

How to Make Time for **CAREER CONVERSATIONS**

By Julie Winkle Giulioni and Beverly Kaye

Having talent development conversations cannot be considered an activity. It's a mindset that permeates a manager's approach to work.

Over the course of a career, talent managers may have attended a time-management or priority-setting workshop during which an instructor piles rocks into a vessel and asks participants the typical trick question: Is it full?

Then pebbles are poured in, filling the space between the bigger rocks, and the question is repeated. Finally, sand is added to occupy the small spaces among the pebbles, making the point that setting the big priorities first allows one to then accomplish many other smaller ones.

The same idea must apply to talent development, right?

Wrong.

Today's managers and leaders operate in a pressure-cooker environment, rich with priorities, activities and expectations, but impoverished in time and resources. Their plates are piled high with mission-critical tasks — or the rocks — and short- and long-term goals — the pebbles. The space remaining is occupied with other responsibilities as assigned — the sand.

Sprinkle anything more atop this overflowing plate, and you'll likely see it fall right off. Or worse, it may shift the delicate balance that's been struck, causing the larger and more significant things to go tumbling.





 ON THE WEB

The tenor of a coaching conversation can make all the difference in how employees accept feedback and, as a result, performance management: talentmgt.com/articles/view/4486.

So, how are busy leaders expected to add talent development — or anything, for that matter — to these already full plates? The truth is they can't. And that is a very good thing for talent development.

The frenetic and full environment that is today's workplace offers an opportunity to completely reconceive and rebrand talent development. No longer must it be limited to a task or activity. Instead, talent development can now be something much broader and more pervasive.

For talent development to thrive, it cannot exist as even an extra grain of salt sprinkled atop the overflowing plates of overwhelming responsibilities. It must instead become a spirit that is brought to every activity that leaders engage in, an intention that's infused into every interaction, or the objective that envelops every relationship.

In essence, talent development must cease to exist as a separate and distinct activity and become a driving force that pervades everything else leaders do. It also must be baked right into the routine work rather than layered on top. And as lofty and grand as this goal may sound, the way to make it happen is simple.

Effective leaders who have discovered the power of this more ephemeral approach come to talent development with a different mindset — one that's based upon the belief that dialogue offers a powerful springboard for development, that transparency can drive tremendous learning and that learning is everywhere.

Development Via Dialogue

One of the most pervasive features of today's business landscape is conversation. Through conversation, deals are made, innovations are identified, savings are found and development happens.

Effective leaders allow development to find a home in all of the dialogue in which they engage. They understand the power of these small moments with others and leverage each to its fullest extent, taking advantage of seemingly insignificant moments and infusing them with the opportunity for greater awareness, reflection, insight and potential action. Examples include:

- A passing comment about a tough customer is a chance to talk briefly about how the customer base is changing, what customers expect today, how that may change in the future and the implications for the organization and individual.
- A project review is an opportunity to explore strengths, skills and opportunities for growth.
- A mistake is the perfect excuse to talk about lessons learned; how they can be applied in different contexts to different challenges; and alternate approaches to enhance future success.

Rethinking dialogue and seeing it as a vehicle for talent development allows busy managers to redeploy the time they are already spending in conversation, inspire insights that can spark change and demonstrate the possibilities for learning every moment of every day.

Talk Is Not Cheap

When it comes to the manager's role in development, talk is the most precious and results-driving commodity you have to share. Conversation has the power to touch employees' hearts and minds more deeply than the well-intentioned steps leaders might take on their behalf, steps they don't have the time for anyway. Dialogue inspires reflection, illuminates possibilities and inspires consideration and commitment.

From that can spring employee-generated actions — actions that employees own, actions that will help them grow, develop and realize their personal definitions of success while supporting business results.

Any number of questions can infuse development into any conversation a leader may already be having with others.

Consider employee-focused questions designed to look backward and inward in an effort to develop a deeper understanding of self-awareness. They might include an exploration of such things as where employees have been, what they love and what they're good at.

Examples include:

- What do others count on you for?
- What are your greatest strengths in this situation?
- What have you done in the past that applies here?

