Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go
Career Conversations Employees Want
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ISBN: 978-1-60994-632-6

KEY CONCEPTS

• Genuine and meaningful career development occurs through the human act of conversation. Growth is the result of quality conversations between managers and employees, conversations that are designed to facilitate insight and awareness, explore possibilities and opportunities, and inspire responses that drive employee-owned action.

• From the intersection of hindsight and foresight comes insight and growth. Employees who fully understand their strengths and interests are better able to anticipate future growth. Insight is where manager and employee jointly determine the full range of ways to move forward and the actions to take to achieve career objectives.

• Employees in every sector are starving for feedback. Feedback is a hindsight lens through which people can pass their self-perceptions, yielding a clearer vision of who they are and the value they bring to an organization. Feedback costs nothing, lends itself to any setting, and is the domain of anyone who is willing to or asked to get involved.

• Modern career development looks more like a rock-climbing wall than a ladder. The traditional notion that advancement means moving up has been replaced by a definition that involves moving forward and toward a very personal definition of career success.

• Grow with the flow. This is the science of holding unplanned conversations with employees about supporting and informing career growth. Growing with the flow honors the cadence of business and enables managers to build development into the ever evolving fabric of the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

In Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go, authors Beverly Kaye and Julie Winkle Giulioni examine the benefits of and methods for addressing the career development imperative with employees. In today's business environment, talent is a major differentiator...
and developing that talent is one of the most significant drivers of employee engagement. Increasing employee engagement will lead to better business outcomes in terms of revenue, innovation, productivity, customer loyalty, and other important criteria for business success. Responsibility for career development ultimately rests with employees, but it is the job of management to prompt, guide, reflect, explore ideas, activate enthusiasm, and drive action. This can be accomplished using a framework for thinking about conversations to help others grow, focused around the concepts of hindsight, foresight, and insight.

DEVELOP ME OR I’M HISTORY

Managers in the modern workplace face significant challenges day in and day out, and they cannot tackle them alone. Managers are expected to do more with less (reduce costs, time, and resources), meet ever-expanding expectations (e.g., bigger sales, more projects), continuously improve quality, and deliver the next big thing. The most effective tools that managers have at their disposal to face these challenges are capable, flexible, and engaged teams able to drive exceptional business results. This means that career development should be a top priority for any business. Managers must remember that the best and brightest employees in any organization will always have options, and failing to help them grow can lead them to take their talents elsewhere, or worse, become disengaged but stay in their current positions.

Career development is among the most frequently forgotten tools for driving business results, yet it is completely within a manager’s sphere of influence. Genuine and meaningful career development is made possible through conversations that are designed to facilitate insight and awareness, explore possibilities and opportunities, and inspire responses that drive employee-owned action. Career development often gets pushed to the backburner by busy managers, but there is a way to reframe it in such a way that the responsibility for growth rests squarely with the employee. Talk is the most precious and results-driving commodity that a manager has to share, as it can lead to actions that help employees realize their personal definitions of success.

Over the years, managers have created and continue to propagate several myths that keep them from having the career conversations their employees want. Some common “immobilizing myths” include:

- **There is simply not enough time.** Time is a scarce resource today, but most managers are having conversations all day. Career development can be a simple matter of redirecting some of that conversation time to focus on careers.
- **If I do not talk about it, they may not think about it, and the status quo will be safe.** Employees always have growth on their minds, whether managers address it or not. Withholding career development conversations is often a greater danger to the status quo than engaging in them.
- **Since employees need to own their careers, it is not my job.** Managers have an essential role in helping and supporting others to take responsibility. That role plays out in large part through conversation.
- **Everyone wants more, bigger, or better: promotions, prestige, power.** When asked what they want to get out of a career conversation with their managers, most employees are simply looking for ways to use their talents creatively.

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

Information about the author and subject:  
www.help-them-grow.com

Information about this book and other business titles:  
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By Paul L. Marciano
Development efforts are best concentrated on high potentials, many of whom already have plans in place. Managers will usually see a significant return on the development they invest in their high potentials, but they only make up a small fraction of an organization’s population. A small investment in the massive middle doing the bulk of the work could yield great results.

