Coaching Conversation: Victim → Agency

Context: Employee has been expressing frustration, blaming others/circumstances.

Manager:
Hey, I wanted to check in about what you shared earlier. It sounds like things have been frustrating lately. Can you walk me through what's been going on from your perspective?

Employee:
Yeah, it just feels like nothing is in my control. Other teams don't respond, priorities keep changing... I can't really get anything done.

Step 1: Acknowledge without reinforcing victimhood

Manager:
That does sound frustrating—especially when you're trying to move things forward and feel blocked.

(Pause—let them feel heard, but don't agree that they're powerless.)

Step 2: Surface the pattern gently

Manager:
I'm noticing something I want to explore with you. A lot of what you're describing are things outside your control—other teams, shifting priorities. How accurate is my understanding of where most of your attention has been? (If there is hesitation or they add more specifics, accommodate using open-ended questions)

Employee:
Yeah... because that's what's causing the problem.

Step 3: Introduce agency (without blame)

Manager:
That makes sense. At the same time, when everything sits outside our control, it can leave us stuck.

Before we continue, what are you committed to accomplishing in this situation?

Silence here is critical—wait until there is some positive outcome to which they are committed.

If they are unable to declare one, postpone the conversation until they have identified one and ask to reschedule the meeting.

I'm curious—if we zoom in just a bit, what parts of this situation *are* within your influence, even if they're small?

Or, what options are possible?

(Let them think. Silence is useful here.)

Employee:
I mean... I guess I could follow up more? Or escalate earlier?

Step 4: Reinforce agency thinking

Manager:
That's a good start. You just named two things already: follow-ups and escalation. What else might be in your control—how you communicate, how you prioritize, how you set expectations?

Employee:
Yeah... I could probably be clearer upfront about timelines instead of assuming people know.

Step 5: Shift identity from reactive → proactive

Manager:
That's an important shift. The goal isn't to control everything—it's to operate from *choice* where you can.
If you approached this situation as someone who *owns the outcome*, what would you do differently starting this week?

Employee:
I'd probably set clearer deadlines, check in earlier, and not wait as long before flagging issues.

Step 6: Make it concrete and actionable

Manager:
Great. Let's make that specific so it sticks.
What's one situation coming up where you can apply this?

Employee:
The project with the product team—I've been waiting on them.

Manager:
Perfect. What will you do differently there?

Employee:
I'll send a clear follow-up today with a deadline and let them know I'll escalate if I don't hear back.

Step 7: Build ownership + confidence

Manager:
That's strong. Notice how that shifts things—you're no longer waiting, you're leading the process.
How confident do you feel about doing that?

Employee:
Pretty confident, actually.

Step 8: Close with reinforcement of agency mindset

Manager:
Good. And just to be clear—there will *always* be things outside your control. But high performers focus on what they *can* influence and expand that over time.

Let's check back after you try this. I'm interested to see what changes when you take that approach.

Why this works

- **Validation without collusion:** Acknowledges frustration but doesn't agree they're powerless

- **Attention shift:** Moves focus from external barriers → internal choices
- **Questions over directives:** The employee generates their own agency
- **Small wins:** Builds momentum through at least one actionable change
- **Identity shift:** From “things happen to me” → “I influence outcomes.”