Consider also bigger picture questions that look at the broader environment and the business to determine what's changing and what it all means. These might focus on what is going on in the organization or industry, how customers, technology and regulations are changing, and what that all means to career plans and objectives.

Questions like the following can transform routine conversations into developmental tools:

- What are you hearing from customers?
- What does that mean for the business/for you?
- What are our competitors doing?
- What can we learn from that?

Questions like these can become a natural part of conversations that are already consuming a leader's time. They redirect the focus and ratchet up the outcomes, without introducing new activities or consuming any more time. It just takes a new awareness of these opportunities.

— *Julie Winkle Giulioni and Beverly Kaye*

Transparency Equals Teaching

Today's workers are more educated and resourceful than at any time in history. Many can connect the dots for themselves, in turn translating events, occurrences and information into valuable learning. But they need visibility to these things to make that happen.

Too frequently, managers see their role as a filter, screen or buffer between reality and their employees. In a well-intentioned effort to help their busy staffs manage their own overflowing plates, leaders may block out or hoard information that could contribute to development.

Imagine what smart workers could accomplish with regular access to:

- Information about how the business is really performing.
- The specific rationale for why someone is being promoted or recognized.
- Candid reasons for organizational changes.
- What's next on the horizon.

It likely takes leaders more time to figure out how to redact, sanitize, edit, spin and repackage these messages for their employees. Eliminating this step not only enhances transparency, but it may also remove a stone or pebble for busy managers themselves.

But transparency can play out in another way for astute, development-oriented leaders. In years gone by, a manager was tasked with leading the performance of his or her team or department and nothing more. Today, most managers are "working" managers, meaning they are responsible for turning out deliverables of their own in addition to supervising others. This also adds to the overflowing nature of their plates.

The working part of the manager's role offers another chance for transparency. Rather than performing their tasks undercover, leaders may want to make the work they do more overt. Those around them can pick up cues and skills when leaders share what they do and why. Allowing others to shadow or ride along, narrate a task, offer insights into the rationale for certain steps, and share missteps and mistakes related to one's own work can be a powerful model and learning tool.

Yet, this sort of transparency doesn't add anything to a manager's workload. It simply recasts the tasks and responsibilities that already exist and extends them beyond individual output by creating fodder for powerful employee-led learning.

Leverage a Learning Lens

One final time-neutral strategy for busy managers who want to enable development of others involves adopting a new view of work. These leaders naturally help others grow by instilling the discipline associated with milking each experience for every drop of development available.

They know that successes, struggles and seemingly insignificant moments in the day can activate learning by just drawing it out with a few quick questions:

READER REACTION

What kind of career development conversations do you urge your company's managers to have with your employees?



Thomas Speer:

One of the big hurdles we try to address in having these discussions is that career development is not the same as career advancement. Development is about acquiring new skills, closing gaps or building upon and sustaining existing strengths. I think a lot of people get hung up on the idea that "if I'm not advancing, I'm not developing." Career development should be tied to one's readiness to advance, not the advancement itself.



Diane Richino:

Our biggest issue is helping our people understand that it's important to make time for it and to do it often throughout the year, not just at formal checkpoints. Most companies are trying to do more with less, and development has gotten lost in the shuffle to keep up. Some of our people do it quite well while others struggle to even have the conversation.

What do you think? Join the discussion at tinyurl.com/careerconvo or follow us on Twitter @TalentMgtMag.

- What did you learn from that?
- What does that mean to you?
- What will you do in the future as a result?

By looking through the learning lens, a leader models and helps others develop the ability to transform experiences into insights and use life as a learning lab. And looking through this lens doesn't involve an additional "to-do" or meeting on the calendar. It's simply a different way of operating and making the most of each interaction and event encountered.

In the end, doable and durable talent development — the kind able to withstand the wear and pressure of today's workforce demands — cannot be considered an "activity." It's a mindset that permeates a manager's approach to work. It's a spirit that pervades the countless events and tasks a leader engages in every day. It's an intention that's brought to every interaction. And it's the way even the busiest managers can make their most profound contribution to the organization — by developing talent. **TM**

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