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Career Conversations for Retention

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR MANAGERS



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Project History

This guide was developed through the Responsive Career Pathways Research Project, and in consultation with working Canadians and small and medium-sized employers in Manitoba.

In March 2023, The Manitoba Institute of Trades and Technology (MITT) joined forces with Blueprint ADE to create a new proactive career services and workforce development model for working Canadians, involving both working Canadians and employers. The project tested a forward-thinking intervention to address the pressing workforce needs of small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) and the career development needs of mid-career workers. This was achieved through three service delivery pathways: 1) Worker-centered; 2) Employer-driven and 3) Intersections between working Canadians and employers.

Usage Agreement: MITT Responsive Career Pathways Project Materials

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What is a Career?

We define Career as a **person's journey** through their occupation(s), education, training, volunteering, jobs, hobbies and other experiences over a lifetime. A person's career path can be intentional or unplanned and does not need to be a vertical climb.

What is a Career Conversation?

A career conversation is a discussion between an employee and their manager, and can be initiated by either party. The focus is on an individual's professional goals and growth needs, and how these align with job and development opportunities within the organization. The intent of these conversations is to **establish a partnership** that meets the needs of both the employee and the employer.

Creating a transparent process that allows career conversations to thrive, and lets employees know that these conversations are supported and encouraged is key. Fostering a culture of personal and organizational achievement can be a vital part of your long-term **engagement and retention strategy**.

The Benefits of Career Conversations

Career conversations are a highly effective tool for building trust, increasing engagement, facilitating career satisfaction, and supporting internal mobility. In turn, employers benefit from enhanced succession planning, increased retention, heightened productivity and cost savings related to ongoing recruiting and hiring. Promoting a culture that supports the achievement of career goals will also help to attract employees who are motivated to learn and actively participate in their own development.

These discussions are fundamental to establishing your identity as an employer who is committed to supporting the career development of your team members. Prioritizing internal progression, promotions, and employee development is crucial to **creating a culture that values employee growth**.

The (Real) Purpose of Career Conversations

A Win For All



Although the purpose of a career conversation is to help team members identify their goals and create a development plan to reach them, the real goal is to develop a better relationship with your team while meeting the current and future needs of your organization. When employees are **engaged in conversations about the things that matter to them**, they come to feel that the people they report to (you) care about them. This will enhance productivity and improve retention.

Career conversations can help **employees:**

- Take an active role in creating a culture of continuous development.
- Understand the priorities and goals of their employer.
- Identify their career-related strengths and development needs.
- Anticipate barriers to career development, growth and/or advancement.
- Determine what resources are necessary to support their goals.
- Foster greater ownership of their personal career development, increasing their career confidence and satisfaction.

Career conversations with employees can help **managers:**

- Facilitate employee internal mobility and improve the retention of talent.
- Increase productivity rates as employee engagement and motivation increases.
- Enhance skills that align with organizational needs.
- Build more open, trusting relationships between employees and leadership.
- Develop and grow their own management skills, while building a strong reputation as a supportive leader.

By investing time in career conversations, employees feel seen and supported in their development, managers are better equipped to guide their teams, and organizations benefit from improved retention, engagement, and performance.



Video: What is the best way to have a career conversation? (1:59 mins)

Developing a Partnership The Importance of Your Role

Talking to team members about career aspirations can be one of the most meaningful and results-driving activities you perform as a leader. Career conversations inspire reflection, illuminate possibilities, foster commitment, and facilitate employee-owned actions. These actions help individuals grow and develop while contributing to organizational goals.

To implement a source and promote-from-within culture, a proactive and sustainable approach to career and workforce development is needed to prepare individuals for growth opportunities and/or roles that require additional skills or greater responsibility.

One of your roles as manager is to inspire, guide and support your team members in the formulation, planning and navigation of their journeys.

