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TIPS, TOOLS & INTELLIGENCE
FOR DEVELOPING TALENT

5 CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS
TO TALENT DEVELOPMENT

Julie Haddock-Millar and David Clutterbuck

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HUMAN CAPITAL

5 CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS TO TALENT DEVELOPMENT

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Critical conversations in the workplace have the power to create change, including shifts in perspective, knowledge, and understanding, all of which are vital to talent development. These conversations take employee development beyond the annual performance review and provide an important tool for managers and talent developers to grow employees' talent and secure the most appropriate talent at the right time.

According to research from both *People Management* and the *Harvard Business Review*, numerous organizations–including Accenture, Adobe, Deloitte, Expedia, Gap, and Microsoft–are shifting toward a more dynamic, responsive, and informal approach to talent development. Employees are demanding more ongoing conversation and regular feedback that is less formulaic and more timely, responsive, and authentic. These trends have signaled a move away from annual appraisal systems–which are shown to be expensive to administer and lacking in any empirical evidence of impact–toward regular check-ins. These check-ins, or conversations, take many forms.

This issue of *TD at Work* will describe:

- the purpose of conversation in the workplace

- five critical conversations to further talent development

- barriers to these conversations

- necessary skills to lay the groundwork for these conversations

- how talent development professionals can facilitate critical conversations.

THE PURPOSE OF CONVERSATION

In her book, *The Art of Conversation*, Judy Apps explains that "the word 'conversation' is made up of *con*, 'with,' and *versare*, 'turn.' Conversation is turn and turn about–you alternate." A genuine conversation must be a two-way exchange involving debate, discussion, or dialogue. In the context of mentoring, quality conversations support learners':

- developmental growth in knowledge, technical competence, and behavioral competence

- career needs, including career goals, aspirations, and growth

- identification of enabling levers, such as a development plan, career plan, learning resources, and a wider network of opportunities

- emotional needs, including increased confidence, altruistic satisfaction, reflective space, status, and intellectual challenge.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION

A 2010 Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development study that focused on harnessing the power of employee communication found that "lateral communication between departments and teams, not simply vertical communication between managers and workers," is an important social dimension in the organization.

In 2014, the *Harvard Business Review* placed the spotlight on the 21st-century workspace. The article showed that in Silicon Valley, there is a tight correlation between personal interactions, performance, and innovation. The chief of human resources at Yahoo explained that "some of the best decisions and insights come from hallway and cafeteria discussions."

The 2014 *Harvard Business Review* article describes how a pharmaceutical company undertook a study identifying how patterns of communication affect outcomes. Approximately 50 executives who were responsible for nearly $1 billion in annual sales were unable to identify which behaviors they would need to develop to increase sales. "The data collected over several weeks showed that when a sales person increased interactions with co-workers on other teams—that is, increased exploration—by 10%, his or her sales grew by 10%."

PERFORMANCE REVIEW TRENDS

Research and experts are weighing in on the need to change how we do talent development. Here are a few examples:

In a 2015 interview with *Inside HR*, David Arkell, GE Australia and New Zealand's human resources leader, noted that "the annual performance review is dead … it's got to be much more frequent and much more regular."

PricewaterhouseCooper's 2015 Performance Management Research involving the re-thinking, re-aligning, and re-energizing of performance management revealed a shift toward a continuous feedback culture rather than the annual review process.

Hayley Kirton, writing for *People Management* magazine, suggests that as many as two-thirds of organizations are considering revamping their appraisal process, with one in 20 looking to move away from formal evaluations completely.

The nature and quality of conversations vary significantly from individual to team and organization. To shift an organization's culture and working practices, we must first accept that conversation is critical and that good conversation is a subtle art that requires nurturing and developing.

In our work on coaching and mentoring, a useful framework has been the levels of conversation (Figure 1). Each level has the potential to increase the depth and impact of dialogue. As one progresses from one level to the next, deeper questions are probed. Let's look at how these levels of conversation support learning and talent development.

> CONVERSATION IS CRITICAL, AND GOOD CONVERSATION IS A SUBTLE ART THAT REQUIRES NURTURING AND DEVELOPING.

Social

Social dialogue is about developing friendship and providing support and encouragement; it is essential for building connections and relationships, including those in the workplace. High-performing employees tend to have a much wider and higher quality of social networks than their lower-performing peers.

These networks usually have two main functions. One is *informational*—people who provide access to information that helps the individual make better decisions, understand context, and recognize opportunities. The second is *instrumental*—people through whom we get things done. In informational networks, the social exchange is knowledge, ranging from useful hints and tips, to transfer of skills and know-how. In instrumental networks, the exchange is primarily one of influence, which includes the shoring up of favors.

