

Key lessons

“A good manager ... isn't worried about [his or her] own career but rather the careers of those who work for [him or her].” -H.S.M. Burns, president of Shell

Introduction

What do the people who report to you want to experience in their life's work, and how will their current jobs help them do it?

It's a big question, and if you're really not sure — or can only provide superficial answers — you're not alone. According to a [recent article in Forbes](#), “... 66 percent of employees aren't discussing their career path with their managers during the first critical 90 days, and 40 percent aren't even talking about it during annual performance reviews.”

Why is this happening (or *not* happening, as the case may be)? If you're among the majority of managers avoiding career conversations, maybe you're so busy with day-to-day tasks you view “career pathing” as a luxury, or even an impossibility. Maybe you think covering it in annual performance reviews is enough. Or maybe you fear opening the door to a bunch of demands you can't meet, questions you can't answer, and problems you can't solve.

These are all understandable concerns. They're also all overshadowed by one unavoidable truth: everyone cares about their future. Deeply. And when managers don't make it their business to care about their direct reports' futures too, their apathy can have a disastrous effect, de-motivating and potentially driving people away. According to Gallup's most recent [State of the American Workplace](#) report, 70 percent of U.S. employees aren't engaged at work (i.e., they either come to work every day but are “checked out,” or are actively disengaged), and among the more than 25 million employees polled, the existence of “opportunities to learn and grow” at work ranks among the top five drivers affecting engagement.

Identifying and exploring such opportunities with your team presents an opportunity for *you* — the opportunity to help your company beat these glum statistics and, in the process, become the kind of leader who truly changes lives. It's within your reach. It won't be easy, but it will be worth it. And you can start today by integrating the lessons below into your management philosophy.

1. Your team is thinking about career issues — whether you talk about them or not.

You think about *your* career — why wouldn't your direct reports think about theirs? What, if anything, do you really stand to gain from avoiding career conversations? The truth is not much. Even an awkward conversation is better than none, because radio silence sends the message that you can't be bothered to think about something that really matters to your team members.

Step up to the plate. Some managers opt to check in on career goals during weekly 1-on-1s. Others put the ball in their direct reports' court, but do so in an encouraging way (e.g., “*Your career development matters to me, so please feel free to schedule four or five one-hour sessions with me over the course of the year to discuss your long-term*”



goals”). There’s no “right” approach; simply having one, versus ignoring the whole topic, will demonstrate you give a hoot.

2. To help others grow, you may need to grow your own empathy and credibility.

Empathy is critical — and can be learned, by the way — because you won’t get far helping others sort out their careers if you’re unable to put yourself in their shoes and understand what really matters to them. You also won’t get far if your direct reports question your credibility and motives; career issues are typically sensitive, and even if you ask all the right questions, you’ll need a foundation of trust to get authentic answers.

See our articles [5 ways to boost your emotional intelligence](#) and [How to earn trust](#) for tips on improving yourself in these key areas.

3. Helping people manage their careers doesn’t necessarily mean helping them “climb the ladder.”

According to experienced manager [Michael Zippiroli](#), “People generally get career management confused with promotions and moving up the ladder.” Many experts today liken career growth more to a jungle gym or a rock-climbing wall.

Even if you’re not a fan of cheesy metaphors, you can probably agree there are more directions to go than up in today’s work world. Lateral moves, cross-departmental roles, backward moves that better position someone for growth, and even no moves at all could make perfect sense in different contexts. This broader perspective will serve you well in addressing your direct reports’ varied needs.

4. Career issues are inherently messy, diverse and ever-changing — which means you need to be a.) very flexible and b.) very open-minded.

Ask 20 people how they define career success and you’ll probably get 20 different answers. To make things even more confusing, ask those same people a year later, and they probably won’t say the same thing they said last time!

This is why Alison Hu, a former director of talent at Yahoo!, advises, “Managers need to be flexible enough to have different kinds of career conversations.” Be ready for anything, at any time, and stretch yourself to think beyond the paradigm of success you apply to your own professional development.

5. Real growth typically happens less through formal training programs than through on-the-job learning.

You and your direct reports may automatically associate the development needed for career growth with formal training — courses, webinars, conferences. And yet it’s undeniable that a lot of learning happens on the job.

What does this mean for managers? The feedback you give, tasks you delegate, people you connect your direct reports to and other daily things you do as a manager can usually be explicitly linked to your direct reports’ career goals. That’s something you can remind yourself — *and them* — whenever you perform these essential tasks. And guess what? It takes very little extra time to explain how something you’ve delegated, for example, will not only help the team reach a performance goal, but could also help your direct report get better at a skill related to a career goal.

6. There’s sometimes a difference between what people think (and say) they want, and what they *really* want out of their careers.

First of all, it can be intimidating for people to tell their boss what they really want out of their careers. Maybe they want your job, or want to leave your team — and that’s hard to say. Second, people often don’t know *themselves*

what they want; they might be overwhelmed by choices, or think they want something but have no idea what it actually entails.

For example, a lot of people say they want to go into management, because that's the typical path "up." But do they really grasp what a manager does? And is it possible they could be saying it's what they want because they think that's what you and others in their lives *want* them to want? There's a lot of social pressure to "succeed" in the traditional sense of the word.

With some of your direct reports, you may never peel back all of these layers. That's perfectly OK. But usually the opportunity to have a significant impact on someone's career comes when you get beneath the surface.

7. Asking good questions about career issues is usually a lot more helpful than providing answers.

It might be appropriate to give advice on occasion — for example, if someone wants to follow in your footsteps and you have some relevant lessons learned to share. But great managers tend to focus less on telling others what *they've* done or would do, and more on helping their direct reports figure out what's best for them. What's these managers' secret? Good questions.

It might be the old standby "*Where do you see yourself in three years?*" or something that could uncover clues about the person's true interests, such as "*What kinds of things are you typically doing when you lose track of time?*" or "*What's something you'd like to learn more about?*" Ask, listen and just be there. If your interest and desire to help are genuine, your team's trust and appreciation for you will grow — along with their understanding of their career goals and options.

For more tips, see our [Coaching](#) topic.

Next: [5 common career drivers](#)