Research tells us overwhelmingly that companies who focus on career growth and development create an environment that results in a more productive workforce, with committed and engaged colleagues who genuinely enjoy coming to work. Consistently offering opportunities for staff to reflect and share their experiences will foster an environment where both individuals and the organization can thrive. Engaging with team members to support discussions about career aspirations, while providing ongoing information about company priorities and opportunities, is essential for this process. This requires you to engage with, support, and discuss career aspirations with team members, while providing information on career and workforce development with a focus on contributing to organizational goals.

Engaging in a partnership-focused career conversation can clarify assumptions and promote a deeper understanding of mutually beneficial growth opportunities.

The traditional view of a career as a ladder has been replaced by something resembling a rock-climbing wall, where progressing involves moving up and/or laterally toward the individual's own definition of career success. This means they must actively manage their career at all phases: explore options, put together career plans and take steps toward fulfilling them. Your role as a manager is to support that navigation and unveil opportunities that support organizational priorities while providing opportunities for career growth.

Adapted from: United Nations. (n.d.). Career Development Conversations: A Guide for Managers (p.3).

Leading by Example Reflecting Upon Your Own Career

To facilitate effective career conversations, it's important to not only understand your role as the manager, but to understand your employees' experience in preparing for these conversations. To do this, we recommend that you review the guide *Growing Your Potential - An Employees Guide to Participating in Effective Career Conversations*.



Before sharing this guide with employees, we suggest taking time to work through the following pages on your own:

Page 4:

Preparing for a Career Conversation
- Personal Reflection

Page 5:

Preparing for a Career Conversation
- Employer Research

Page 6:

Preparing for a Career Conversation
- Thinking Ahead

Did you have any “aha” moments? Do you require more information?
What was interesting or challenging about this process?



Managers are employees too! That's why it's important for you to take time to reflect upon your own career and future growth needs.

Common Concerns of Managers

What if they have unrealistic expectations?

Employees may have career aspirations that are unrealistic given their current skills, experience, or what the company may actually need or be able to accommodate. Career conversations can help by providing an opportunity to support employees in setting realistic, actionable career goals. By offering honest feedback on the skills or experience they may need to move forward, and transparency about the opportunities that may or may not be available, managers can set clear expectations and develop trust with team members.

I will lose my top performing employees.

Instead of staying quiet and running the risk of losing them, open the lines of communication and give them a reason to stay! Showing an interest in a high performer not only builds credibility for you as a leader, but it shows them that you care and are interested in what matters to them. A career conversation with a top performer provides you with an opportunity to ensure that you understand the individual's goals and how these can align with the organization's goals. These conversations provide a proactive and low-cost strategy for retaining high performing employees.

I don't have the resources to help people with career development.

Managers may feel they don't have the resources (time, training, budget) to invest in an employee's career development. Over time, however, employees may become frustrated and perceive their career growth as limited by a lack of support or resources. By focusing on low-cost, high-impact development opportunities, such as mentoring, job shadowing, or involvement in stretch projects, managers can engage employees while continuing to support their growth.

I'm afraid I'll do this wrong. I'm not sure what to do!

Managers might not be sure how to support employees in their career growth, particularly if the growth path involves areas outside their direct expertise or current job responsibilities. To be clear, managers are not expected to have all the answers or be experts in all things. By being curious, asking thoughtful questions (pages 10-11) and listening without judgement, managers can open the lines of communication and become collaborative partners with employees in creating a development pathway.

Remember: A talented individual who receives no encouragement may believe that the manager does not see their potential; and leaving may seem like the best option. Likewise, an underperforming individual who receives no encouragement from the manager may continue to struggle or disengage instead of seeking support and opportunities that could help them flourish.

