



When Someone on Your Team Is Struggling

You've noticed something is off with someone on your team. How to start the conversation with empathy, and when to defer to the experts.

You've noticed something. The work is slipping, or they've gone quiet, or something in a meeting made your stomach drop a little. Most leaders respond in one of two unhelpful ways: say nothing (and hope it passes) or say too much (and turn into an amateur counselor). There's a third option, and it fits in one conversation.

Say something — the opener matters less than you think

The goal is to open a door, not diagnose. Name what you've observed, without interpretation:

"I've noticed you've seemed quieter in meetings the last couple weeks. I wanted to check in — how are you doing?"

"This isn't about performance — I just want to make sure you're okay. Anything I can do?"

Observation, then question, then **silence**. The silence is the hard part. Let them fill it.

What not to say

Skip this	Because
"I know exactly how you feel."	You don't, and it moves the spotlight to you.
"Everything happens for a reason."	Toxic positivity. It asks them to feel better so <i>you</i> can feel better.
"Have you tried [yoga / gratitude / exercise]?"	Unsolicited fixes signal the sharing portion is over.
"At least..." (anything)	"At least" is comparison, and comparison is dismissal.
"You should..."	You're there to listen and connect them to help — not to prescribe.

What actually helps

- **Listen more than you talk.** A useful ratio: they talk 80%, you talk 20%.
- **Reflect, don't solve:** "That sounds like a lot to carry" beats any advice you have.
- **Ask what would help:** "What would make this week more manageable?" They often know; nobody's asked.
- **Offer something concrete and small:** a deadline shifted, a meeting covered, a workload conversation. Small and real beats big and vague.
- **Follow up.** The second conversation — "how are things since we talked?" — is where trust gets built.
- **Go first sometimes.** Sharing when you're struggling gives the team permission to speak up early.

When to defer to the experts

You are responsible for noticing, opening the door, adjusting what's in your control, and connecting people to real support. You are **not** responsible for counseling, diagnosing, or fixing someone's life — and trying to is bad for both of you.

- **Make the handoff normal:** "We have an EAP — it's confidential and free, and good people use it. Want me to send you the link?"
- **Know your resources before you need them:** EAP contact, HR partner, and any peer-support programs your organization offers.
- **If someone mentions harming themselves,** take it seriously every time. In the U.S., the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is available by call or text, 24/7. Stay with the person, help them connect, and loop in HR — this is never a keep-it-to-yourself situation.

One more thing: peers count too

Everything above works sideways as well as down. Checking on a fellow manager who's carrying too much may matter more — because nobody checks on the people who look like they have it handled.

Want this as a session for your team or conference? This guide pairs with "Coaching & Difficult Conversations" — the conversations managers avoid, why avoiding them costs you your best people, and how to have them without a script that sounds like HR wrote it. heatherlambert.speaker@gmail.com · 615.434.5180