



# Paper

## Effective performance, development and career conversations at work

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**IES Perspectives on HR 2018**

April 2018

**Member Paper 138**

This paper takes a critical look at the widespread exhortation that managers should have more frequent and more effective conversations with employees about their performance, skills and learning, potential and career development. It's all very well to tell managers to have such conversations, but what do effective discussions in these inter-related areas of people management look like and how do you make it easier for managers to conduct more of them?

*'Let us make a special effort to stop communicating with each other, so we can have some conversation.'*

attributed to Mark Twain (Martin, 1979)

HR is certainly telling managers to have more 'conversations' with their staff, and who would argue with that? But the modern workplace seems designed to discourage the essentially human habit of using discussions to find out what's going on, resolve issues, get advice, give encouragement and agree what we need to do. Formal meetings clog up managers' diaries, so that when they do meet with the people who work for them the conversation can feel rushed and superficial. The time in between meetings, when managers could be 'walking the talk', is too often eaten up with emails.

We know from a Work Foundation study led by Penny Tamkin (2010), that leaders who achieve outstanding business results put conversations right at the heart of how they organise their working day. They see conversations as the most effective way of getting things done. They decide who they need to touch base with and what they are seeking to get out of the numerous, often informal, conversations they initiate every day. 'Talk is work' is how one of these leaders put it.

Such conversations are often about work performance, nearly always with the aim of improving the individual's ability to cope with a particular issue, person or situation. This often means finding out what is worrying them. We are anxious when we may not have the skills or experience to execute a task, but we also worry when we feel generally stressed or when a relationship with someone is upsetting us, or when we have problems outside work. Effective leaders do not let worries fester. They also spend a surprising amount of time and effort understanding and supporting the career aspirations and interests of the people working for them and those they mentor, understanding the motivational power of giving personalised career support. Team meetings are conversations too; effective leaders use them more for discussion and for generating ideas than for top-down communication.

## What are effective conversations doing?

There is a strong academic consensus about the ways in which effective performance and development conversations can lead to improved and sustainable organisational performance. Essentially these conversations are activating four main levers, all of which apply to talent and career conversations too:

- **Alignment and goal setting** helps the individual employee understand what is expected of them and aligns their individual work priorities with business needs, often via understanding team or unit priorities. Business alignment is in itself important, but

goal-setting can also be intrinsically motivating, especially if employees have a significant input into setting their own goals or priorities (Locke and Latham, 1990). This applies to development and career goals as well as to performance priorities. SMART objectives, beloved by HR, are not the only way of expressing goals and, indeed, do not work well for either very routine jobs or extremely open-ended ones.

- **Constructive feedback** helps the individual know how they are doing. It gives recognition for work well done, which is so motivating to receive. It also explores what is not going so well, and what the individual can do to improve. Constructive feedback is also central to career or talent conversations. Some people under-estimate the potential they are showing at work relative to their peer group. Others start applying for promotion way too early or before they have thought about what kind of role will suit them.
- **Agreed skill and/or career development actions** may not come out of every conversation, but they are central to improving the employee's business contribution. Effective performance management is essentially developmental in nature (Fletcher, 1995). Development certainly includes skill acquisition but also the application of skills, behaviours and know-how to tasks or situations. In effective talent management, the organisation needs to support the employee in agreed career development actions, often by facilitating access to relevant work experiences (Hirsh and Tyler, 2017). Agreeing actions is often a useful way to conclude a conversation and the next conversation should follow up what was agreed.
- **Motivation through individual attention and exploration.** In addition to the three levers above, effective conversations make the employee feel attended to as an individual. This in itself is motivating, as Likert (1959) explained nearly sixty years ago. More recently, West and Dawson (2012) found that poorly conducted appraisals left NHS staff feeling less engaged than having no appraisal at all. So *how* a conversation is conducted is just as important as what it covers. Whether the conversation is about perceived poor performance or identifying the next step for someone seen as having high potential, it needs to be particular to that employee at that moment and relevant to their situation (Cederblom, 1982). Likewise, we all need to feel that we have been listened to. Good conversations often have to be quite exploratory to get to the bottom of a performance issue, understand a source of anxiety, or explore an individual's career options (Kidd, Hirsh and Jackson, 2004).

*'When somebody comes in to see you, they have to leave your office feeling better than when they walked in. That can actually be quite complicated to achieve, particularly when they come in with problems, or you may even not be happy with their performance. But you have to make them feel that they're in a better place at the end of the discussion than when they arrived.'*

Line manager in Hirsh and Tyler, 2017

Not all of these four levers will be equally relevant to every effective performance or development conversation, but managers who understand them are better placed to facilitate useful conversations, and respond to what the employee is saying and feeling.

