Career Conversations for Managers

Having career conversations with your team is part of being a manager or leader. PDR prompts us to have career conversations: team members might also want to talk about their career aspirations and choices at any point in the year and can reasonably expect to do that with their manager.

For the manager, this isn't always easy. Many of us feel a strong sense of responsibility when we talk about career progression with our team members: we want to support people’s aspirations while being realistic, we worry about being asked for advice which we sometimes feel ill placed to offer and we may have a very practical desire not to lose an effective team member. Sometimes staff look for progression within our own teams when we know that this isn’t possible for budgetary or headcount reasons. Understandably, we don’t want to be the person who gives a disappointing message.

Whether you enjoy having career conversations, or find them a source of anxiety, here are some things to consider and tips to help you.

1. We are assuming that you are unlikely to be a qualified or experienced careers guidance specialist or coach, so don’t feel that you have to be one. The Careers Service website is aimed at students and also at postdocs: your staff may not fall into either of those categories but the website has many useful resources that they can use to help them think about their careers, consider progression, sharpen up their application skills and prepare to do a successful interview.

2. Be clear on your role: is the team member looking for mentoring type support from you? (A mentor is usually a person who has experience of the area the individual wants to discuss). In that case, you’re likely to be asked for information or to advise or give guidance. You should offer what feels comfortable and appropriate. If you don’t feel that you are equipped to offer guidance, then say so. You might feel that you have insufficient experience in the topic, for example, or that you don’t know enough about the direction of travel sought by the individual. A better option for the person involved may be to find an appropriate mentor who is ready and confident to offer their experience. Learning to be self-directed is a valuable skill in itself and encouraging your team members to take control of their futures by finding their own mentor could be a significant learning point. See OLI’s guidance on how to find your own mentor.

3. Where the individual isn’t after mentoring input from someone who knows their proposed career path, but wants a sounding board, try using coaching approaches. Coaching is also useful when the individual is looking for a ready-made answer and your sense is that they would benefit from stepping back to work out their goals and review their options. When we are coaching, we are usually being non-directive and that means steering clear of giving solutions, but rather encouraging the other person to take time to reflect and plan. The GROW model can be very useful here. (G = Goal, R = Reality, O = Options, W = Will). Following the GROW structure in a conversation means that you start by asking the individual to specify the goal they want to achieve, encourage them to consider the factors at work in their current reality with regard to this goal and how these might be promoting or inhibiting their ability to reach it, what options they have to achieve the goal and which of those options they will pursue in order to achieve it. See also OLI’s guidance on coaching skills for managers.

4. Coaching techniques can also be helpful when your sense is that you need to encourage someone to do a reality check on their aspirations. Asking someone to consider how likely a
particular outcome is and what steps they would have to take to achieve it can offer the individual the opportunity to be more objective about a subjective desire to achieve a particular career goal. Having said that, on occasion, it may be necessary to explain that, in your experience, that particular outcome would be unlikely for these reasons.

5. Sometimes team members are pinning their hopes on a promotion within the team that you know is unlikely because turnover is low, budget is tight and you have to think about headcount. No-one enjoys giving bad news, but in this situation, we can gain respect as managers by being consistently open and transparent in all our communications about our situation. If team members can see for themselves that the vital ingredients for an internal promotion are not in place, they are less likely to focus on that option and you can encourage them to consider other moves.

6. Sometimes we have to give difficult messages on career aspirations. One example might be when we believe that an individual isn’t ready for a much wanted promotion. Routine, consistent feedback about what is working well and what could and should change/improve in the current job is an excellent start to encouraging realism. If our people know what they need to improve now, they are more likely to be open to what they need to achieve in order to step up. If you have to explain the gap between what someone does well now and what they would need to evidence in order to achieve the next job, focus on the requirements of the role (essential, desirable etc). These are included in the selection criteria for the post in question. In this way, you are able to keep your feedback objective. For more help see OLI’s giving feedback resource.

7. When team members are seriously looking for a career move, encourage them to create a plan: What do I really want to do? How well does that match my values, my preferences and my long term goals? Where should I look for vacancies? How do I know these are the best places to look? Which jobs interest me and why? When I compare my current skills and experience to the requirements of another role, what is the gap? Don’t forget that staff can find help with all these questions by using the resources on the Careers Service website.

8. The most valuable thing you can do for your team is to encourage them to proactively seek the change they’re looking for. As a recruiter, you look for motivated staff and every other employer does the same. Encourage team members to think like recruiters when they are applying for jobs, to work out where they should be scanning to find vacancies, to network so that they can find other people to ask for advice and information and to think about opportunities outside of work (e.g. volunteering) from which they can gain vital experience.

9. Sometimes we can develop tunnel vision as managers. It can be helpful to stand in the team member’s shoes and see the world from their perspective. In addition to asking them how they feel and what they’re aiming for, it may be useful to read OLI’s companion resource on career conversations for individuals.