Roles and Responsibilities Employees & Employers

Employees	Employers
<p>Take ownership of your career conversations and desired growth. Initiate and prepare for career development conversations with your manager/leader and strive to develop a curiosity mindset to further support these conversations.</p>	<p>Prioritize career conversations. Provide employees with opportunities to share career aspirations and reflect upon their experiences. Encourage employees to develop a curiosity mindset and take ownership of their career development.</p>
<p>Keep the focus on career development and growth. Separate these conversations from formal performance reviews or workplan discussions.</p>	<p>Keep the focus on career development and growth. Separate these conversations from formal performance reviews or workplan discussions.</p>
<p>Be open about your career aspirations and desired growth. Understand your strengths and interests and ask for honest feedback on your goals and expectations.</p>	<p>Be transparent about career development and growth opportunities. Provide honest feedback on the employee's goals, aspirations and expectations.</p>
<p>Research the skills and experience your organization needs. Stay abreast of changes and emerging needs within your organization and your specific role or field.</p>	<p>Communicate future organizational needs. Help staff understand the skills and experience your organization is looking to acquire in the future.</p>
<p>Take initiative to seek out development opportunities. Actively look for opportunities or experiences that will further your desired career growth.</p>	<p>Help employees find development opportunities, including outside your team or area. Utilize networks/colleagues to identify and share opportunities that align with an employee's desired growth.</p>
<p>Build your network within the organization. Network with peers, other supervisors and senior leaders to learn more about growth opportunities and what skills and experiences to focus on.</p>	<p>Help employees expand their internal networks. Connect them with peers, other supervisors and senior leaders that match their areas of interest.</p>



Video: Unlocking Career Success - The Power of Curiosity (3:38 mins)

Adapted from: United Nations. (n.d.). Career Development Conversations: A Guide for Managers (p. 16).

Setting the Stage for Career Conversations

Career conversations play a crucial role in fostering employee engagement, growth, and retention. While you may be enthusiastic to instruct staff to begin having these conversations immediately, it's important to acknowledge that an intentional and strategic approach will be required if these are being introduced into your organization's culture for the first time. As the benefits of career conversations are many, here are ways to ensure that these conversations thrive within in your organization for years to come:

1) Communicate

Clearly communicate what career conversations are and why you believe these are important for both employees and the organization. Explain to staff and senior leadership how these conversations create a win-win for all. When you're ready, openly share when/how you intend to implement these conversations into your work environment.

2) Normalize

Introduce the concept in meetings, memos and day-to-day conversations. Share your plans and what you're doing to prepare for these conversations. Offer information about current and future growth opportunities within the organization. Invite questions and concerns with curiosity, not judgement. Be prepared to explain why your organization wants to engage in career conversations and your interest in supporting employee growth.

3) Lead by Example

As a manager, who is having career conversations with you? On page 5 we advised you to work through some key pages in the *Growing Your Potential* guide. Now that you've had time to reflect and prepare, who can have a

career conversation with you? A shift in culture requires a top-down approach, so the buy-in of senior leadership is vital. When managers and senior leadership actively engage in career conversations, it encourages employees to adopt the practice with greater trust and confidence.

4) Focus on Growth & Celebrate Wins

As we shared on page 4, meaningful career growth and satisfaction can be different things to different people. Publicly recognize career milestones, acknowledge progress, and celebrate a variety of career development wins, both big and small. Doing this will not only let employees know that you appreciate them, but it will reinforce the messaging that growth of all kinds is to be celebrated.

5) Share Success Stories

Do you have stories of employees who have grown and flourished within their existing role? How about stories of those who have advanced or transitioned to a different role within your organization? Share these career stories with your team to demonstrate that career growth, in different directions, is possible within your organization.



Video: How to Have a Career Conversation with my Boss (1:53 mins)

Preparing for Your First Career Conversation

Now that you've had a chance to understand your role (page 4), work through the employee guide (page 5), and clarify the roles and responsibilities for both you and your team (page 7), it's time to prepare for your first career conversation! To help with this final step, here are a few tips to increase your confidence and support a productive and beneficial exchange:

Before the conversation:

Provide your employee with *Growing Your Potential - An Employee's Guide to Participating in Effective Career Conversations* to help them prepare and better understand the intent of the conversation.

