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FREE RESOURCE FOR MANAGERS

5 questions for a great development conversation

A ready-to-use tool that makes conversations with employees about their growth specific, motivating and strengths-based – rather than a list of shortcomings.



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before you start

Why have a development conversation?

A development conversation is not a performance review. Its purpose is to understand what energises your employee, what they do best and how you can support their growth – together with the team. Done well, it builds engagement and trust faster than any bonus.

1

Before

Send your employee the questions from this resource a few days in advance. Give them time to think about their answers.

2

During

Block 45–60 minutes with no phone or email. Ask the questions one by one and follow up – the employee should do most of the talking.

3

After

Write down what you agreed on the card on the last page and schedule the next conversation – ideally in 4–8 weeks.

4 principles that make a difference

Listen more than you talk

A good ratio is 70/30 in the employee's favour. Silence after a question is not a problem – it's thinking time.

Start with strengths

People grow fastest where they have talent. Look for what works first.

Be curious, not judgemental

Ask "what?" and "how?" more often than "why?" – the last one can easily sound like an accusation.

End with something concrete

One small, clearly defined step is worth more than five ambitious plans with no deadline.

> Employees who have the opportunity to do what they do best every day are far more engaged in their work.
>
> Findings from Gallup research on engagement and strengths

5 questions that open up the conversation

1 What has given you the most energy at work recently?

You start on a positive note and immediately get clues about where your employee's talents lie. Energy is one of the best signals of strengths.

FOLLOW UP

- What exactly were you doing then?
- How do you know when something really energises you?

WATCH OUT

Don't jump straight to problems. Let what works sink in – it builds trust for the rest of the conversation.

2 In which situations do you feel you are at your best?

It helps name strengths in action – specific behaviours worth using more often and more consciously.

FOLLOW UP

- What makes things go so well for you in those situations?
- Where else could you use this?

WATCH OUT

If your employee struggles to answer, give an example from your own observations: "I've noticed that…".

3 What do you want to learn or develop in the coming months?

Growth that employees choose for themselves lasts much longer than growth imposed from above. Your role is to help them make it specific.

FOLLOW UP

- How will you know you've succeeded?
- How can you connect this with what you're already good at?

WATCH OUT

A goal like "better communication" is too general. Look together for a specific situation where the change should be visible.

4 What gets in your way – and what can I do to make things easier for you?

This question shows you are a partner, not just a supervisor. It often reveals obstacles that simply aren't visible from a manager's level.

FOLLOW UP

- What part of this is in your control, and what is in mine?
- What support do you need from me most?

WATCH OUT

Don't get defensive or explain yourself straight away. Thank them for their honesty, write it down and come back with an answer by the agreed date.

5 What one small step will you take before our next conversation?

It closes the conversation with something concrete and hands ownership to the employee. A small step is easier to take – and every success fuels the next.

FOLLOW UP

- When exactly will you do it?
- What might get in your way and how will you deal with it?

WATCH OUT

Set the date of your next conversation straight away. Without it, even the best agreements quickly fade.

the most common traps

The conversation turns into a review

If you want to discuss performance, do it in a separate meeting. Here you focus on the future and growth.

The manager answers for the employee

Hold back from suggesting answers. A solution the employee comes up with is more likely to be put into practice.

Too many goals at once

One, or at most two, development areas for a few months. Better to do less, but do it properly.

No follow-up

A conversation without a next date is a one-off event. Growth happens through regular contact.

Bonus question to finish: "What was most valuable for you in this conversation?"

It tells you what works in the way you run conversations – and what is worth repeating.

printable

Conversation card

Fill it in together at the end of the conversation. Each of you keeps a copy – it's your starting point for the next meeting.

Employee

Date of conversation / next conversation

What gives energy?
question 1

Strengths in action
question 2

Development goal
question 3

Obstacles and support needed
question 4

First step and deadline
question 5

- [ ] Questions sent to the employee before the conversation
- [ ] The employee talked more than I did
- [ ] The conversation started with strengths
- [ ] We agreed on one specific step with a deadline

Want conversations like this to become standard in your team?

In the "Courageous development conversations" workshop you'll practise them hands-on. Start with a free 30-minute consultation.

Book a consultation

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