Managers operate at the speed of business and can rarely set aside large chunks of time to engage in career dialogues with employees. An effective solution is for managers to look at career development in terms of ongoing conversations rather than procedural checkpoints or scheduled activities, which fits better with the cadence of business today. These brief yet frequent exchanges help employees to sustain momentum, track progress, and act as an ongoing reminder of the organization’s commitment to employee learning, growth, and progress. People recognize and respond to genuine curiosity on the part of their leaders, and it might be the most undervalued leadership competency in business today.

Boomers are waiting longer to retire. Repeated rounds of belt tightening have led to delayering and downsizing. More jobs are out-sourced. ... [T]his breeds a sense of scarcity and leaves the impression that there aren’t as many opportunities. ... This makes career development more—not less—important than in the past.

Quality questions asked with a spirit of curiosity can facilitate conversations that will allow others to change their lives. This does not mean that the employee or the manager has to have all the answers. In many cases, a lack of closure will actually drive more thought and energy as the mind, uncomfortable with what has been left unfinished, continues to focus on the question or problem and possible solutions.

**Hindsight, Foresight, and Insight**

Whether conversations are more formal and lengthy or shorter and iterative, helping others pursue their career goals involves facilitating an exploration of three key areas: hindsight, foresight, and insight.

*Hindsight* is a look backward to develop a deep understanding of things like where employees have been, what they love, and what they are good at. Self-perception is the key, and it becomes even clearer when enhanced by the feedback of others.

*Foresight* involves a big-picture look at the environment and the business to determine what is changing and how those changes will affect the future.

*Insight* is the convergence of hindsight and foresight, where manager and employee jointly determine the full range of ways to move forward and the actions to take to achieve career objectives.

Hindsight conversations are the foundation of career development, as they are designed to spark thinking, encourage connections, and promote discovery. Hindsight allows employees to develop a clear view of their skills and strengths, values, interests, dislikes, prefer-
ences, and weaknesses. Most people are disconnected from their strengths but strongly drawn toward their weaknesses, so employees require two different perspectives in order to confirm, challenge, and enhance their own self-perceptions. Clarity around these factors allows for confident and intentional movement toward career objectives.

Genuine career development is not about forms, choreographing new assignments, or orchestrating promotions. It’s about the quality of the conversations between a manager and an employee.

FEEDBACK
Studies have shown that employees in every sector are starving for feedback, and good people tend to move on when their hunger for feedback is not satisfied. Feedback is a hindsight lens through which people can pass their self-perceptions. It is an ideal development tool considering that it costs nothing (except a little genuine attention to others), lends itself to any setting, and is the domain of anyone who is willing or asked to get involved. Encouraging employees to proactively solicit the points of view of others can create a self-generating feedback frenzy. This has the double benefit of enabling employees to check their assumptions and balance their understanding, while helping them to develop the capacity to independently initiate feedback conversations. Developing a broad network will facilitate individual career success, because gathering feedback from others is an ideal way for employees to begin engaging others in creating a path forward.

The ability to solicit and graciously accept feedback is a skill that distinguishes successful and effective individuals. Because the act of opening one’s self up to the opinions of others can be challenging, the agenda for such a discussion should be simple and straightforward. Employees should be encouraged to focus on just three things as they gather feedback from others, ABC:

1. Abilities
2. Blind spots
3. Conditions

Abilities can include strengths, skills, and the perceived value that an employee brings to the organization. Blind spots include any behaviors that might get in the way of an employee’s success, including ways in which perceived strengths might work against the employee. Conditions are the settings or circumstances in which an employee might make the greatest contributions, or any factors that could trigger stress or other negative reactions for the employee in question.

Employees also need to get hindsight information from managers based around three key areas:

1. Technical skills
2. Soft skills
3. A set of career intangibles

Managers who address any of these areas will help deepen employees’ self-awareness and facilitate development.

Technical or hard skills are those that relate to how employees produce the outputs of their jobs. Equally important to employees’ success is their set of interpersonal or soft skills, which can include communication, collaboration, teamwork, and networking.

There is another category of skills that includes career intangibles that are frequently forgotten, but are qualities that serve as key differentiators when it comes to day-to-day and long-term career success. These qualities include a thirst for continuous learning, resilience in the face of change, and a natural curiosity about the world and its endless possibilities.