## How are effective conversations conducted?

Having established what we are trying to achieve in these conversations, what do managers and employees need to know about how to behave and what to bear in mind to make a conversation effective?

The STAIR graphic below (albeit with initial letters not quite in this order) shows five characteristics of effective performance and development conversations for managers and individual employees to remember. These features emerge from IES' experience in our research, consulting and training for line managers, and also from literature reviews including Bevan (2014), Cappelli and Tavis (2016) and Gifford (2016). Several of these key features are both cognitive (in our heads) and behavioural (what the other person sees and hears). For example, sharing ownership is both a way of thinking (eg aiming for win-win outcomes) and also a way of behaving (eg encouraging the other person to suggest ideas and listening with interest and respect). Several aspects of this model are embodied in coaching, but not all managers know what we mean by asking them to behave as coaches. Also, managers are bringing information and their own observation of the individual to these conversations, which is not always the case in coaching.

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### Features of effective performance and development conversations



Source: Hirsh, 2017

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Starting at the right-hand end of the framework, effective conversations nearly always lead to action. This might be considered obvious in conversations about job performance, but turns out to be the case for effective career conversations too, which typically prompt a range of actions on varying timeframes (Kidd, Hirsh and Jackson, 2004). In order to get to agreement about relevant action, effective conversations bring fresh insights to the employee and the manager (or the other person the employee is talking to). Such insights are more likely if conversations are relevant and timely, with genuinely shared ownership. Two consenting adults are a minimum requirement – not one reluctant manager and a stressed employee or vice versa. Semi-formal conversations, like regular one-to-one meetings, lend themselves to mutual agenda-setting and can be flexible in addressing a range of issues and actions over time.

## Six routes to more effective conversations

If the HR profession is serious about more effective conversations at work, then it needs to concentrate on what helps these happen and get some of its own bad habits out of the way.

### 1. More frequent one-to-one conversations

As we all know, saving everything up for a once a year 'big bang' flouts the principle of continuous improvement and development, which requires timely feedback and support. The very simple idea of regular 'one-to-ones' has helped many organisations embed relatively more frequent work-related conversations between employees and their managers.

One-to-ones are more than a chat, but not so formal that they constrain the conversation or feel intimidating. What we might call 'semi-formal' conversations are often just right for addressing performance and development. If one-to-one air time is planned in, it becomes easier to use different occasions for different purposes. One-to-ones don't have to be face-to-face. Once you know someone, a phone or video call can be very effective. One-to-ones also encourage the giving of feedback as events happen. This can be through a quick word face-to-face or on the phone, via email, or an app. Once we talk a bit more, it just gets easier to raise issues whenever we need to.

Some organisations invent their own terminology for regular one-to-one conversations. We have worked recently with a company using the term 'check-in' for conversations of different kinds. For example, they have a suggested career check-in agenda which is different from a performance check-in. Managers can spread different check-ins across the year with each member of staff. 'Check-ins' sound both quick and focussed, but not too formal. This suits this organisation's busy frontline, shift-working environment.

HR needs to lighten its design of more formal performance and/or development reviews. Some organisations are completely dropping the formal annual performance review. Where the annual review remains, more frequent one-to-ones can make its agenda less complicated and its documentation less time-consuming.

### 2. Don't cram talent management and career development into a formal performance review conversation

It is natural for performance conversations to include identifying action areas for performance improvement and, therefore, skill development needs related to the person's current work. It often takes a follow-up conversation to turn those action areas into specific ways in which the skill need will be addressed and to identify who will help with this.

It is a step further to start talking about an individual's potential and their career development. It is simply not useful to try jamming the whole skill and career development

agenda into the back end of a formal appraisal meeting. Time is running out, both parties are tired and maybe not feeling all that positive. This is not a good moment to say ‘so where do you want to be in five years’ time?’ Showing someone a nine-box talent grid at this point is even worse. Better perhaps to find out if that person does want to talk about their career next steps and then fix this follow-up conversation for another day.

Employees do need the chance to discuss their careers and to get feedback on how their potential is perceived, but they need this conversation when it feels relevant, rather than in April.

### **3. Get the form out the way**

If people think the purpose of a performance and development conversation is to fill in some paperwork to placate HR or senior management, its value evaporates. If you are saying that the conversation matters, try structuring conversations around simple questions, not headings on a form. It does the same job, but feels less like administration and data collection.

