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TIPS, TOOLS & INTELLIGENCE
FOR DEVELOPING TALENT



5 CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS TO TALENT DEVELOPMENT

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THE PURPOSE OF CONVERSATION 1
 FIVE CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS..... 6
 CONVERSATIONS IN PRACTICE7
 BARRIERS TO CRITICAL CONVERSATION 9
 SUPPORT FOR CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS10
 CONCLUSION.....13

REFERENCES & RESOURCES 15

JOB AIDS

Questions Tool for Critical Conversations..... 16
 Preparing and Facilitating the Developmental Conversation 17

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Critical conversations in the workplace have the power to create change, including shifts in perspective, knowledge, and understanding, all of which are vital to talent development. These conversations take employee development beyond the annual performance review and provide an important tool for managers and talent developers to grow employees' talent and secure the most appropriate talent at the right time.

According to research from both *People Management* and the *Harvard Business Review*, numerous organizations—including Accenture, Adobe, Deloitte, Expedia, Gap, and Microsoft—are shifting toward a more dynamic, responsive, and informal approach to talent development. Employees are demanding more ongoing conversation and regular feedback that is less formulaic and more timely, responsive, and authentic. These trends have signaled a move away from annual appraisal systems—which are shown to be expensive to administer and lacking in any empirical evidence of impact—toward regular check-ins. These check-ins, or conversations, take many forms.

This issue of *TD at Work* will describe:

- the purpose of conversation in the workplace
- five critical conversations to further talent development

- barriers to these conversations
- necessary skills to lay the groundwork for these conversations
- how talent development professionals can facilitate critical conversations.

THE PURPOSE OF CONVERSATION

In her book, *The Art of Conversation*, Judy Apps explains that “the word ‘conversation’ is made up of *con*, ‘with,’ and *versare*, ‘turn.’ Conversation is turn and turn about—you alternate.” A genuine conversation must be a two-way exchange involving debate, discussion, or dialogue. In the context of mentoring, quality conversations support learners’:

- developmental growth in knowledge, technical competence, and behavioral competence
- career needs, including career goals, aspirations, and growth
- identification of enabling levers, such as a development plan, career plan, learning resources, and a wider network of opportunities
- emotional needs, including increased confidence, altruistic satisfaction, reflective space, status, and intellectual challenge.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION

A 2010 Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development study that focused on harnessing the power of employee communication found that “lateral communication between departments and teams, not simply vertical communication between managers and workers,” is an important social dimension in the organization.

In 2014, the *Harvard Business Review* placed the spotlight on the 21st-century workspace. The article showed that in Silicon Valley, there is a tight correlation between personal interactions, performance, and innovation. The chief of human resources at Yahoo explained that “some of the best decisions and insights come from hallway and cafeteria discussions.”

The 2014 *Harvard Business Review* article describes how a pharmaceutical company undertook a study identifying how patterns of communication affect outcomes. Approximately 50 executives who were responsible for nearly \$1 billion in annual sales were unable to identify which behaviors they would need to develop to increase sales. “The data collected over several weeks showed that when a sales person increased interactions with co-workers on other teams—that is, increased exploration—by 10%, his or her sales grew by 10%.”

PERFORMANCE REVIEW TRENDS

Research and experts are weighing in on the need to change how we do talent development. Here are a few examples:

In a 2015 interview with *Inside HR*, David Arkell, GE Australia and New Zealand's human resources leader, noted that "the annual performance review is dead ... it's got to be much more frequent and much more regular."

PricewaterhouseCooper's 2015 Performance Management Research involving the re-thinking, re-aligning, and re-energizing of performance management revealed a shift toward a continuous feedback culture rather than the annual review process.

Hayley Kirton, writing for *People Management* magazine, suggests that as many as two-thirds of organizations are considering revamping their appraisal process, with one in 20 looking to move away from formal evaluations completely.

The nature and quality of conversations vary significantly from individual to team and organization. To shift an organization's culture and working practices, we must first accept that conversation is critical and that good conversation is a subtle art that requires nurturing and developing.

In our work on coaching and mentoring, a useful framework has been the levels of conversation (Figure 1). Each level has the potential to increase the depth and impact of dialogue. As one progresses from one level to the next, deeper questions are probed. Let's look at how these levels of conversation support learning and talent development.

CONVERSATION IS CRITICAL, AND GOOD CONVERSATION IS A SUBTLE ART THAT REQUIRES NURTURING AND DEVELOPING.

Social

Social dialogue is about developing friendship and providing support and encouragement; it is essential for building connections and relationships, including those in the workplace. High-performing employees tend to have a much wider and higher quality of social networks than their lower-performing peers.

These networks usually have two main functions. One is *informational*—people who provide access to information that helps the

individual make better decisions, understand context, and recognize opportunities. The second is *instrumental*—people through whom we get things done. In informational networks, the social exchange is knowledge, ranging from useful hints and tips, to transfer of skills and know-how. In instrumental networks, the exchange is primarily one of influence, which includes the shoring up of favors.

In terms of talent development, TD managers might ask themselves these questions about the social level of dialogue:

- How can I help people build and maintain social networks?
- How can I facilitate the identification of common points of interest in the workforce?
- How can I encourage people to talk openly about their interests and concerns?

Technical

Technical dialogue helps employees learn about work processes, policies, and systems, all of which are essential in acquiring skills and expertise. Highly effective talent development professionals, including managers, are precise about the skills and knowledge they need to acquire; and they aim to acquire them in the most efficient way. In our research on high-performing teams, one of the key factors we have identified is the willingness to share and ask for expertise on a just-in-time basis. Line managers need to create a climate within their department where this sharing can happen naturally.

FIGURE 1. LEVELS OF CONVERSATION

Level	Characteristics
Social	Vital for building elements of rapport, particularly trust, which in turn deepens a sense of shared values and mutual positive feelings
Technical	Built around sharing information that is needed to get tasks done. It requires clarity, asking questions, and checking understanding
Tactical	Requires participants to examine and evaluate different workplace options
Strategic	Explores a wider range of options than tactical conversations and develops scenarios around them, weighing benefits of each
Self-insight	Shifts the perspective from the external to the internal and addresses issues such as awareness of personal values and understanding one's strengths and weaknesses
Behavioral change	Involves making and implementing plans for personal evolution
Integrative dialogue	Examines deeper questions about personal identity and awareness of one's role as part of the human system