



DISCUSSING CAREER GOALS

A Handy Guide to Having a Career Goals Conversation With Your Employee

Prepare for a focused, supportive conversation that turns employee aspirations into practical development.

By Eugenia Lunden | Updated 2026

Your role is to create clarity and access

Career development is shared work. The employee owns their career choices and effort. As the manager, you help them understand possibilities, connect growth to meaningful work, obtain feedback, and gain fair access to experiences that build capability.

Development is broader than promotion

Growth may mean deeper expertise, broader scope, a lateral move, a stretch assignment, project leadership, people leadership, mentoring, or stronger performance in the current role. Do not assume that every employee wants the same destination.

Six principles for managers

1 Lead with curiosity

Ask before advising. Let the employee describe what energizes them, what they value, and what they want to explore.

2 Discuss skills and contribution

Connect aspirations to capabilities, business priorities, customer needs, and observable results.

3 Share candid context

Offer useful feedback about strengths, readiness, gaps, role requirements, and organizational realities.

4 Make access equitable

Review who receives stretch work, visibility, mentoring, and advocacy. Avoid relying only on the most vocal employees.

5 Build development into work

Use real assignments, practice, feedback, shadowing, and relationships alongside formal learning.

6 Follow through

Document commitments and revisit them. Trust declines when career conversations produce no visible action.

Separate development from corrective action

Performance feedback can inform a development priority, but a career conversation should remain forward-looking. If a significant performance concern needs attention, address it directly in the appropriate conversation instead of disguising it as development.

Prepare with evidence, not assumptions

Review recent work, feedback, goals, and opportunities. Consider what you have observed while staying open to the employee's perspective. Your notes are a starting point, not a verdict.

1. What accomplishments and contributions have I observed? What impact did they have?

2. Which responsibilities, projects, or interactions appear to energize this employee? What evidence supports my view?

3. Which strengths are consistently visible? Which strengths or talents may be underused?

4. What feedback would help this employee grow? Can I provide a specific example and explain why it matters?

5. What assumptions might I be making about this employee's ambition, availability, interests, career stage, or preferred path? What should I ask instead?

Identify realistic paths and opportunities

Prepare possibilities without deciding the employee's path for them. Consider work that is available now as well as capabilities that may matter as roles and technology evolve.

6. What team or organizational priorities could provide meaningful development through real work?

7. What stretch assignment, expanded responsibility, project, or cross-functional exposure could be appropriate?

8. Who could provide mentoring, shadowing, subject-matter expertise, feedback, or sponsorship?

9. Which skills are becoming more important in this field, including responsible use of AI or new technology? Which are relevant to the employee's current work or possible paths?

10. What constraints, decision processes, timelines, or readiness expectations should I explain honestly?

Check opportunity equity

Before offering a development experience, ask whether access depends on visibility, schedule flexibility, location, confidence, similarity to prior role holders, or informal networks. Adjust the process when those factors create avoidable barriers.

Coach the conversation

Request 30 to 45 minutes in a setting where both of you can focus. Share the purpose and invite the employee to complete the companion employee guide in advance. The goal is not to produce a perfect career map. It is to reach a clearer understanding and agree on a useful next step.

REFLECT	Which recent work are you most proud of? What made it meaningful?
STRENGTHS	Which strengths do you want to use more? Where do you feel underutilized?
EXPLORE	What kinds of problems, responsibilities, or experiences would you like more of?
LEARN	What capability would make the greatest difference in the next 90 days?
CONNECT	How could that growth support your work, the team, customers, or a possible future path?
SUPPORT	What support from me would be most useful? What will you own?

Listen for more than a job title

- The problems the employee wants to solve
- The skills they want to deepen or broaden
- The work conditions that help them contribute
- The impact, relationships, and recognition they value
- Concerns that may make it difficult to speak openly

Do not overpromise

Be encouraging and transparent. If you cannot offer a promotion, role, budget, or timeline, say what is known, what is not known, and what you can support now.

Co-create a focused 90-day goal

Choose one development priority that matters to the employee, supports real work, and can be practiced. Clarify what success looks like and how each person will contribute.

Outcome	What will the employee be able to do, contribute, or demonstrate?
Business connection	How will this help the team, customers, or organization?
Evidence	What result, feedback, or work product will show progress?
Practice	Where can the employee apply the skill in real work?
Employee ownership	What actions will the employee take?
Manager support	What access, feedback, advocacy, time, or resources will the manager provide?

The employee's 90-day development goal:

The support I will provide:

Potential risks, barriers, or competing priorities to address:

Turn the conversation into action

Capture the agreement while it is fresh. Give the employee a copy and schedule a follow-up. Development plans should be adaptable when priorities, opportunities, or interests change.

ACTION	OWNER	TARGET DATE	EVIDENCE OF PROGRESS

Follow-up date:

What I will review or prepare before the follow-up:

After the meeting

- Confirm the goal, actions, and timing in a short follow-up note.
- Make the introduction, assignment, feedback, or resource you committed to provide.
- Notice and reinforce progress during regular check-ins.
- Remove barriers where you reasonably can.
- At the follow-up, evaluate learning and impact, then continue, adjust, or choose the next priority.

Current practice note

This 2026 update reflects current emphasis on ongoing coaching conversations, internal mobility, skills-based development, equitable access to growth, learning through work, and preparation for technology-driven skill shifts.

Selected resources

LinkedIn Learning, [2025 Workplace Learning Report](#) - career development, internal mobility, and agile upskilling.
Gallup - meaningful manager conversations, strengths, and coaching.
World Economic Forum, [Future of Jobs Report 2025](#) - emerging skills and workforce change.