Hindsight clarity needs to be filtered through the lens of foresight, allowing employees to play to their identified strengths in the context of a business need. Foresight conversations open people’s minds to the broader world, the future, organizational issues, changes, and the implications of all of these factors, while helping others to focus their career efforts in ways that will lead to satisfying and productive outcomes.

WHAT’S HAPPENING?
People who are able to anticipate the future and are ready to grow into it practice their own brand of ESP:
Ever Scanning and Pondering. ESP is a set of habits that managers can instill in employees so that everyone in the organization is constantly staying on top of what is going on in the world around them.

Employees may not always see the big picture, so it is important for managers to populate their radar screens with a constellation of new points to consider, including both internal and external factors.

External challenges and changes are things going on in the wider world that can include changing demographics, globalization, government regulation, and economic instability.

Internal challenges and changes within the organization can include changing customer expectations, new vendor relationships, mergers and acquisitions, and responses to shrinking margins. A manager does not have to deliver a whole strategic planning curriculum to his or her staff, but it is beneficial to create a forum for employees to get in touch with the world around them and define their career development playing fields.

From the intersection of hindsight and foresight comes insight. Possible insights are endless, and can manifest into useful solutions for the organization. For instance, an employee might use insights gained through conversation to deploy a new skill to solve a problem, or evolving interests might support a new business direction. Recognizing insights and exploring and exploiting them through career conversations can reveal countless possibilities for both employees and the business.

**ADVANCING THE NOTION OF ADVANCEMENT**

Insight and growth are all about possibilities. However, recent years have seen widespread organizational belt-tightening and delayering in many businesses, which creates the false impression that opportunities for advancement are scarce. In addition to the trend towards work–life balance, the traditional notion that advancement means moving up has been replaced by a definition that involves moving forward and toward a more personal definition of career success. Some of the most important conversations that managers will have with employees involve clarifying their definitions of career success. Success could mean a promotion to a higher position, a lateral adjustment to something more interesting or challenging, or even steps that in the past might have been considered down or backward, but in fact help the employee gain valuable experience.

Too many managers avoid career discussions altogether because they do not want to set unrealistic expectations only to disappoint when desirable moves are few and far between. But growth is not limited to movements over, up or down, and with the right support people can grow right where they are. Finding ways to grow talents, explore interests, and build capacity within the context of employees’ current jobs is completely within a manager’s sphere of influence, and is often a better option than having an employee move towards a different role. Helping employees to grow in place requires a shift in mindset, where the old notion of career development is replaced by a focus on developing skills and experience, which, in turn, makes employees more valuable to the company.

The opportunity minded have unlimited ways to grow in place, and it is important for managers to encourage them to think and point them in new directions. Helping employees realize their own personal definitions of career success requires conversations that fall into two distinct categories: what and how.

**WHAT** conversations focus on what the employee needs in terms of experiences, skills, exposure, and information. **HOW** conversations build on these and help the employee to figure out how to get those needs met. These conversations should not be combined or reversed, and above all they should not be rushed. Moving prematurely to action sidesteps important thinking, chokes off creativity, narrows the conversation, and obscures the full range of possibilities for career development.

**ADVANCE ACTION FORWARD**

Working with employees around hindsight and foresight helps to generate insight into the world of possibilities that exist for those who want to move
forward and toward their career goals. But those possibilities will remain amorphous and abstract until they can be translated into action. There is a model for accomplishing this end, the 3E Model, and it involves understanding and using the “3 Es” to help employees move from insights to implementation.

1. Expand education to open employees to a variety of new learning avenues.

2. Enable exposure to others who can teach, mentor, and coach.

3. Explore experiences that will unlock opportunities to learn on the spot.

Encouraging employees to interact directly with the environment is just an interesting exercise until you debrief their experiences and encourage reflection.

**Education**

Concerning education, learning can take place in a variety of settings. It can be face-to-face in the form of classes and workshops, or online through webinars and virtual classrooms. Employees will get the most value from education when their managers help to set them up for success, and this can be done in four simple steps:

1. Set expectations in advance, using conversation to support employees and help them to focus their effort and learning.

