non-judgmental questions:

Tip: Replace "Why?" with "What"/"How"

- What feels most important to you about this?
- What am I not paying enough attention to?
- What is at stake here?
- What are we missing?
- What is this about for you?
- What is your thought process?
- What is at play that I'm not seeing?



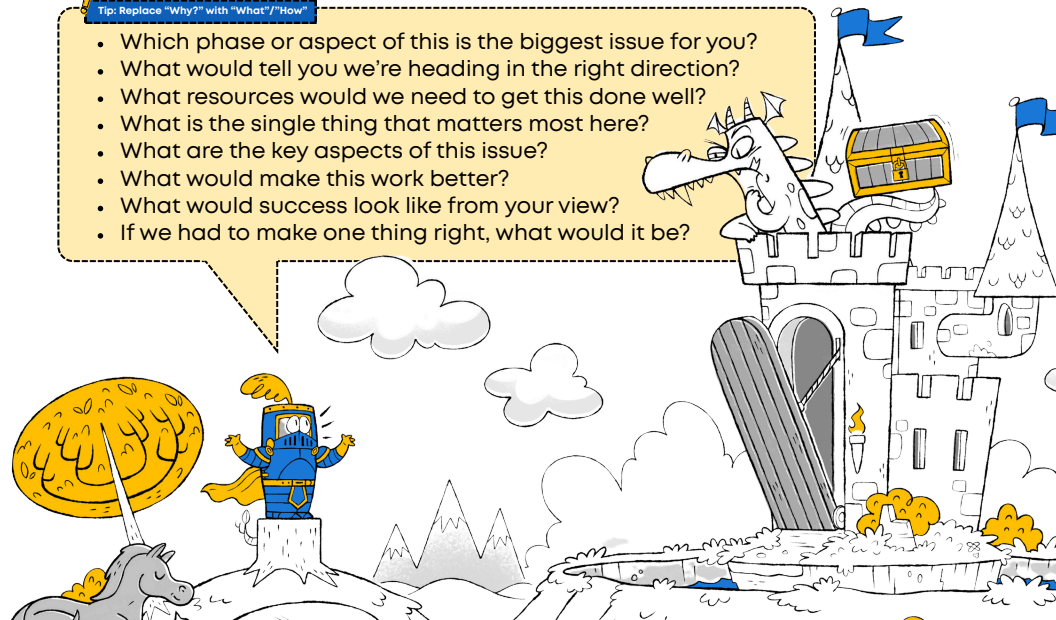
SPOT THE KEY LANDMARKS

Start identifying the specifics that will move you toward progress.

Open-ended, curious, non-defensive, non-judgmental questions:

Tip: Replace "Why?" with "What"/"How"

- Which phase or aspect of this is the biggest issue for you?
- What would tell you we're heading in the right direction?
- What resources would we need to get this done well?
- What is the single thing that matters most here?
- What are the key aspects of this issue?
- What would make this work better?
- What would success look like from your view?
- If we had to make one thing right, what would it be?



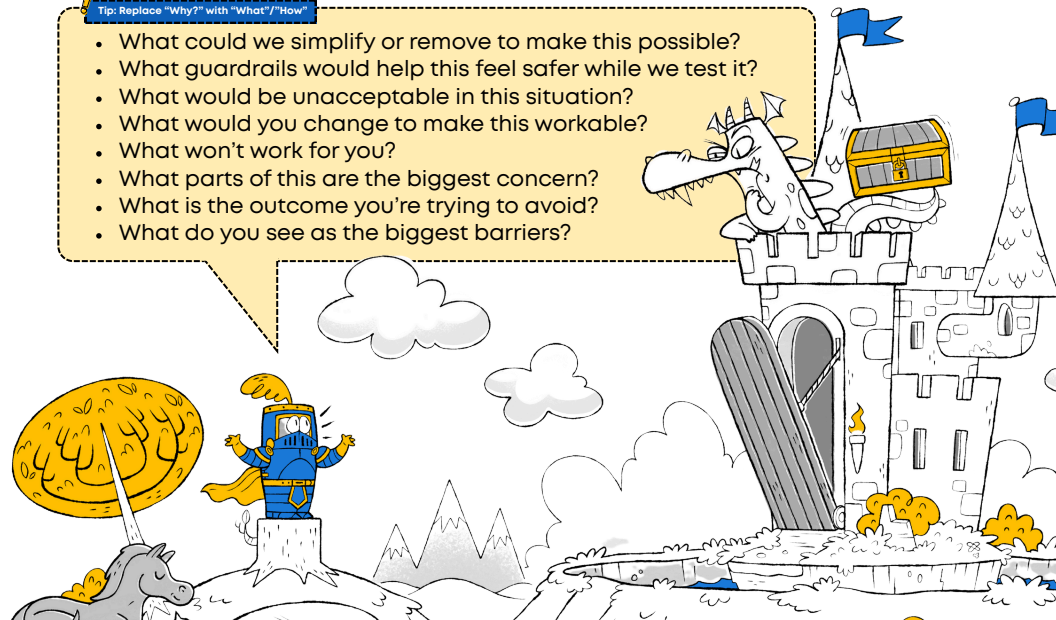
REMOVE THE BARRIERS

Surface what's blocking progress or making the situation feel unworkable.

Open-ended, curious, non-defensive, non-judgmental questions:

Tip: Replace "Why?" with "What"/"How"

- What could we simplify or remove to make this possible?
- What guardrails would help this feel safer while we test it?
- What would be unacceptable in this situation?
- What would you change to make this workable?
- What won't work for you?
- What parts of this are the biggest concern?
- What is the outcome you're trying to avoid?
- What do you see as the biggest barriers?



CHOOSE THE PATH FORWARD

Shift toward co-creating the most constructive next step.

Open-ended, curious, non-defensive, non-judgmental questions:

Tip: Replace "Why?" with "What?"/"How?"

- What additional support would set this up for success?
- What would help make you feel ready to move forward?
- What has to happen for us to move to the next step?
- What is one small step we can take right now?
- What would "good enough for now" look like?
- What do we still need to solve for?
- How can we move forward from here?
- How will we know we're back on track?

