It’s Good to Talk!
A Practical Guide to Career Conversations in the Workplace
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A Practical Guide to Career Conversations in the Workplace

by

Antoinette Oglethorpe
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Career Conversations are Important</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What makes a Career Conversation effective?</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to have a great Career Conversation</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to Structure a Career Conversation - 5 Stages</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Career Conversation Model</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Conversations - The Power is in the Question</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About Antoinette Oglethorpe</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

“The difference between great people and everyone else is that great people create their lives actively, while everyone else is created by their lives, passively waiting to see where life takes them next. The difference between the two is the difference between living fully and just existing.”

John C Maxwell

Talented employees want to know where they stand in the organisation now and their possibilities for the future. They want direction on what and where they need to develop, and they seek feedback and support in their efforts. If they are able to have honest, open, two-way conversations with managers and mentors, they will feel more engaged by their work and more committed to the organisation. In short, they want a career conversation.

The big question is ‘How can you have engaging career conversations that empower employees to take ownership of their own development while providing them with the information and support they need?’

That’s what this guide is designed to answer.

This guide will outline the structure and tools to help you have meaningful career conversations in 20 minutes without any complex process or paperwork.

As a result, you’ll be able to:

1. Help employees feel more satisfied in their current role no matter what their ambitions.
2. Encourage employees to identify development opportunities and take steps that will help them and the organisation.
3. Have conversations that make employees want to stay with the organisation rather than go elsewhere.
4. Have a flexible approach which means employees take ownership for their career development and don’t look to you for all the answers.
Why Career Conversations are Important

“To add value to others, one must first value others.”

John C Maxwell

I’m guessing you are a manager, a coach or a mentor, and you are interested in developing others’ careers. After all, meaningfulness of work and the fit between a person and their job are two of the key drivers of engagement at work.

The challenge is that you can’t develop other people’s careers. It’s like all personal development: you can’t stop smoking for someone else; you can’t lose weight for them; you can’t get fit for them - and you can’t develop their career. All you can do is help them work out what they need to do and guide and support them as they take action.

The idea that managers and organisations can develop employees’ careers is outdated. It may have been true once upon a time that employees would follow a predictable career path. But predictable career paths rely on static organisations. And in today’s volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world, organisations aren’t static, they are continually changing.
In the past, employers could take a ‘Sat Nav’ approach to their career development, simply following pre-programmed routes, designed by someone else, to well-travelled destinations. In today’s Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) world, career development is more like orienteering with the employee taking the lead on deciding where they want to go and how they’re going to get there.

Reflecting on your own career, could you have predicted you would end up where you are now? Did you follow a predictable path? Did you climb a ladder one step at a time? Or did you follow your own route? There are a number of areas employees need support with to take ownership of their careers:

1. **Where they’re at.** How they feel about their current job and career situation can clarify matters and discharge some negative emotions which can get in the way of positive thought and action.

2. **What’s important to them in their career** – What skills do they like to use? What kind of activities do they enjoy most? What are their values in relation to work? What kind of work environment do they prefer? What kind of people do they enjoy working with?

3. **What does success look like for them?** What kind of activities would they be doing on a day to day basis? Where would they be working in terms of geography or location? What kinds of responsibilities would they have? What kinds of outcomes and deliverables would they be producing? Who would they be working with and for?

4. **What skills and qualities do they have?** What are their strengths and weaknesses? How does the organisation view them?

5. **What opportunities are available to them** – in their current role and elsewhere in the organisation?

6. **How to navigate the processes and politics of the organisation.** Understanding how things are done ‘around here’, including both processes and tactics; how to raise their profile and be more visible to key people; how to crack the system for moving job if that’s what they want to do.

7. **Identifying and evaluating different options and opportunities;** looking at the pros and cons, making a decision, or at least being clearer about where they want to go and the development or experience required.

8. **What career development strategies** can they use to make progress? What actions can they take?
Some people can do this for themselves, but most of us find it a lot easier to have someone else to talk to and test our ideas on. And that’s why career conversations have such a valuable role to play. Engage employees in quality career conversations and they will be empowered to take ownership of their careers and inspired to take action in a way that is right for them.