In terms of talent development, TD managers might ask themselves these questions about the social level of dialogue:

- How can I help people build and maintain social networks?

- How can I facilitate the identification of common points of interest in the workforce?

- How can I encourage people to talk openly about their interests and concerns?

Technical

Technical dialogue helps employees learn about work processes, policies, and systems, all of which are essential in acquiring skills and expertise. Highly effective talent development professionals, including managers, are precise about the skills and knowledge they need to acquire; and they aim to acquire them in the most efficient way. In our research on high-performing teams, one of the key factors we have identified is the willingness to share and ask for expertise on a just-in-time basis. Line managers need to create a climate within their department where this sharing can happen naturally.

FIGURE 1. LEVELS OF CONVERSATION

Level	Characteristics
Social	Vital for building elements of rapport, particularly trust, which in turn deepens a sense of shared values and mutual positive feelings
Technical	Built around sharing information that is needed to get tasks done. It requires clarity, asking questions, and checking understanding
Tactical	Requires participants to examine and evaluate different workplace options
Strategic	Explores a wider range of options than tactical conversations and develops scenarios around them, weighing benefits of each
Self-insight	Shifts the perspective from the external to the internal and addresses issues such as awareness of personal values and understanding one's strengths and weaknesses
Behavioral change	Involves making and implementing plans for personal evolution
Integrative dialogue	Examines deeper questions about personal identity and awareness of one's role as part of the human system

For talent development professionals, questions related to the technical level include:

- How can I encourage and facilitate conversations and relationships between employees who are highly effective and those who need development in a specific area?

- How can I ensure employees' levels of knowledge and understanding are transparent?

- How can I ensure just-in-time advice is available to all employees?

Tactical

Tactical dialogue helps employees figure out practical ways of dealing with issues in their work and personal life. With respect to career, these types of conversations revolve around what to do next, where to go next, and what is involved in the next steps. For example, what projects will help me gain the specific experience and track record I need?

This is an issue of particular importance in the context of supporting the advancement of women in the workplace. Project teams are one of the key ways to acquire reputation and positive visibility. Unfortunately, women are less likely to be appointed to the most high-profile, reputation-building project teams. Helping employees identify and pitch for membership of such teams is potentially one of the most effective levers for both talent management and diversity management.

For talent development to be furthered on the tactical level, these questions are relevant to TD professionals:

- How can I encourage employees to gain the variety of perspectives they need to make informed tactical decisions about career options? For example, can I connect my employee with subject matter experts?

- How can I help people gain the right balance between a focus on specific progression (linear perspectives) and openness to unforeseen opportunities (systemic perspectives)?

- How can I influence the organization to make project team membership an integral and significant part of talent development?

Strategic

Strategic dialogue helps employees take a broader perspective and consider opportunities and their own ambitions within a wider context; it is essential in aligning employee and employer ambitions and needs. The more that conversation informs employees about potential opportunities and informs employers about shifting capabilities and aspirations of employees, the easier alignment becomes.

What frequently happens today is that the organization has a great deal of information about likely future developments, but its leadership does not share these scenarios with employees. At the same time, employees tend to keep their career aspirations close to the chest, especially when they don't fully align with opportunities or career paths mapped out for them. Understanding what people have the energy and enthusiasm for, as well as the expectations they hold about their career progression, helps to link strategy with employee capability and interests.

> THE MORE THAT CONVERSATION INFORMS EMPLOYEES ABOUT POTENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES AND INFORMS EMPLOYERS ABOUT SHIFTING CAPABILITIES AND ASPIRATIONS OF EMPLOYEES, THE EASIER ALIGNMENT BECOMES.

At the strategic level, the talent development professional may ponder:

- How can I encourage and facilitate sharing of information between different groups of employees? For example, might I schedule a regular biweekly meeting so that employees' calendars are cleared to make conversation a priority?

- How can I help the organization listen better to employee aspirations and use this information in workforce planning?

- How can I help employees understand the broader context within which they operate?

Self-Insight

Self-insight is a deeper level of conversation that helps employees understand their own ambitions, energies, uncertainties, and thinking patterns. Self-insight is critical to raising employees' awareness of their strengths, weaknesses, values, and motivations, therefore helping them make better career choices. This will enable the company to determine what roles will allow employees to express and develop their talents.

