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The University of Manchester

# Career conversation guidance for managers



## What is the purpose of career conversations?

Career conversations are an opportunity to understand your colleagues' career aspirations, strengths and development needs.

These discussions help build trust, increase engagement and support individual growth. There is no "one-size-fits-all" approach – every conversation will be different.

This guide provides practical tips to help you structure and get the most out of these conversations.



### Use a coaching mindset

Listen actively. Ask open questions. Focus on understanding rather than directing.

## Preparing for the conversation

### Before the meeting

- Schedule 45–60 minutes for a dedicated discussion.
- Let your colleague know the focus is career development, not performance or objective setting.
- Review any notes from previous development or career discussions.

### Ask your colleague to reflect on

- What they enjoy most and least about their current role.
- Skills they would like to develop.
- Their career aspirations over the next 2–5 years.
- Any challenges they feel may affect their progress.

## During the conversation

### Explore career aspirations

Encourage your colleague to reflect on their interests and goals.

Examples of helpful questions:

- What do you enjoy most about your work?
- How would you like your career to develop over the next few years?
- Are there other roles or areas you would like to explore?

### Identify strengths and development areas

Discuss both current strengths and areas for development. You could ask them:

- What do you see as your core strengths?
- What skills or experiences would help you progress towards your goals?

### Discuss opportunities

Career development is not always about promotion. Some colleagues may want to grow within their current role while building new skills or experiences, such as:

- Lateral development – new projects or responsibilities.
- Vertical development – promotions or leadership opportunities.
- Skill development – training, mentoring or professional qualifications.
- Cross-functional experience – working with other teams or departments.

## Agree next steps

Identify 2–3 practical actions to support development. For example:

- A new assignment or project.
- Training or professional development.
- Mentoring or job shadowing.

Agree how you will check in on progress and continue the conversation over time.

## Tips for success

- Be supportive and honest, even if immediate opportunities are limited.
- Focus on skills, growth and experience, not just job titles.
- Encourage shared ownership – career development is a partnership between manager and colleague.

## What to avoid

- Turning the conversation into a performance review.
- Making promises you cannot guarantee.
- Judging or dismissing someone's aspirations.
- Avoiding honest discussions where goals may need to be refined or developed.

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