Effective career conversations lead to a whole host of positive benefits, as below:

![Bar chart showing types of impact](chart.png)


<table>
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<tr>
<th>Significant Impact</th>
<th>Other Impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Better sense of own options/career direction</td>
<td>Contacts to follow up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-insight: interests, values, feedback on skills</td>
<td>Understanding of tactics, politics, processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information on company and full range of options</td>
<td>Job moves - secured by various means</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-confidence, career confidence: ‘feel-good’</td>
<td>Arranging development activities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Career planning outlook, frameworks, skills</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive view of company/retention</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Raised profile/putting own career on the agenda</td>
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What Makes a Career Conversation Effective?

Think about the most useful career conversation you’ve had in the past. Who was the conversation with? Where did the conversation occur? How did it come about? Was it one conversation or an ongoing dialogue?

When we ask these questions in our career conversations Workshops, the following come up time and time again:

1. **They’re not necessarily with ‘the boss’**. The fundamental priority of the most effective career conversations is that the person taking them is objective. They must have the best interests of the employee at heart and no underlying agenda.

   For these reasons, career conversations can be difficult for the immediate line manager to take. Eventually, career conversations do need to take place between employees and their managers, but that might be the place to finish rather than start the conversation.

2. **They take place informally**. Good career conversations often take place outside any formal management or HR process, i.e. in what I call a ‘semi-formal’ setting, such as a mentoring discussion, regular progress meeting or follow-up meeting after an appraisal. Although good conversations can take place as part of formal HR processes, they’re not all that frequent.

3. **They are unplanned**. Some good career conversations are planned, but they can also be spontaneous. Valuable conversations with friends and work colleagues, for example, often happen spontaneously.

4. **They don’t take a long time**. Good career conversations usually take time, say three-quarters of an hour to an hour. But a short first conversation can be useful as a prelude to setting up a longer meeting. Sometimes a single conversation can be pivotal; sometimes people need several conversations to make progress.

5. **They provide different levels of support at different times**. Employees often need career support at defining points in their career, for example, when they’re starting a new role, considering a job move or come to the end of a development programme. At other times, they need a lighter touch.

And most of all, career conversations must be all about the employee and what they want from their working life. They have to feel the focus is on them and that their future hasn’t already been decided by others.
How to Have a Great Career Conversation

There are a number of things that contribute to a great career conversation:

1. **Focus on who the employee is**, what they want and why. Great career conversations cut through to help employees focus on where they’re at and reduce unnecessary stress. Knowing how they feel about their current job and career clarifies matters and can help unload negative emotions.

2. **Help them reflect on their experience.** What skills do they like to use? What activities do they enjoy most? What are their values in relation to work? What work environment do they prefer? What people do they enjoy working with?

3. **Enable them to gain clarity of direction.** In an effective career conversation, people will reflect on what their ambitions really are. What does success look like for them? Helping them connect their personal values and career wishes, you ignite their passion, which triggers the desire to develop.

4. **Develop self-awareness** by holding up a mirror. Great career conversations build confidence. They hold up a mirror so individuals can reflect on their skills and performance, thinking about the feedback they’ve received from others in the organisation and identifying their strengths and weaknesses themselves.

5. **Enable a change of perspective.** An effective career conversation challenges individuals to think differently, helping them move out of their comfort zone and consider what opportunities are available to them. Those opportunities might be in their current role or elsewhere in the organisation.

6. **Aid their decision making.** Quality career conversations help individuals evaluate different alternatives and opportunities, look at the pros and cons and make a decision. Or at least gain greater clarity about where they want to go and the development they need to get there.

7. **Build networks and organisational understanding.** People often need support in navigating the processes and politics of the organisation. Career conversations can help them develop an understanding of how things are done ‘around here’, decide how to raise their profile and be more visible to key people. They can also help them work out how to crack the system for moving to a different role, if that’s what they want to do.

