Coach's inquiry guide

Understanding conflict avoidance • Explore influences, check context, choose a response.

PAUSER helps explore a specific moment of holding back. Its six lenses are distinct but connected; they are neither exhaustive nor independently validated. Use the person's language before introducing categories.

1 Describe the moment

What did you want to say? What happened? What influenced your decision to stay quiet? Listen before showing the six lenses.

2 Explore the influences

Offer the lenses with permission: "Would any of these help describe it?" Explore those that fit; allow several, none, or another explanation. Do not total or score responses.

3 Check the context

Explore expected impact, available capacity, responsibility, and anything missing. Consider safety throughout, including risks unrelated to hierarchy.

4 Consider the choice

What did silence protect, and what did it cost? What might speaking risk or enable? Separate observed events from anticipated consequences without dismissing either.

5 Choose and review

Agree a practical next step, support if needed, and a review point. Speaking, preparing, asking, waiting, or letting go can each be reasonable.

Use the accompanying worksheet for reflection. The article provides research context and limitations. Neither resource establishes a diagnostic score, a personality type, or a requirement to confront someone.

Questions that distinguish

Follow the coachee's account; these prompts are optional, not a script.

P — Peace

"I don't want an argument."

Avoiding the tension, disagreement, or disruption of the immediate exchange.

Start here: What immediate friction were you hoping to avoid?

Explore: What did you imagine the conversation would become? What would a manageable exchange look like?

Boundary: Peace concerns the conversation itself. Relationship concerns the continuing connection. Capacity concerns whether you have the energy or emotional resources to engage.

Possible direction: Consider timing, scope, or a clear limit on the discussion.

A — Authority

"Their position makes speaking up risky."

Holding back because of a power difference and the consequences associated with it, including formal seniority and informal influence.

Start here: How did their power or influence affect your choice?

Explore: What consequences did you anticipate? What experiences informed that expectation? What options, if any, would make raising this safer?

Boundary: Authority concerns what someone's position enables them to do. Self-belief concerns your judgment of your own contribution. A power risk may be real even when you feel confident.

Possible direction: Consider a different setting, an appropriate support person, or another channel. Do not assume better wording removes the risk.

Questions that distinguish

Follow the coachee's account; these prompts are optional, not a script.

U — Uncertainty

"I need more clarity before I raise this."

Holding back because relevant information or perspective is missing, or because proceeding without certainty feels difficult.

Start here: What remained unclear, and what did you need to know?

Explore: What specific information would change your next step? What could you ask before reaching a conclusion? How much uncertainty is reasonable in this situation?

Boundary: Uncertainty concerns what remains unknown. Self-belief concerns how much you trust your judgment. Needing information is not evidence of avoidance.

Possible direction: Identify the missing information and how to obtain it, or consider raising a question rather than a conclusion.

S — Self-belief

"Is my view worth raising?"

Doubting the value or validity of your view, or your right to contribute it.

Start here: How were you judging your own perspective?

Explore: What supports your perspective? What challenges it? What standard were you requiring yourself to meet before contributing?

Boundary: Self-belief concerns confidence in your contribution; uncertainty concerns missing knowledge. If "worth raising" means "nothing will change," explore expected impact in the context check.

Possible direction: Separate observations from interpretations and consider what you can reasonably stand behind.

Questions that distinguish

Follow the coachee's account; these prompts are optional, not a script.

E — Expression

"I know what I mean, but not how to say it."

Difficulty expressing a concern, disagreement, request, or boundary clearly and respectfully: the assertive-communication dimension.

Start here: What did you want them to understand?

Explore: Where does finding the words become difficult? What request or boundary needs to be clear? How could you say it in language that feels natural to you?

Boundary: Expression concerns finding and delivering the words. It does not assume a general skills deficit. Someone may know what to say but judge that the situation makes saying it unsafe.

Possible direction: Draft and rehearse a brief opening, then check whether it fits the relationship and context.

R — Relationship

"I don't want to damage our connection."

Protecting ongoing trust, closeness, acceptance, or cooperation with the other person.

