

Help your employees to grow their careers, one conversation at a time.

Career Development Conversations: Overcoming Common Myths

By Beverly Kaye and Julie Winkle Giulioni

Assuming a management role in today's workplace comes with a front-row seat to some of the greatest business challenges of our time. On a daily basis, managers are tasked with the following responsibilities.

Do more with less. This phrase has become cliché, but it permeates life at work. You've likely become a master at finding ways to reduce costs, time, and other resources to levels you once imagined were impossible to reach.

Meet ever-expanding expectations. Every quarter, you're asked to achieve a little (or a lot) more such as generate bigger sales, accumulate a greater number of service interactions, take on more projects, or hit higher scores.

Continuously improve quality. "Good enough" isn't good enough. Given the competition in today's global market, perfection is the standard—until it's met; then you must perform even better.

Deliver the next big thing. Most organizations believe that if they're not moving forward, they're sliding backward. Innovation has enjoyed the spotlight because it represents the

promise of greater success.

No matter how long, hard, or smart you work, you can't do all of this alone. Success depends on effectively accessing the very best that each employee has to offer and enabling the highest possible levels of engagement.

Rethink career development

Study after study confirms that best-in-class managers—those who consistently develop the most capable, flexible, and engaged teams able to drive exceptional business results—share one quality: They make career development a priority.

The problem lies with how we think about career development. For many it's become a complex and convoluted task to be avoided rather than embraced. Too often career development evokes unpleasant images of forms that must be completed and complex processes with

checklists and deadlines to follow. But such administrative tasks are not career development.

Career development is nothing more than helping others to grow—and nothing less. It doesn't occur through meticulous documentation, but rather through the human act of conversation. Careers are developed one conversation at a time, over time.

Whether through a formal individual development planning meeting or an on-the-fly connection, it's the quality of the conversation that matters most to employees—that's how they judge a manager's performance and their own development. It's also how they make the decision to go, stay, or stay and disengage. So if it really is as simple as merely talking to people, then why isn't career development a more prevalent feature in the organizational landscape?

Immobilizing myths

Through the years, managers have created and continue to propagate several myths by sharing oral history and

spinning lore. These myths—that is, reasons or excuses—keep them from conducting the career conversations that their employees want. Which of the following are familiar to you?

Myth 1: There simply is not enough time. No one will argue that time is among the scarcest resources available to managers today. But let's get real: You're having conversations already, and probably all day long. What if you could redirect some of that time and some of those conversations to focus on careers?

Myth 2: If I don't talk about it, they may not think about it, and the status quo will be safe. Why invite problems? Developing people could cause them to leave and upset the balance of your efficient department, right? Wrong. Employees have growth on their minds, whether you address it or not. Withholding these conversations presents a greater danger to the status quo than engaging in them.

Myth 3: Employees need to own their careers; it's not my job. Agreed. Managers don't own the development of their employees' careers; employees do. But that doesn't mean that managers are completely off the hook. You have an essential role to play in supporting others to take responsibility. And that role plays out largely through conversation.

Myth 4: Everyone wants more, bigger, or better promotions, raises, prestige, or power. If you believe this myth, then you perceive your employees as baby birds with their mouths always wide open, begging to be fed. This image must quickly lose its appeal for doting bird parents, much less busy managers. Based on our research, this assumption is patently inaccurate. When asked what they hope will result from a career conversation with their managers, the number one response employees give is: determine ways to use my talents creatively.

Myth 5: Development efforts are best concentrated on high potentials, many of whom already have plans in place.

You can, indeed, see a significant return on the development you invest in your high-potential employees. However, they comprise approximately 10 percent of your population. You probably have

another 10 percent of marginal performers who are on a different kind of plan. But what about the 80 percent of employees in between—the massive middle responsible for doing the bulk of the work? Imagine what even a small investment in their development might yield.

Remobilize through conversation

If you're like most managers, at least a few of these myths ring true and undermine your ability to help others grow. The first step is to recognize this reality. The next step is to remobilize your efforts.

If the work of career development happens within the context of conversation, then the primary tool of the trade is the question. You don't need all of the answers, but you must know the questions.

Thoughtfully conceived and well-timed questions make things happen. They provoke reflection, insight, constructive discomfort, ideas, and action in others. They keep the focus squarely on the employee and reinforce the shift of development ownership from the manager to the direct report. Finally, effective questions demonstrate that you respect and value the other person.

Conversation is an anytime, anywhere strategy that easily can fit within the flow and rhythm of daily work. Simply pick a question, ask it, and wait for a response. Here's a short starter list:

- What's your favorite part of this job?
- How could we better use your talents?
- What else would you like to be doing?
- How can we challenge you?

- What skills would you like to develop?
- What did you learn yesterday?

When it comes to the manager's role in development, talk is the most precious and results-spurring commodity you have to share.

It's all about the conversation

Conversation has the power to deeply touch employees' hearts and minds. You require nothing more than your own words to inspire reflection and commitment, which generate actions that employees own.

What if you could re-imagine your role around helping others to grow? What if you reframed this task in such a way that responsibility rested squarely with the employee? What if your role was more about prompting, guiding, reflecting, exploring ideas, activating enthusiasm, and driving action than actually doing all of the work? That's how best-in-class leaders do it. And so can you. Just start the conversation—and watch your employees grow.

The preceding is adapted from the authors' book, *Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go: Career Conversations Employees Want*.

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