Make it a golden rule only to ask people to record information that someone will use, and be clear who will be able to see it. Don’t measure the effectiveness of performance management by how many forms are filled in. Use pulse surveys or your regular employee attitude/engagement survey to find out if employees have had conversations about their performance, development or careers and ask them how useful these conversations have been.

### **4. Harness the power of team discussions**

It can be more efficient and more engaging to set priorities and identify areas for improvement and development at team level. It takes some of the load off one-to-one conversations and also leads to more effective communication and participation within the team. Again, a simple question-based set of prompts for managers can aid team conversations and help connect them with one-to-ones.

### **5. The line manager is not the only person to talk to**

HR has got into the lazy habit of assuming that performance, development and career conversations should be predominantly between the employee and their line manager. However, the line manager is not the only, or necessarily the best, person to give an employee performance feedback and recognition. Hence the recent interest in ‘crowdsourced feedback’ (see box on p7).

Likewise, the manager is not the only person to talk to about development. We know that peers and subject-matter experts may be best placed to deliver on-the-job coaching. Senior leaders can be especially valuable for career conversations and to act as mentors and career sponsors. They are also likely to be involved in talent or succession forums and are often well placed to spot opportunities for lateral moves, projects and so on. HR professionals, especially business partners and those working in learning and



development roles, should have the knowledge and skills to give well-informed and relatively impartial development advice.

HR needs to get its head around identifying and explaining more varied sources of development support and not just pretend that the line manager can do it all.

Gerry Ledford and his colleagues at the Center for Effective Organizations, University of Southern California, have been researching changing practice in the field of performance management (Ledford et al, 2016). In particular they have looked at the effectiveness of combinations of what they call 'cutting-edge practices': ongoing feedback, ratingless reviews and crowdsourced feedback (getting real-time feedback from a wider range of people). These practices do not necessarily replace the old, formal annual performance review: they are often used alongside it. Ongoing feedback through more frequent conversations takes centre stage in organisations adopting newer approaches. However, it is interesting to note that getting feedback from a wider range of people turns out to be important too. Ledford notes that 'the combination of ongoing feedback and crowdsourced feedback is more effective on many outcomes than either ongoing feedback alone or ongoing feedback plus ratingless reviews.'

## 6. Stop calling conversations 'difficult'

Asking managers to have 'difficult conversations' is a bit like asking someone to come with you on a horrible holiday. Why would you do it? Conversations with some people in some circumstances can be difficult, but many discussions about performance and development are interesting and satisfying. There are often no right answers, so these conversations should not feel like a kind of test for the manager. It's not the manager's job to fix everything. It is their job to let in a bit of light and air and attempt some shared problem-solving, not just with the individual employee but with others who can help too. At a more basic level, if managers simply show interest, normal human concern, give thanks and a helping hand when needed, we would be talking less about burn-out, disengagement and other contemporary ills.

*'People are frightened of having a career conversation ... but at the end of the day it's just about having a conversation with another human being.'*

HR Director in Hirsh and Tyler, 2017

## Treat conversations as an aspect of culture change

The kinds of conversation we have been describing here are a gateway to a culture that has a stronger and more continuous focus on improving performance, enhancing skills and helping employees make the most of their potential. So if we think about these conversations as manifestations of organisational culture, we are more likely to remember to do the things that we know reinforce any culture change. These are communication; training; monitoring; rewarding the desired behaviours; assessing relevant capability and attitudes in recruitment and promotion; and modelling by senior executives.

Managers are often trained in performance management, but this tends to focus on the procedure (especially the form to fill in) not the practical skills needed for effective

conversations and how to follow them up with actions. Some managers are now being trained in coaching skills, which is a big step in the right direction, but it is still rare for managers to receive training in how to facilitate an effective career conversation. Individual employees are less likely to be trained than their managers, but we all need the skills to manage our own development and careers.

As mentioned above, monitoring how many appraisal forms or personal development plans are filled in online, does not tell you whether they are doing any good. Better feedback is obtained by including specific questions about this in staff attitude or engagement surveys, or in quick polls. We could also be giving feedback on the frequency and quality of conversations via a phone app or social media.

We know role modelling from senior leaders makes a difference. We should expect them to be mentioning their own one-to-one meetings; the things they are trying to improve, both individually and as part of various teams; their own learning priorities; and who has helped them in their own career. Most importantly, they need to stop promoting people who fail to support and develop other employees.

So, is this the year when you will be able to say that you have had really useful conversations about your own performance, development and career? If you manage other people, will they say that you are a really useful and motivating person to talk to? If you work in HR, try asking employees and managers whether you and your function help them to have more effective performance and development conversations at work. Then act on their replies.

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