2. Set aside time to schedule employees into classes, to demonstrate commitment to learning.

3. Provide opportunities for employees to obtain new skills and knowledge, and set up opportunities for employees to use what is learned.

4. Set a date to debrief and create a plan for moving forward with the new learning.

**Exposure**

The second “E” in the 3E model is exposure, because it is important to expose employees to wisdom in the workplace. Exposure can be facilitated by creating connections, and the more individuals who are drawn into an employee’s career support circle, the better. But in today’s dynamic business environment, the lines between mentoring and networking are blurring, and exposure is all about establishing compelling connections among individuals who can share knowledge, skills, and experience. The authors call this “Mentworking™” which is based on two simple premises: nobody knows it all and it is reciprocal. The model is a mosaic of connections where enlightened mentors can learn as much as they teach.

**Experience**

Experience is the third “E,” and most people learn by doing. At any organization there is often a lot of work to be done, so strategically bringing these two factors together can serve the needs of the organization and the individual simultaneously. Experience-based learning is about integrating learning into the workflow, as a sensible way to efficiently and effectively develop others. Experiences can be scaled based upon a manager’s sphere of influence, the needs of the organization, and what employees are looking to achieve. There are plenty of options for experience-based learning, including combinations and permutations of special projects, events, in-department rotations, job-shadowing, and community service.

Whatever combination of education, exposure, and experience managers use, they must have a plan in place to implement the learning, and the best plans are really development deals that managers strike with employees. A DEAL is:

- **Documented.** Putting it in writing signals that the plan is being taken seriously, and can be treated as the living, breathing, and changeable tool that it is.

- **Aligned with the employee’s goals.** Linking the plan to short-term and long-term goals tests whether activities are worth the effort they will take.

- **Employee-owned.** Employees must take responsibility for their plans to generate the commitment and energy required to implement them. Ownership is most effective when the plan is personalized to the individual, focused and specific, and doable in light of other activities.

- **Linked to the needs of the organization.** Resources may be in short supply and support can be fickle,
but what employees are doing to learn and develop directly contributes to the bigger picture.

Development is only an activity until its lessons are applied. Many employees become so engaged in the experience that they do not take the time to reflect on how they have benefitted from it. Conversation, in the form of a debriefing discussion, becomes the key to genuine growth. Managers can ask simple questions, such as:

- What did you learn from that?
- What would you do differently?
- What will you take away from this?

These questions will launch a dialogue about an experience that will help them to extract learning from it, and in the process seal the deal on their learning and development.

GROW WITH THE FLOW

In the fast-paced modern workplace, career development and growth has to be seamlessly integrated with the flow of business. Growing with the flow is the science of holding unplanned conversations with employees about supporting and informing career growth. By learning to pick up career conversation cues, managers can use these opportunities to build development into the ever evolving fabric of the workplace. Additional benefits will follow, as regularly scheduled career conversations will become richer and more efficient, and employees will learn to pick up on their own cues and take greater ownership for driving their own development.

CONCLUSION

Helping employees grow is an essential management responsibility, because career development benefits both individual employees and the organization as a whole. Just as there are multiple directions in which a career can develop, there are lots of ways to engage with employees in meaningful and constructive ways that can fit easily into any manager’s schedule. It can be as simple as managers talking with people, and interacting intentionally to show genuine interest in helping employees grow.

It is important for managers to keep the interview going, in the sense that they should make a commitment to continue learning about employees. Using hindsight as a lens to understand who employees are and what they bring to the organization in terms of skills, interests, values, and more will provide a solid foundation for development.

Fostering a future focus is a matter of helping employees develop the ability to scan the environment, anticipate trends, and spot opportunities to provide a constructive context for career development. The intersection of hindsight and foresight can be mined for insight, because opportunities exist where employees’ aspirations can find expression in the real, ever-changing world of work.

FEATURES OF THE BOOK

Estimated Reading Time: 1–2 hours, 126 pages

Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go is a guide to help managers have more constructive career development conversations with employees to enable their success and improve business outcomes. “Try This” features are inserted throughout, providing questions and activities managers can use with their employees, and each chapter ends with a “What If” section, which asks questions that require managers to reframe their thinking. The book is intended for anyone who has a role in developing others, and can easily be read cover to cover or used as a reference.

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