8. **End with action.** Good conversations usually lead to action, focusing on the ‘What...?’ i.e. What career development strategies can employees use to make progress? What actions can they take? They’ll also agree how they’re going to check in and review progress.
How to Structure a Career Conversation - Five Stages

The five stages for a great career conversation are to:

1. **Set up the conversation**

Manage expectations by emphasising the individual is responsible for managing their career. You are someone who can help them manage this better.

Take time to prepare. If you don’t know the individual, see if they are happy to send you their CV. Tell them in advance if there are questions you would like them to think about. Emphasise that the conversation is confidential.

2. **Establish trust**

Agree the desired outcomes from the conversation. Establish an open feel to the conversation. Put the other person at their ease. Show your interest, listen carefully, check you understand what they say to you. Be open about your own career and experience if appropriate.

3. **Explore the situation**

Use powerful questions (described in the next section) to facilitate their thinking. Help the individual discuss what they really want out of work. If you sense the individual needs to explore more personal concerns, give them the opportunity to do so, but respect their right to keep these matters private.

Help the individual to identify a wide range of ways forward. Which do they feel would suit them best? Are their preferred options realistic?

4. **Share information**

Try to meet the individual’s needs for information, including opportunities outside the organisation. Where appropriate suggest other people to talk to.

Use your own and others’ careers to illustrate options. But don’t expect the individual to want a career like yours.

5. **Agree actions**

Leave enough time to bring the discussion to a close and agree what happens next. Ensure the individual knows they can come back to you.

Does the individual need you to take any actions (e.g. help them make initial contact with others)? If you agree to do something, do it - and quickly.
The Career Conversation Model

To explore the situation (as in Stage 3, left), start by understanding the Career Conversation Model.

The career conversation Model is based on the assumption that the best career decisions combine past-, present- and future-thinking. Career conversations can help people integrate hindsight from past experience with foresight about where they could go in the future. Bringing both together determines action that can be taken in the present.

It is recommended that exploration loops around the model in a figure of eight covering four phases. How deep you go and how many turns around the process you take will depend on the needs of the individual and the time available.

Phase 1: Start from where they are

People engage in career conversations when they need to set a new direction, plan for a change in role or feel dissatisfied with where they’re at. Conversations are often triggered by “crossroads decisions” they need to make in the near future.

Ask questions to establish where they are starting from and what they would like help with. If you have had previous conversations with them you can ask questions to find out how they are getting on and what they want to focus on.

Phase 2: Learn from past experience
The conversation now moves “backward” into the past.

Help employees identify what they already know about developing their career in the organisation. Help them look back to understand where they’ve been and what they’ve learned along the way and help them to reflect on what they’re good at, what’s most important to them, what keeps them engaged and how they like to work.

Most people have forgotten the skills and abilities they have at their disposal, but are strongly aware of what’s missing. So, they need your help in identifying and focusing on all the resources they have.

Ask questions like:

- What useful experiences have helped you get where you are today?
- What valuable skills have you developed?
- What qualities will help you make progress?
- What unique talents set you apart from others?

And this is where you can provide useful input. Recall all the success stories you’ve heard. Give genuine feedback about the positive skills, qualities, behaviours and attitudes of the employee that you’ve noticed.

**Phase 3: Open up future possibilities**

This phase of the conversation moves forward into the future. Career development is a journey, not a destination. Help employees discover the general direction they want to go in and the variety of routes to get there.

Success means different things to different people. It doesn’t have to mean moving up in an organisation. It doesn’t have to mean taking on more responsibility. Career Conversations can help employees develop a picture of future success that is meaningful to them.

When I talk about future success, people sometimes think I mean career goals or objectives. I don’t. Future success goes beyond goals and objectives to imagine what working life will be like after employees have achieved them.

People too often describe success by a position or title (“I want to be...”) which limits choices and possibilities. Much more helpful is to move past the job title to what they want their experience at work to involve, which opens all sorts of possibilities. Help employees to describe in detail how life will be when they have achieved their ambitions. At this stage, it doesn’t matter if the ambition is seemingly realistic or not.
The purpose of the discussion is simply to fix career direction so employees can explore the many different ways to get to their destination.

