



SETTING YOUR CAREER GOALS

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

Prepare for a focused, practical conversation about your strengths, growth priorities, and next steps.

By Eugenia Lunden | Updated 2026

Career growth is broader than a promotion

A useful career conversation connects what you do well, what you want to learn, and what the organization needs. Growth may include deeper expertise, broader scope, a lateral move, a stretch assignment, leadership, mentoring, or preparation for a future role.

A modern career conversation is a partnership

You bring reflection, ideas, and ownership. Your manager brings context, feedback, advocacy, and access to opportunities. Neither person needs to have the entire career path mapped out in one meeting.

Six principles to guide the conversation

1 Focus on contribution and growth

Connect your interests to team priorities, customer needs, and measurable results.

2 Think in skills, not only titles

Identify capabilities you want to strengthen and the work experiences that could build them.

3 Use evidence

Bring examples of accomplishments, feedback, strengths, and work you found energizing.

4 Explore more than one path

Consider expert, project, people leadership, cross-functional, and internal mobility options.

5 Make development part of the work

Prioritize stretch work, mentoring, shadowing, practice, and feedback alongside courses.

6 Plan to revisit

Career conversations work best as a series of check-ins, not a once-a-year event.

Keep performance and development connected, but distinct

Current performance can inform your priorities, but this meeting should create a forward-looking development plan. If a significant performance concern requires attention, schedule enough time to address it clearly rather than allowing it to take over the career discussion.

Prepare a clear career snapshot

Complete the prompts that are most useful to you. You do not need perfect answers. Look for patterns in the work, conditions, and contributions that matter most.

1. What accomplishments from the past 6 to 12 months am I most proud of? What impact did they have?

2. Which responsibilities, projects, or interactions give me energy? Which drain it?

3. Which strengths do I use often? Which strengths or talents are underused?

4. What feedback have I received repeatedly, both reinforcing and developmental?

5. What matters most to me at this stage of my career? Consider learning, impact, flexibility, stability, compensation, purpose, relationships, and scope.

Look ahead without forcing one fixed path

Career paths are often nonlinear. Instead of relying only on 'Where do I want to be in five years?', explore the kinds of problems, skills, and environments you want more of.

6. What kinds of problems would I like to solve more often?

7. What work would I like to do at a deeper level, a broader level, or with greater independence?

8. Which adjacent teams, roles, customers, or business areas would I like to understand better?

9. Which skills are becoming more important in my field, including responsible use of AI or new technology? Which one or two are most relevant to my role?

10. What are two possible next chapters I could explore? They may include growth in my current role, a lateral move, expanded scope, expert work, project leadership, or people leadership.

A useful test

A development goal should matter to you, support real work, and be specific enough that you and your manager can recognize progress.

Choose a focused development goal

Select one priority for the next 90 days. A focused goal is easier to support, practice, and evaluate than a long list of intentions.

Outcome	What do I want to be able to do, contribute, or demonstrate?
Business connection	How will this help my team, customers, or organization?
Evidence	What observable result, feedback, or work product will show progress?
Practice	Where can I apply the skill in real work?
Support	What feedback, access, mentoring, resources, or sponsorship would help?

My 90-day development goal:

Why this goal matters now:

Build the goal through experience

- A stretch assignment or expanded responsibility
- Shadowing, mentoring, coaching, or an informational interview
- A cross-functional project, task force, or customer-facing opportunity
- Deliberate practice with timely feedback
- A course, credential, reading plan, or professional community tied to immediate application

Plan the conversation

Request 30 to 45 minutes in a setting where you can focus. Share that you want to discuss growth and prepare a practical next step. If possible, send your main topics in advance.

OPEN	I would like to talk about how I can continue growing and contributing. I have reflected on the work I do best and one development priority I would like to explore.
SHARE	One accomplishment I am proud of is... A strength I would like to use more is... The skill or experience I would like to build is...
CONNECT	I believe this could support the team by... I would value your perspective on where this capability is most needed.
ASK	What opportunities, feedback, people, or resources could help me build this skill? What would you need to see from me?
AGREE	Can we identify one or two next steps, clarify who will do what, and schedule a follow-up?

The main message I want my manager to understand:

Questions I want to ask:

Support or opportunity I want to request:

If your manager cannot offer a specific opportunity

Ask what is possible now, what evidence would strengthen your case, who else could provide perspective, and when you should revisit the discussion.

Turn the conversation into action

Capture agreements before the details fade. A short follow-up note can confirm the goal, next steps, and timing without making the plan unnecessarily formal.

ACTION	OWNER	TARGET DATE	EVIDENCE OF PROGRESS

Follow-up date:

What I will bring to the follow-up:

After the meeting

- Send a brief thank-you and recap of the agreed actions.
- Complete your first step promptly to create momentum.
- Track examples of practice, results, and feedback.
- Revisit the plan when priorities or opportunities change.
- Acknowledge progress and decide what comes next.

Current practice note

This 2026 update reflects current emphasis on ongoing coaching conversations, internal mobility, skills-based development, learning through work, and preparing 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.