

Guide to Constructive Coaching Conversations

A primary responsibility of managers is to have frequent, meaningful conversations with their employees. Some of those conversations will be forward-looking and focus on long-term development needs. More frequently, though, managers should be having regular conversations – constructive conversations – to provide feedback and coaching on what’s occurring or has recently occurred on the job. Constructive conversations are comprised of the following:

- **Provide feedback:** Information about performance is essential to learning and improving.
- **Review expectations:** Checking in frequently to ensure manager and employee are aligned in terms of expectations is good practice and avoids unpleasant surprises later.
- **Give positive reinforcement:** Positive reinforcement can be any favorable consequence that follows good performance. Of all the consequences you can provide, simple verbal recognition for a job well done is easiest to do and usually most highly valued.
- **Coaching for course correction:** At times, everyone who has challenging goals will need to correct their course to achieve those goals. Coaching is a conversation or series of conversations to provide feedback and suggestions for modifying behaviors to improve performance.

Suggestions for effective constructive conversations:

- **Don’t confuse performance with development.** Coaching for performance is looking in the rearview mirror and addresses the specifics of what was accomplished, how it was accomplished, and the impact of the accomplishment. Development conversations are looking through the front windshield. These are fundamentally different conversations. One of the major errors of performance management processes is the combination of performance review and development – given the choice, the manager will focus on the development conversation because it’s almost always easier.
- **Be timely.** Feedback and reinforcement is more effective when provided immediately rather than after a delay. When new skills and behaviors are being learned, feedback and reinforcement should be very frequent; it’s more effective to provide it intermittently when good performance is established and consistently demonstrated.
- **Be specific.** Being specific about quality, productivity, timeliness, etc., is much more helpful than being general. When preparing to provide feedback and reinforcement, consider how to address specific behaviors or accomplishments.
- **Be authentic.** Your employees can spot authenticity from a mile away. They recognize when feedback or reinforcement is genuine. They also recognize when it’s given in an impersonal and inattentive manner. If you care about performance, if you care about your employees, it will show and will be meaningful.
- **Be direct.** It’s easy to get right to the point when delivering good news, but the tendency for many people is to avoid difficult issues, to dance around uncomfortable topics. Being direct is especially important when you’re having tough conversations, but the best approach is generally the direct approach. Don’t skirt the issue. Don’t sugar-coat the issue. Address it head-on.

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- **Know your people.** A primary responsibility of managers is to provide consequences, and what's effective for one employee might not be as effective for another. You have a responsibility to know your employees as individuals. Interact with each as a unique person and respect their individuality.
- **Address the impact of performance.** In addition to providing specific feedback about behaviors, be sure to address the impact of performance on others.
- **Remove obstacles.** When your employees struggle to achieve their goals, you have a responsibility to find out why. You may need to provide tools or other resources. You may need to provide guidance to address skill deficiencies (less likely). And as manager you have a responsibility to remove organizational obstacles to performance. Telling an employee they're "empowered" to achieve their goals is actually demotivating if there are significant organizational roadblocks. Delegating without addressing those obstacles is not empowerment. It's frustrating. Ask your employees what they need from you. Ask them directly what's likely to prevent them from achieving their goals. Use your managerial power and influence to do for them what they can't do for themselves.
- **Leave your ego out of it.** Constructive conversations are not about you. When you're absorbed with thoughts about yourself, about how you'll be perceived, you will probably struggle with constructive conversations, especially the difficult ones. Relax. Let go of your ego and focus on your employee and the performance in question. When you do you will find it much easier to say what needs to be said in a meaningful and effective way.
- **Have courage.** The truth is that most employees want more feedback rather than less. They want you to be authentic and to genuinely care about their success. They want to know what you think and hear your suggestions for growing and proving their value. When you realize this and follow the guidance to let go of your ego, you will find it easier to have the managerial courage to have even the most difficult of conversations.
- **Check your intentions.** Constructive conversations are intended to be helpful. They should be truly constructive. Managers struggle when they allow personal agendas to intrude in the conversations. Reflect on your intentions. Focus on the well-being of the business. Focus on the success of your team. Your intentions will shape the nature and effectiveness of your conversations.