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Having a Career Conversation with Your Manager

By Joe Stein

The thought of having a career conversation with your Manager may be enough to make many employees' stomach churn. How do I begin? What do I say? What if I don't like what my Manager says? All legitimate questions for a person to wonder about, but having a career conversation is crucial for a person, especially someone who is thinking about leaving an organization.

So, if you are currently employed, you are probably doing a bit of disservice to yourself if you don't have some type of conversation about your job and career prior to beginning your search. The idea is not to publicly declare that "you will be looking" or even to overtly tip off your Manager, but rather to explore what plans and options there are in the company for you prior to you making a decision whether or not to search.

- **Focus on Career Goals and Aspirations** – By doing this, you can help ensure that the conversation stays positive. It may be tempting to drag into the conversation your current job problems or any dissatisfaction, but doing this may serve to place your Manager on the defensive and will chill the conversation. You don't want the conversation to come off like you are complaining so do not blame anyone (especially your Manager) for your current spot in the organization.
- **Reinforce Your Strengths** – Share with your Manager where you feel some of your strengths reside. Check to see if there is an agreement on the same areas. This will allow you to determine how to maintain (or even elevate) those strengths and focus clearer on your opportunities.
- **Discuss Your Opportunities** – A key to anyone who is successful in moving up internally in an organization, is having a strong advocate as a Manager. Rarely is someone successful without a Manager who is pulling for you and assisting in your development rather than looking at you as a potential threat. Discuss what areas you believe you need to develop and determine what can be done to help you. The conversation will help you gauge what level of support you can expect to receive from your Manager.
- **Come Prepared** – Decide ahead of time what you want to achieve from the meeting and come prepared with what you would like to accomplish in order to meet your goals. Ultimately, the employee needs to own his or her career development, so be ready with where you think you are and what you need. Prepare your Manager also by providing a heads up that you would like to discuss your career goals. Don't just "spring a meeting" on him/her with little to no notice. You will hope that they will also spend some preparation time prior to the meeting.

- Have an Open Mind – The best feedback is honest and specific. If you are going to ask your Manager where they perceive you to be and what you need to achieve your goals, be ready for the feedback. Listen intently to what information is provided and refrain from becoming defensive or debating your Manager. Ask for specific examples if you have any confusion regarding the feedback being provided. Be sure to thank your Manager for both the time and the candor provided.
- Pick the Right Time – The conversation should be scheduled in advance and at a time when your Manager can focus on you. For example, a Monday A.M. (everyone is busy) or Friday P.M. (weekend mindset) meeting is typically not ideal for this type of discussion. This should also not be an extension of your Performance Review. The idea is that this conversation should be focused on your future rather than a review of the past.
- Stretch Yourself – Communicate to your Manager that you are interested in assignments that will allow you to learn, succeed, and develop a positive reputation in the organization. These assignments may be in addition to your current job duties (i.e., a stretch assignment), but the extra effort and work may provide you with a real career boost.
- Follow-Up – If the conversation went well and you mentally decide to stay with the organization, then it will be a key to not just have what is discussed pass without anything accomplished. Create a development plan that you will be able to cover with your Manager at periodic times (perhaps once a quarter), as this will help to ensure that both of you stay on track.

A career conversation may seem like a frightening event, but the reality is a strong Manager will look forward to the conversation. Good Managers want employees who have career desires and ambitions. In fact, the really good ones will enjoy helping you reach those goals. At the very least, the conversation will help you determine if you should stay, or whether it is time to move on with your job search.