

Editorial – for May issue of Employment Today

Having Career Conversations

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One of the most powerful influences to a person's career success is having their manager believe in them. I hear many stories from people who feel undervalued and out-of-relationship with their manager.

Many managers fall short in the establishment of building collaborative and trusting relationship with their employees, let alone have the skills to conduct open career conversations.

Open dialogue is impossible when there are unresolved issues, limiting assumptions and undisclosed agendas. Regular and open conversations dissolve these quickly as they happen, making way for fewer misunderstandings, more trust and collaboration.

One of the strong influences in my own career was a manager who made time, once a month, for an hour, to catch up. It was a precious, agenda-free conversation to share professional and personal development ideas, current issues, and experiences. More importantly, over time it developed mutual trust and appreciation.

Career conversations need to happen outside of the Performance Review process and be on-going without referencing performance (which judges retrospectively). They need to stimulate vision and possibility, identify development and look at the whole situation or person - not just what they can offer the organisation.

If performance reviews are the only times employee and manager have close dialogue, an employee is unlikely to raise issues or disclose aspirations that might hinder future bonuses or opportunities. Equally, Performance Reviews are often influenced by political corporate agendas and personal biases.

One of the best tools I know of to support this development is Appreciative Inquiry. The AI Commons website <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/> states;

Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative search for the best in people, their organisation, and the world around them... AI involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to heighten positive potential.

To shift a conversation, relationship or activity to a positive perspective, an Appreciative Inquiry approach would look at what is working, and build on that. By focusing on positives and unique strengths, motivation and enthusiasm are sparked giving the person a chance to bring real success to their work.

The 5 'P' process developed by Dr. Kris Magnussen, career specialist from the University of Lethbridge in Canada offers a structured career conversation planning process which represents a system or cycle of change. The process goes like this simple example:-

Pride: The employee describes what they are most proud of and recalls what made the experience so motivating and successful.

Passion: Values, beliefs and interests present in that and other experiences are identified .

Purpose: Other possible projects or assignments are explored which might also involve similar interests and values that would bring meaningful focus.

Performance: Develop, in collaboration, work strategies and resources required that will enable similar successes.

Poise: Manage expectations, trust and reinforce the idea that, with practice, success is achievable.

By using the 5'P' process both the employee and their manager will enhance mutual appreciation, and collaboration.

More open career conversations should involve both life and work considerations. The challenge is that they might reveal dissatisfaction and plans that do not fit within the organisational framework or strategy. A manager needs good skills and understanding to help the employee implement the changes they want and negotiate collaboration and timeframes for the transition.

But career planning is complex and at times external, neutral facilitation and coaching is necessary to help get to the bottom of what motivates someone to enable change to happen in the best possible way.

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