

The Pushback Response Card

When they push back, you have three sentences. Use them.

When they push back, do not relitigate, do not negotiate, do not fill silence. You have one sentence for each reaction. Memorize them. Use them verbatim.

“When they push back, your job is not to win. Your job is to keep the conversation in a place where the work can get done.”

— DR. LAURA SUTTIN

01 DENIAL

WHEN YOU HEAR

“That’s not what happened.”

“You’re misreading it.”

WHAT’S HAPPENING

They’re disputing your observation. You’re at the edge of a relitigation. If you debate facts, the conversation is over.

YOUR SENTENCE

“I hear you. Here’s what I observed. I still need us to align on what we do going forward.”

THE MOVE

Validate the perception. Restate the observation, not the interpretation. Move the conversation forward.

02 DEFLECTION

WHEN YOU HEAR

“Dr. M is also late sometimes.”

“What about [other person, other issue]?”

“You’re just saying that because you got promoted.”

WHAT’S HAPPENING

They’re moving the spotlight. The deflection may be valid, but it is not this conversation.

YOUR SENTENCE

“That’s a fair conversation for us to have separately, and I want to. But it’s a different conversation than the one we’re having right now. Right now I need us to land on [the original topic].”

THE MOVE

Name the deflection as a legitimate separate conversation. Redirect to the topic.

03 EMOTIONAL FLOODING

WHEN YOU SEE

Tears. Anger. Complete shutdown.

WHAT’S HAPPENING

Their nervous system is now offline. Reasoning isn’t available to them. This is where clinical training actually helps you. You’ve done this in family meetings.

YOUR SENTENCE

“I’m here. We don’t have to finish this today if you need a minute. Or we can keep going. What works for you?”

THE MOVE

Be present. Do not rescue. Do not fill the silence with apologies. Hand a tissue if needed. Let them choose the pace.

BOUNDARY SENTENCE (ONLY IF THEY REDIRECT AWAY FROM THE REQUEST)

“This isn’t a debate. I’m not asking your permission for the request. I’m asking how I can support you in meeting it. Let’s go back to that.”

1 Hold the line on your observation. Negotiate the path forward.

The observed behavior is not up for debate. The request is collaborative: how they meet it, what support they need, what gets in the way.

2 Silence is not your enemy.

Most clinician leaders fill the silence with backtracking. Don’t. Three seconds of silence after their pushback is not awkward. It is the conversation working.