Coaching and mentoring are essential tools that help people link a deeper understanding of their internal contexts with greater awareness of the world around them (the external context). This is the starting point for performance improvement and positive behavior change. One of the relevant skills is ensuring that other people give you timely, honest, and relevant feedback, rather than relying on occasional psychometrics or other supports from HR.

To encourage self-insight among employees, these are a few questions for talent development professionals:

- How can I encourage and facilitate employees' self-insights?

- How can I encourage line managers to create time and space for employees to think through and come to terms with their own self-knowledge?

- What tools does the organization use to assist employees with self-discovery? For example, do we encourage the use of journals and provide a space where employees can reflect on their career trajectory?

Behavioral Change

Behavioral dialogue helps employees combine insight, strategy, and tactics into a personal planning approach, which is essential if employees are going to shift into a different role in the organization. Behavior change is often a necessary precursor to making that shift to the next position.

For behavioral changes to take effect and be sustainable, it is important that both individuals and those around them adapt. Modern talent management increasingly sees this as a systemic issue—helping people understand the systems of which they are a part helps them change. It also shifts accountability more firmly onto the employee's shoulders, rather than on the manager or organization.

> SELF-INSIGHT IS CRITICAL TO RAISING EMPLOYEES' AWARENESS OF THEIR STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, VALUES, AND MOTIVATIONS, THEREFORE HELPING THEM MAKE BETTER CAREER CHOICES.

To facilitate behavior change, here are a few questions for talent development professionals to consider:

- How can I encourage continuing and honest dialogue that addresses the needs of the individual and the wider team? Are there regular meetings scheduled to discuss careers—beyond the yearly performance review? Is there truly an open-door policy, not just in name but integrated into the organization's culture? Do I walk around the offices and make myself visible to employees?

- Why is change important for employees, teams, and the organization? How can I reinforce the need for change?

- How can I encourage a commitment to change?

Integrative

Integrative dialogue, which is sometimes called transpersonal dialogue, helps employees develop a clear sense of self and personal meaning. It involves determining who they are, what they contribute, and how they fit in—which are all essential in developing more perceptive, holistic, and authentic ways of thinking and behaving. These conversations are particularly useful when the person is evolving in identity.

The transition from one level of adult maturity to another, as described by Robert Kegan and others, changes the way people relate to the world around them and requires them to address how

the person they aspire to be aligns with the roles they play. This reflective process can lead to a radical shift in career direction or job role. If that means losing the employee, better to do so while that employee is energized by her work than when it is an impediment to her personal growth.

At this deepest level of conversation, some questions in the talent development realm are:

- How can I ensure that life transitions are positive experiences for both employees and the organization?

- How can I help employees, teams, and the organization explore genuinely diverse perspectives? For example, are there internal groups that bring together employees from different nations or generations or from different branches of the company (marketing, sales, and so on) to learn from each other?

- How can I help employees to develop a multifaceted picture of themselves, through consideration of past, present, and future actions? For example, the manager could ask an employee, "What would your 25-year-old self have done in this situation? How would he have reacted?"

> INTEGRATIVE DIALOGUE HELPS EMPLOYEES DEVELOP A CLEAR SENSE OF SELF AND PERSONAL MEANING.

FIVE CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

Now that we've looked at the *levels* of conversation and how deeper levels of conversation can incite greater and more meaningful change, let's look at the *types* of conversations that help employees delve deeper into exploring career choices and personal growth.

From our numerous interviews with human resource management professionals and recent research with the United Kingdom local government sector, five critical conversations have emerged that play a key role in talent development:

- internal dialogue

- systemic dialogue with immediate stakeholders

- employee/organizational dialogue

- social networking dialogue

- human resources, senior management, and line manager dialogue.

In the job aid, Questions Tool for Critical Conversations, you will see a list of specific questions for each of these conversation types.

These five types of conversations map very well onto the seven levels of conversation. They provide clear contexts in which each of the levels may be relevant. No matter the conversation type, an absence or limited amount of conversation at any of the lower six levels, from social to behavior change, undermines the openness and effectiveness of the integrative dialogue.

Internal Dialogue

For this type of conversation, the employee does the reflection by thinking about and asking questions in these areas:

- Self-awareness. Reflection on identity and values, self-belief, and self-motivation.

- Environmental awareness. What is going on around me, and how do I relate to it?

- Purpose. What do I want to achieve for myself and others? Who do I want to become?

- Strengths and weaknesses. What do I do well? What don't I do well? What new strengths am I developing?

- Green, amber, and red zones. Things that are going well, warning signs that should be kept on the employee's radar screen to revisit soon, and current or emerging problems. Clarifying and making these issues evident allows the employee to discuss them with his manager, HR, or a mentor or colleague, with a view to finding practical solutions at an early stage.