- Schedule an agreed upon time and date to have the conversation, providing enough time and notice for your employee to review and work through the guide.
- Secure a private space, free of distraction (if possible) for your conversation.
- Review the employee's current role and involvements, as well as any career growth goals they may have shared prior to this meeting.
- Familiarize yourself with available resources - learning programs, mentorship and volunteering opportunities, etc. - so that you can help guide them.

During the conversation:

- Invite your employee to document feedback from your conversation. (page 12)
- Focus on building rapport, listening, asking questions with curiosity, and learning about the employee's needs and aspirations. (If all you do is listen to see how these align with your organization's needs, the conversation has been extremely successful.)

After the conversation:

- Thank your employee for taking time to share their values, skills, interest and goals.
- Provide them with a timeline with regards to any further information or contacts you have committed to locating on their behalf. (When/where applicable)
- Encourage your employee explore opportunities within your organization, and invite them to follow up with you to share findings and review progress.

Remember: a career conversation is not a one-time event, but an ongoing process of sharing of information. As a co-facilitator in the developmental journey of your team, these conversations can help you better understand the goals, needs and motivations of those who report to you, and how these align with opportunities and needs within the organization.



Video: How to Have a Career Conversation with your Staff (9:38 mins)

Sample Career Conversation Plan

EMPLOYEE NAME:

DATE OF CONVERSATION:

STAGE OF CONVERSATION (circle): Initial Follow up

OPENING THE CONVERSATION

1. Thank the employee for taking the time to meet with you.
2. Emphasize that the meeting’s focus will not be on performance, but on ways they can grow and implement their career plan and explore growth opportunities within the organization.
3. Refresh/relay any key items you already know from other conversations you may have already had with the employee about their career aspirations and/or professional development to date.
4. Let the employee know you will be asking them questions that they have reflected on in pages 4-6 of the employee guide to get them to share the direction they want their career to take.
5. Assure employee that this is not a test, and it is okay to not know or have an answer.

Sample Questions	Notes
<p>PERSONAL REFLECTION</p> <p>What did you learn about yourself as you prepared for this conversation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do you enjoy learning about?• Which skills have contributed to your successes or work satisfaction in your current role and/or in the past?• What types of impact(s) have you made in your current or past roles?	

EMPLOYER RESEARCH

What did you discover about our organization as you prepared for this conversation?

- What growth or learning opportunities are you interested in?
- What roles you are interested in exploring further?

THINKING AHEAD

What did you discover about your goals as you consider what's next?

- What is your current goal, or most important to you right now, in terms of your career growth?
- Where are you now in relation to your growth goal?
- What are some ways you could achieve your goal?
- Who could help you gain the experience or develop the skills you desire?
- What holds you back from achieving this goal?

What growth or advance opportunities do you see for this individual? Share any ideas or information you may have.

BUILDING & KEEPING MOMENTUM

- What (small) action can you take in the next week to start you on the path?
- How will you track your progress?
- What else could I (or other colleagues) do to support you?
- How will you overcome obstacles?
- How will you know you have succeeded?

Is there anything that you can do to support them? What ideas, tools or suggestions can you offer?

CLOSING THE CONVERSATION

1. Thank the employee for their trust and willingness to share.
2. Ask them when they intend to check in again and if they have any questions about what was discussed and/or what happens next.
3. Invite them to write down their first (small) action and commit to completing it within the next week.
4. Document what you have committed to do to support the employee's growth and development.
5. Remind the employee that career conversations are not a one-time event, and they are encouraged to continue to have these conversations with you.

Write it Down - A Commitment to Success

To be effective, it's important to not only have career conversations regularly, but for your team members to evaluate their goals and document their challenges, changes and progress along the way. To help facilitate this, **your employee** can use this sheet to take notes and establish next steps.

NAME OF EMPLOYEE:

DATE OF MEETING:

NOTES: (Information, ideas and feedback shared.)

ACTIONS & NEXT STEPS: (What commitments did I make? What are my next steps? What goals have I set? When do I intend to take action? What suggestions or commitments did my manager make?)

NEXT CHECK IN: (When I will follow up or schedule another conversation.)