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GARY HAMEL
Future-Proofing
 Start making the company more adaptable 3

LOUIS CARTER AND BRIAN FISHEL
Executive Skill Set
 Cultivate nine skills and one master trait. 4

BEVERLY KAYE AND JULIE WINKLE GIULIONI
Career Conversation
 It's today's common sense competency. 5

ERIC C. SINOWAY
Look Up at Your Culture
 See it from the top down and the bottom up 6

KEVIN D. WILDE
Leadership Recipe
 Cook up a top program. . . 7

MICHAEL M. REUTER AND JOHN H. SHANNON
Leadership Think
 Start imagining the unimaginable. 8

KAREN KICHLINE RUEF
Systemic LD
 Apply the LD theory. . . . 9

ROXANA HEWERTSON
What Great Leaders Do
 It's now do or die. 10

SHARON DANIELS
Avoid Fatigue Traps
 Use intrinsic motivation of innovation. 11



Princess in the Tower

In many leadership stories from literature, mythology, history, and biography, the elements are similar—the crumbling tower, the thorns and brambles surrounding it, and the prince or princess trapped inside—but it's up to the leader to create the plot and the decisive points of departure.

CHIP R. BELL
Culture Change
 It's like juggling. 12

STU CRANDELL AND JOY HAZUCHA
Key Personality Traits
 You need them to advance to leadership positions. . . 13

KEVIN CASHMAN
Pause to Lead
 Move from management to leadership excellence. . . . 14

LINDA A. HILL AND KENT LINEBACK
Being the Leader
 Master the imperatives. . 15

MARK BASHRUM
Culture of Execution
 Master five keys to executing strategy. 16

HOWARD M. GUTTMAN
Seven Ways to Fail
 These can derail you. . . . 17

JAMES W. GAUSS
Diverse Leadership
 Make it happen. 17

BUD HANEY
Charismatic Leaders
 Boost your charisma. . . . 18

MARGOT CAIRNES
Leadership Competence
 Know who you are. 19

LIANE DAVEY
Vital Teams
 Build your own. 20

Career Conversation

It's today's common sense competency.



by Beverly Kaye and Julie Winkle Giulioni

LEADERS READ THE HEADLINES. THEY know about the survey data. The linkages between *career development* and productivity gains, expense reduction, quality improvements, innovation, and bottom-line results are obvious.

And yet most organizations are still poor at growing talent. It's time to elevate the *career conversation* to its rightful ranks—give it the respect and title it deserves. Talking with people about their careers is a competency—perhaps the most powerful and under-utilized one at a leader's disposal.

Defining Terms

Let's face it, the term *career development* strikes fear into managers' hearts. What does *career development* mean to you? What's involved? What's your role? Whatever your answer, we'll bet that ours is simpler. You see, many managers are intimidated by or steer clear of career development because they have a mistaken, convoluted, or overwhelming definition of the term.

So, try this definition: *Career development is helping others grow.* *Helping others grow* can take a nearly unlimited number of forms. You might help people prepare for and move to new or expanded roles in obvious and visible ways. But more frequently, growth shows up in small, subtle ways that quietly create greater challenge, interest, and satisfaction in a job.

Too often *career development* evokes images of forms, checklists, and deadlines. And let's be honest—you've got to address those items to support the organization. But administrative details are not career development.

Talk Is Not Cheap

Genuine and meaningful *career development* occurs through conversation. So, shed yourselves of the belief that *talk is cheap* because talk is the most powerful and results-driving tool for helping others grow.

Astute leaders engage in effective career conversations, knowing that *conversation has the power to touch employees' hearts and minds.* You need nothing more than your own words to spark reflection and commitment. From that can spring employee-generated actions.

Genuine *career development* isn't about forms, choreographing new assignments, or orchestrating promotions. It's about having *quality conversations* that facilitate insights and awareness, explore possibilities and opportunities, and inspire responses that drive employee-owned action. Hence, practicing career conversations is now a strategic priority.

Less Is More

And it doesn't have to bite painfully into your limited time. To be effective, you don't need to hold lengthy summits with employees, solving all of the career problems of the world in one big meeting to help others get results. In fact, in many cases less can be more.

When you reframe *career development* in terms of *ongoing conversations*—rather than *procedural checkpoints* or *scheduled activities*—suddenly you have more flexibility and the chance to develop careers organically, when and where authentic opportunities arise.

You don't get more points for the length of the conversation. You get more points for stimulating thinking.

Would you rather sit with a person for two hours and map out a career plan for the year? Or do the same thing in a dozen 10-minute conversations over the year? It's the same *120 minutes* offered up in smaller, bite-size servings.

Increasingly, time-starved managers are opting for shorter, more frequent conversations that can cover the same ground as their heftier cousins (maybe more) but in an iterative and ongoing fashion. The four benefits are compelling: 1) shorter conversations fit better with the cadence of business today; 2) frequent, ongoing dialogue communicates a genuine commitment to the employee and development; 3) iterative conversations allow employees to

layer awareness, insights, and action more naturally; and 4) the ongoing nature of the conversation keeps development alive in everyone's mind (vs. tucking it away for a formal meeting).

The ability to engage in short, targeted, ongoing career conversations makes career development efficient—for you and the employee—because they happen within the workflow where genuine opportunities exist.

In a career conversation, employees should do 90 percent of the talking. If you're talking more than 10 percent, you're taking on too much responsibility for their development and robbing them of ownership for their careers.

If the work of career development happens within the context of conversation, then the primary tool of the trade must be asking quality questions. You don't need to have *all the answers*, but you must be ready with questions.

Closure Is Overrated

You need not have all the answers. And neither do employees. In fact, not having all the answers may actually drive more thought and energy.

According to Russian psychologist Bluma Zeigarnik, *we remember better what is incomplete.* The mind, uncomfortable with what is left unfinished, continues to focus on the question or problem.

What does this science have to do with helping people grow? Many managers shy away from hard questions and conversations where they might not have all the answers. If you're one



I believe in the idea of "Leadership by Design"—the practical notion that any leadership development product or program should have some elements of instructional design. The master of "Leadership by Design" is Julie Winkle Giulioni, designer of innovative training products that deliver bottom-line results. Her new book, coauthored with Bev Kaye, Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go, is an instant classic in the field of employee retention—a field where Bev Kaye has been a rock star for decades.

Ken Shelton, editor/CEO,
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of them, you don't have to do that any longer. Go ahead and courageously ask the challenging questions and even end the conversation with a real tough or thought-provoking one that the employee can contemplate for a while.

Don't feel the pressure to wrap up every conversation with a bow. Closure is overrated. Unfinished business—that's what will cause employees to continue to ponder and will ultimately spark action and feed progress.

If we want leaders to help others grow, let's give this critical responsibility and competency the respect it is due. Let's focus on the skills involved and recommit to the career conversation. **LE**

*Beverly Kaye is co-CEO of Career Systems Intl., speaker, writer, and product developer, beverly.kaye@careersystemsintl.com. Julie Winkle Giulioni is cofounder of DesignArounds, an instructional design firm, julie@juliewinklegiulioni.com. They're coauthors of *Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go*. (Berrett-Koehler).*

ACTION: Engage in career conversations.

L e a d e r s h i p E x c e l l e n c e

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