The choices available to them may include a change in role upwards or sideward, but the greatest opportunities come from finding ways to help them develop in their current role.

You can then go on to explore and analyse the specific development needed for different options.

**Phase 4: Come back to the present**

The purpose of a career conversation is to drive action by the individual. Help employees identify small changes and actions that can make big differences. By focusing on the immediate future, you can encourage them to commit to doable actions which will help them make progress. By identifying small manageable steps to do immediately, they can direct their energy towards implementation. And that creates enthusiasm for action. Small steps can result in large progress.
Career Conversations The Power is in the Question

Quality career conversations are based on powerful questions.

The most powerful questions are strengths based and solution focused. In other words, they specifically ask about positives. What does the employee like about their current role? What would they like to do more of? What strengths do they feel they bring? What value do they contribute to the organisation?

Such questions provoke reflection, insight, ideas and action. They keep the focus on the employee while helping them see things differently. And they encourage them to take ownership of their own development. They help them recognise possibilities.

They encourage them to create many alternatives and achievable action steps to build on their knowledge of how to progress.

It can be hard to always have the right question at your fingertips. I created the career conversation Toolkit so it does the heavy lifting for you.

Drawing on principles of positive psychology, solutions focus and neuroscience, the career conversation Toolkit gives managers, mentors and coaches a set of thoughtfully conceived questions to:

1. Provoke reflection, insight, ideas and action
2. Keep the focus on the employee
3. Encourage them to take ownership

The questions are packaged into ten different tools.

1. **Career Platform** - helps an employee determine what they want to change in their career and motivates them to take action.

2. **Your Journey So Far** - allows employees to reflect on what they’re good at, what’s most important to them and how they like to work.

3. **Future Success** - helps employees articulate their ambitions by describing what success will look like.

4. **Career Checkpoint** - connects employees ambition with reality to identify how their current situation is satisfying their aspirations and the progress they have made.
5. **Career Kitbag** - helps employees identify all the resources they have that will help them make progress. Skills include technical skills, soft skills and career development skills.

6. **Career Routes** - helps employees identify the options available to them in their current role and/or in new roles.

7. **Career Kitbag Additions** - helps employees analyse the skills, experiences, information and relationships that they need to develop to progress toward their Future Success.

8. **Short-Term Milestones** - helps employees focus on an achievable goal in the not too distant future.

9. **Setting Off** - encourages employees to commit to do-able actions that will help them make progress, however small.

10. **Progress Review** - helps employees learn from the experience.

Each tool provides a practical but flexible framework that can be used as the basis for a conversation that is only 20 minutes long. You can use one tool or a number of tools in whatever sequence or order makes sense for them and their situation.

You can find out more about the Career Conversation Toolkit and purchase online at [www.antoinetteoglethorpe.com/career-conversation-toolkit](http://www.antoinetteoglethorpe.com/career-conversation-toolkit)
About Antoinette Oglethorpe

Antoinette is a Chartered Fellow of the CIPD and has 25 years' experience of developing leaders for companies like P&G, Accenture and Avanade. Recent clients include British Gypsum, EY, John Lewis, Prudential, Sage and Saint-Gobain.

An expert in developing leaders and leadership teams for fast-growing, high-tech companies, Antoinette qualified as a career coach and counsellor in 1999. She believes developing leadership talent in organisations relies on connecting employees' career ambitions with the goals of the organisation.

She has been a speaker at HR Vision as well as conferences for the CIPD, the Association for Coaching and International Mentoring Association and also hosts a podcast on iTunes called "Talent Development Mastery".

Antoinette has written for CIPD Management Toolclicks, Coaching at Work magazine and HR Gazette. Her articles have been featured in SmartBrief and HRZone. She is also the author of *Grow Your Geeks - A Handbook for Developing Leaders in High-Tech Organisations*, available on Amazon.

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