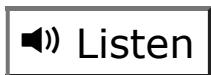## Abstract

Examine high-performing organizations and you will find an important part of their success is fantastic communication. The communication is clear, transparent, iterative, conversational, and proactive. Unfortunately, organizations often have the opposite regarding communication. Trends show that people don't know how they tie into the bigger picture, they want more feedback and coaching from their managers, more input on their performance, they want discussions on their careers, and to know they are fairly compensated. Essentially, managers need to become proficient at five conversations, and they must help employees understand what is needed of them. The conversations are: 1. Discuss what the employee needs to do. 2. Discuss how employees are doing along the way to help them succeed. 3. Discuss how the employee

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Headnote

One of the most reliable ways to overcome obstacles is to communicate and get everyone on the same page. Here are some tips to make these conversations more effective.

Examine high-performing organizations and you will find an important part of their success is fantastic communication. The communication is clear, transparent, iterative, conversational, and proactive. Unfortunately, organizations often have the opposite regarding communication. Trends show that people don't know how they tie into the bigger picture, they want more feedback and coaching from their managers, more input on their performance, they want discussions on their careers, and to know they are fairly compensated.

The effort and skill level needed for effective communication is minimal compared to the incredible benefits that are possible. It can seem overwhelming but it's really not when you break it down. Essentially, managers need to become proficient at these five conversations, and they must help employees understand what is needed of them, as follows:

* Discuss what the employee needs to do.

* Discuss how employees are doing along the way to help them succeed.

* Discuss how the employee did.

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* Discuss what the employee will get if he or she achieves the results.

* Discuss and help employees continue to develop.

Managers are well positioned for success if they develop competence in engaging employees in these five conversations. When done well, these conversations help unleash an employee's potential. Let's dive into each of these conversations.

Conversation One- What You Need to Do

You wouldn't get into a car with someone without telling where he or she needed to go and important considerations along the way. Employees working without clear performance expectations/ goals is the equivalent to just that. It's simply foolish. Too many issues stem from this not being done or not being done well.

Manager's Role

At the end of the day, the manager is ultimately accountable for the employee's performance. It is prudent, therefore, to make sure employees are engaged and clear on what is needed from them. Managers are wise to ensure measures are in place to indicate whether employees are on track so they know when to reinforce or course correct.

Employee's Role

Employees are ultimately responsible for their performance. An employee who is highly engaged and clear on what great performance looks like is more likely to succeed. When an employee has influence and ownership, he or she has more passion around the work. All employees should go after getting this information and clarity with gusto. What's the down side? The potential downside of not achieving the results is so much

worse and much more likely. Employees should come with a point of view based on informed company insights and data. Employees should pursue clarity until their deliverables are fully understood. Firmly commit and then over-deliver.

Pitfalls

* If this work is done too late in the performance cycle, it is demotivating and limits the likelihood of success.

* When performance expectations contain desired results that are just purely unachievable, employees tend to throw in the towel at the start.

* When the measures are irrelevant or complicated, they can work counterproductively.

* When changes that occur throughout the year are not taken into consideration and deliverables aren't modified, you will have an issue at the end.

* When either party feels like it is the other person's responsibility rather than fully acknowledging the shared responsibility, and, in turn, the huge upside, you are in trouble before you even start.

Best Practice Ideas

* This is a positive and proactive opportunity for engagement and should be treated as such. The focus is not on stress and pressure, but opportunity for success.

* When performance expectations are set from team brainstorming based on current-year priorities, powerful ideas can surface.

* When performance expectations are linked to the strategic direction of the company, employees feel more engaged.

* When managers share their goals, the employee can gain clarity much quicker.

* When the process has an automated component to make it easier to share information, it is easier, faster, and can be linked to the other elements of talent management.

* Agreements should be in writing. Miscommunication happens all the time even with the most well-intentioned individuals.

Conversation Two-How You Are Doing

Almost every professional athlete has a coach. Athletes are looking constantly for input and compare what they are doing against what they should and could do to be the best. They have a deep interest in achieving success. Can you imagine the power of an organization if employees and managers brought this maniacal, focus to employee performance and development?