Systemic Dialogue With Immediate Stakeholders

Often it is helpful to seek others' guidance or just have someone listen to where your head is. At other times, it is critical to have conversations with immediate stakeholders—for example, when a job move is going to affect a spouse or children. These are examples of this type of conversation:

- sharing information and expertise with a work team

- reflecting with family about values, needs, and practical issues

- identifying people who have expertise and experience employees can learn from

- determining which people on the team have relevant networks that can provide insight

- asking how family members can articulate their needs in relation to the employee's.

Employee/Organizational Dialogue

These conversations will help determine what individual talent exists in the organization and address organizational skills gaps. They can include:

- macro conversations (with employees as a whole)

- micro conversations (with individual employees)

- high-quality career conversations between the organization and its people to share information, aspirations, and ideas

- conversations to develop scenarios for career development and discuss with key stakeholders

- conversations to understand the collective ambitions of employees and groups.

Social Networking Dialogue

Some social dialogues can take place informally. For example, the organization could have monthly pizza parties where employees learn from each

other or pay for employees' membership in professional associations so they can attend formal and informal events to share ideas with others. These are examples of social networking:

- conversations within the profession or organization

- conversations with peers in other professions

- conversations the organization and the individual have with the external world

- conversations to understand the quality of the relationships between network members

- conversations to understand how to harness the network to develop career opportunities.

HR, Senior Management, and Line Manager Dialogue

All too often, managers are given responsibility without training. They may need ongoing support so they can, in turn, support their employees. Also, senior leaders need to maintain open communication with managers so managers are aware of larger strategic directions of the organization.

These are some of the topics this type of conversation might involve:

- how to encourage and support line managers in their roles as talent developers

- the organization's talent management strategy

- changes in the organization's business and talent management strategy

- the line manager's ability to hold developmental conversations with her team

- the line manager's willingness to support movement in his team.

CONVERSATIONS IN PRACTICE

What do these conversations look like in practice? Consider this account of a manager grappling with career transition and work-life balance. The

account shows how the five conversations help with decision making.

The Situation

I have worked for my employer in the retail sector for 17 years and am somewhat institutionalized because this has been my only employer. I have always worked long hours, including weekends, evenings, and overnight shifts. I had come to accept that this is a characteristic of the retail environment, and it wasn't a problem before I had children. But having a young family (with children ages 1 and 2) changed that, and it grew increasingly difficult to maintain a healthy balance between the demands of my job and family.

Two years ago, I had an opportunity to take a job in the company's head office in a more strategic role that would allow me to stretch my thinking, knowledge, and leadership skills. It was an opportunity to grow in my career and have a healthier work-life balance. Nonetheless, I was hesitant. I had a number of questions and considerations.

Internal Dialogue

I was grappling internally with several issues:

- *Comfort Zone/Security*. I would be moving away from a role I could do exceptionally well, even on "autopilot." What if I couldn't adapt to a different way of working, a different culture, and new people? Would this hinder my ability to progress?

- *Finances*. In my retail-store role, I had Wednesdays off, during which time I was responsible for child care. Moving to a Monday to Friday job would mean a net income loss of 25 percent due to additional child-care costs, along with increased travel costs. Could my family and I afford these costs?

- *Flexibility*. Would I still have the flexibility I needed if I worked 30 miles away versus my current four miles from home?

- *Aspirations*. What did I want to do in the long term? I had previously taken a short-term view to my career; this opportunity

would potentially take me into a more strategic rather than operational role. Is this something I wanted?

Stakeholder Conversations

I felt it was important to talk through what the opportunity could mean with people I valued and trusted and who would help me reflect more fully on my and my family's needs. These included:

- my wife

- my current line manager

- my potential new line manager

- a close colleague

- our organization's HR/TD manager.

Wife

I wanted to explore whether I could make the move into the office work for both my home life and career. Naturally, the majority of these conversations were with my wife and focused on our ability to absorb the additional child-care and travel costs. We also talked about the effect a change to our routine would have on our home life. It would be a huge benefit to be able to play a bigger part in our children's upbringing and spend quality time as a family on weekends and in the evening. We agreed that I should try to find out as much about moving to the office as possible, so I sought guidance from additional stakeholders.

Current Line Manager

I had a good relationship with my line manager, and I discussed with her my desire to achieve a better work-life balance and grow as a manager. My line manager was objective and impartial and advised me that it was a great opportunity. Moving to the office from the store would enable me to broaden my thinking and understand the business more widely. This would, in turn, improve my marketability for future jobs inside or outside the organization. I would be exposed to senior managers within the business and have a platform to showcase my brand and gain sponsorship from senior figures across the business.