Start here: What about the relationship were you protecting?

Explore: What change in the relationship did you fear? What might continued silence mean for that relationship? What would respectful honesty look like here?

Boundary: Relationship concerns what happens between you beyond this exchange. Peace concerns immediate friction. Authority concerns consequences arising from power.

Possible direction: Consider a private conversation, a shared purpose, and language that acknowledges the relationship without hiding the concern.

Keep the map open

Fictional examples test conceptual boundaries; they do not validate the tool.

Peace / Relationship

"We'll be fine tomorrow; I don't want an argument tonight" points toward Peace. "We can talk calmly, but they may stop confiding in me" points toward Relationship.

Uncertainty / Self-belief

"I'm missing the figures" points toward Uncertainty. "I have the figures, but my view probably isn't worth hearing" points toward Self-belief.

Authority / Expression

"I know how to say it, but they could penalise me" points toward Authority. "They welcome disagreement, but I can't explain my concern" points toward Expression.

Missing coverage

"Nothing will change" needs an impact question. "I'm too depleted today" needs a capacity question. "It isn't mine to address" needs a responsibility question. Don't force these into a letter.

A small practice pilot

With participants' consent, try the tool in several conversations. Ask which wording helped, which lenses felt repetitive, what was missing, and whether the reflection supported a useful choice. Record only anonymised feedback with permission. Revise the wording before wider use. Such feedback can improve usability; it is not psychometric validation.

Integrity of use

Do not infer a person's motives from silence alone. Do not treat information needs as excuses, or confidence as a remedy for structural risk. Let people decline a prompt. Keep identifiable client material out of public examples. Research citations and scope limits are in the companion article.

WORKED EXAMPLE / FICTIONAL

The deadline nobody questioned

A possible coaching conversation, not a client case or evidence of effectiveness.

The moment

A director promises Friday delivery. Alex, a project lead, suspects a required review is outstanding but says nothing. Begin with: “What did you want to say, and what influenced your choice?”

Explore the influences

Alex describes missing review information (Uncertainty), concern about the director’s control of assignments (Authority), and difficulty raising the issue respectfully (Expression). Offer these lenses tentatively; let Alex decide what fits. There is no need to find all six.

Check the context

There is time to check the review status before the next client update. Delivery coordination is part of Alex’s role. Alex needs a short break first and has seen the director react defensively to public challenges. A private conversation might be preferable, but does not guarantee safety.

Consider the choice

Silence avoided a public disagreement and left the possible scheduling issue unresolved. Explore both. Ask what each realistic option might protect, risk, or enable.

Choose and review

Alex chooses to check the review status that afternoon. If it is incomplete, a possible opening is: “Before we confirm Friday, can we check the review status? What am I missing?” If the concern is resolved, there may be nothing to challenge. If risk remains unacceptable, explore support or another route. Review before the next client update.

What the example shows

Waiting to obtain specific information can be a purposeful choice. Better wording cannot remove every power risk. The outcome is an informed decision, not a requirement to speak.

Explore recurring influences

Use worksheet page 4 after exploring individual situations. No totals or personality labels.

Compare three situations

Include different people or settings and one moment when the person did speak. Ask for their own explanation before offering the lenses.

Ask what repeats and what changes

Which influences recur? Which disappear with a trusted colleague, more information, more time, or different stakes? What helped when speaking felt possible? What conditions could reasonably be recreated?

Clarify “worth raising”

“My view may not be valid” concerns Self-belief. “My view is valid, but nothing will change” concerns expected impact. Ask which meaning the person intends rather than coding the phrase automatically.

Keep interpretation open

Difficulty finding words with a senior colleague but not with a peer invites exploration of what the power difference changes. It does not establish a general communication deficit. PAUSER cannot determine whether a pattern arises from personality, experience, circumstances, or their interaction.

Choose a modest experiment

Agree a suitable next step, support if needed, and a review point. This can be asking a factual question, rehearsing an opening, or deliberately waiting for information. Let the person choose and decline.

Attribution and scope

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