Manager's Role

Coaching and feedback are two skills that can be developed to a very high degree. Coaching cannot be seen as another thing to do, however. It needs to be a persona similar to being a mother, a volunteer, or an executive-in other words, who he or she is as a person. With that mindset, all else follows. Effective coaching requires assessing the situation, engaging the person well, providing feedback, offering suggestions, or

connecting people with resources to help them. The greatest coaches care and organize their time and efforts to help people succeed. For some reason, it is acceptable for managers to perform poorly in this area. It's actually non-negotiable to be anything but great in this area because it is so essential and when done well, transformational.

Employee's Role

Employees need to seek input actively regardless of how their manager approaches coaching and feedback. The employee is responsible for his or her behavior and performance. An employee is foolish to leave this in the hands of anyone else. Seeking input from multiple sources and soliciting ideas for improvement can sometimes take courage, but in the long run are well worth the effort. Employees need to be open-minded about what is offered to them because it may not be what they want to hear. A great question for employees to ask is "If you were in my shoes and were to do this again, what would you do more or less of to be even more successful?" That question is non-threatening in so many ways and generally nets great insights.

Pitfalls

* If employees don't feel safe in the relationship, they will shy away from coaching and feedback.

* If employees only hear negative feedback, they may not be receptive to soliciting input.

* If the manager approaches the input for his/ her own benefit, employees can sense this and become leery of it.

* When feedback and coaching is given at the wrong time or place, it can be undermined.

Best Practice Ideas

* Informal and formal checkpoints work best for being able to provide feedback on how someone is doing.

* The use of multiple sources for input gives a well-rounded picture.

* When in doubt-ask. What's the worst that can happen?

* When managers consider a person's style and how he or she communicates, and, in turn, package things so the employee can hear them, then the time to adopt the input is much quicker.

* Focus on specifics such as the absence or presence of the behavior being addressed or performance result. Give context and use examples. The more fact based, the better.

Conversation Three-How You Did

There has been so much drama and trauma in organizations in relation to the performance review process. Previously, all the emphasis was on the review and very little attention to the first two conversations. The reality is if you do a good job in the first two conversations then this third conversation is almost irrelevant. It becomes the period at the end of the sentence that was written all year long.

Manager's Role

First and foremost, managers need to ensure these conversations happen for several reasons: 10 bring closure to one performance cycle, to know how to compensate someone in upcoming merit increases and bonuses if applicable, to confirm insights that can be used in the next performance cycle and development plan, to document results to protect the company, and provide clear and final messages to the employee about the impact of missing results or delivering outstanding results. Surprises have no place in the performance review. Managers who blindside employees in performance reviews should be fired because that means the manager has not been doing his or her job. These discussions should merely serve as uneventful summaries.

Employee's Role

As with everything else, the more the employee plays a role in this, the better off he or she is in the long run. Regardless of what the manager does, be sure to do a self-review and solicit input from key stakeholders. Document and, if for some reason your manager doesn't conduct a review, email your manager this self-review with a request to meet. Documentation can work in your favor if you have an issue down the line. Come to the review with an open mind and look for ways to leam from this year's performance cycle and how things were done to be even more successful next year.

Pitfalls

* The feedback doesn't reflect the full year.

* Data isn't used to substantiate final assessments.

* The employee is not involved in the process.

* Not enough time is spent on creating the document or meeting.

* It is not actually documented or it is written poorly.

Best Practice Ideas

* Encourage an employee to keep an "I love me" file to use and share with the manager as examples of good results.

* The manager and the employee should use a quick process of five to 10 minutes each month to determine what can I do more of? Less of? Stop/start/continue? What is at risk? What different resources are needed? It's easy, fast, and can be insightful.

* Have a dashboard of red/yellow/green to indicate how you are tracking and capture that monthly. This can make the final summation process quite easy.

* In terms of the meeting, take an employee out to eat for the review. It diffuses a tough conversation or celebrates a happy one, but either way, it sends a message that the employee is important and valued.

Conversation Four-Money

People have a reasonable expectation to be compensated fairly for the work done and results accomplished. Companies that have a tight link to rewards and performance get more of the desired behaviors and results. Pay-for-performance is a wonderful model to motivate people to accomplish great things.

Manager's Role

Managers need to have the courage to align pay with results. That may mean that not everyone gets a raise or a bonus. While those are tough conversations to have, the exponential contributions of top performers over everyone else should drive managers to find the courage to have these conversations. Managers should ensure employees fully understand how they are being paid. If the pay can be modified, managers need to ensure employees understand the circumstances in which they would be paid more or less.

Employee's Role

If there are any areas that an employee is unclear on regarding how he or she is compensated, the employee needs to ask.

Pitfalls

* Not fulfilling commitments for arbitrary reasons is the quickest way to have employees disengage.

* Leaders at the top make changes in the final compensation decisions and managers don't have good explanations to give to employees about why this happened.

* Managers sometimes take the money they have been allotted and spread it evenly across all employees without differentiating based on performance. This is a really bad strategy. Top performers catch on to this quickly and either leave or drop their performance while mediocre or poor performers continue what they are doing.

Best Practice Ideas

* Have this conversation up front as part of the performance expectation process.

* Check in along the year about how people are tracking and if all continues, what this looks like at the end of the year.

* If company financial performance is a factor in compensation decisions, provide updates at least quarterly about how the company is doing against its financial goals.

* All parties need to be open, transparent, and very honest through this process to ensure good results.

Conversation Five-"How You Need to Grow"

For companies, it is simply smart business sense to continue to invest, evolve, and stretch the biggest asset it has-employees. For employees, it is just good sense to add to your skill set and experience to remain employable and marketable. As obvious as these two things are-both companies and employees routinely ignore or fall down in the area of short-term and long-term employee development.

Manager's Role

Managers should be constantly looking at what capabilities are needed for the organization and how employees are lining up against those needs. By focusing on development, managers look to execute the performance commitments in the short term and help the company fulfill the strategic business goals in the long term, Additionally, employees who are developed consistently within a company tend to have higher retention rates for many reasons. This is an essential business practice and strategic imperative, not a nice-to-do as it has been treated as such in the past.

Employee's Role

It should be obvious what the employee's role should be, which is to develop every day. An employee should relentlessly pursue being better every day. While managers can play a big and powerful role in helping them, it doesn't mean employees will have a manager who understands this and adds value in this area. At the end of the day, it is fully the employee's responsibility to continue to evolve what he or she brings to the table. At the end of the day, employees have careers, organizations don't.

Pitfalls

* The obvious pitfall is to not spend time on development or to spend time on only immediate needs.

* A focus on the development plan (next 12 months) only and not the career plan (three to five years).

* Use of a single approach to develop rather than a multi-point approach to ensure knowledge or skill acquisition.

* Managers feeling they need to have all the answers. They don't. They need to be good at helping find the answer.

* Investment in people is often the first thing to be cut from a budget but the long-term implications of that can be detrimental to an organization and to the employees.

Best Practice Ideas

* Consider doing small amounts of development work over longer amounts of time. It is a great strategy. Think about it as if you were exercising. Doing something 30 minutes a day, six days a week nets better results than only three hours on Saturday.

* Create a plan. Work the plan. That's a good plan.

* Solicit input from a variety of stakeholders to determine a coordinated view of strengths and areas for improvement.

* Commit to lifelong learning.

* Commitment to helping employees achieve success and creating a learning culture where development is expected and supported will make organizations successful.

Conclusion

None of this work is difficult. It's actually pretty obvious and intuitive if you think about it. Approaching it with full commitment with a focus on keeping it simple will make these important conversations easy and productive. The path ahead is so full of opportunity, and these five conversations can help accelerate your success on this path.

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Kim Janson is the CEO of Janson Associates, a firm dedicated to unleashing people's potential. She has more than 20 years' experience working in 40 different countries in senior roles such as chief talent management officer at the H.J. Heinz Company; senior vice president leadership development at Bank of America; and a senior leader at Hasbro, BancBoston Mortgage, and Bank of Boston. Janson abo coaches for the Harvard Business School. She is the author of Demystifying Talent Management: Unleash People's Potential to Deliver Superior Results. For more information, contact Janson at Kim@jansonassodates.com.

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