New Line Manager

Conversations with the person who would be my new line manager centered on his expectations, along with the differences in culture and practices in the office as opposed to in stores. My priority was to understand his perspective about having a young family and the flexibility that may be required. I also wanted to understand a bit more about his career path: how he viewed his progress in the organization and his approach to supporting and developing his team. If I was going to leave the safety of my current job, it had to be for the right role and the right manager.

Colleague

I also talked at length with a colleague who had made the transition from store to the office; she also had a young family. My purpose was to understand the difference in culture, how she adapted to this, and what I could take away from her. I found her insight into her career transition and work-life balance incredibly helpful.

HR/TD Manager

Finally, I talked to the support office's HR manager about the similarities and differences between career progressions in the head office versus the stores. I wanted to understand the role of sponsors in the head office. In my organization, sponsorship is a stated prerequisite to promotion. In my retail-store role, I had a supportive sponsor at the senior director level. I had worked diligently to nurture the relationship and gain his support, and I wanted to learn how I would go about identifying potential sponsors in a new environment. The HR manager helped me think about senior employees I had worked with in the past who had transitioned to the head office. The HR manager suggested I reconnect with these individuals to identify a potential mentor who might help me work toward sponsorship.

The Outcome

After careful consideration, I decided it was too good an opportunity to pass up and took the position. I can safely say that I haven't regretted my decision once. I have improved my work-life balance, and the quality of my work has improved now that I feel I have an even more fulfilling home life. Because I achieved my objectives and "overperformed" last year, my pay has increased to more than cover child-care and travel costs.

My new manager challenges my thinking and allows me the room to take risks and learn from experiences that don't go as planned. It was prudent to understand his character before committing to the role. The conversation with him was the most valuable of my stakeholder conversations, and it is one I would recommend for every job applicant before taking on a new role.

My team and the organization as a whole also have benefited. I had a tremendous amount of experience in helping the team when the company was experiencing dips or roadblocks. This heightened level of resilience supported my new team in times of challenge. I also brought a sense of urgency to an environment characterized by bureaucracy and regimentation. This adds a degree of dynamism to a team that needs to respond urgently to store issues.

BARRIERS TO CRITICAL CONVERSATION

Once we understand the nature of conversations—both the seven *levels* and the five *types*—and their importance in talent development, we can begin to recognize what gets in the way of critical conversations, what support is required, and what skills are needed to support conversation.

There are numerous barriers to effective communication. In their book, *Conversations at Work*, Tim Baker and Aubrey Warren identify these nine:

- inattention during conversations
- restricted information channels
- lack of feedback
- a culture of not asking questions
- too much formality
- overreliance on email
- lack of role models
- fear of emotion
- physical office layout.

FIGURE 2. BARRIERS TO CONVERSATION

Type of Conversation	What Gets in the Way
Internal Dialogue of the Employee	• Many employees may not have the experience or competence to undertake such reflection. • Finding "thinking" time can often be a challenge.
Systemic Dialogue With Immediate Stakeholders	• It may be difficult to make the commitment to frequent, in-depth, honest conversation. • Lack of clarity within the work team and between the team and its leader about the ambitions and broad career direction of each employee.
Employee/Organizational Dialogue	• All too often, the focus is on employees regarded as "high-potentials," excluding the vast majority of employees who have emergent potential. • Some individuals do not have a mentor who can guide them through the subtleties of, and nuances within, an organization.
Social Networking Dialogue	• The perceived risks associated with open dialogue, which crosses the boundaries between the organization and the outside world. • Lack of information about networks to support people within the organization can hinder conversation.
HR, Senior Management, and Line Manager Dialogue	• Lack of understanding about changes in the organizational business and talent strategy. • Lack of knowledge about the connection between individual development and the business as a whole.

Figure 2 summarizes some of the barriers that get in the way of each of the five critical types of conversation.

SUPPORT FOR CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

There are a vast array of strategic and tactical responses TD professionals can adopt to support the conversations that create radical shifts in understanding, thereby transforming careers and talent development.

Here, we identify some of the most critical supports for the five types of conversation. Figure 3 lists the skills and resources TD professionals need for each of the five conversation types.

Internal Dialogue

Equipping employees with the skills to make their inner dialogue more effective is crucial for the talent development professional. A coherent strategy for raising the quality of internal career conversations might include training, monitoring, and practical support for employees as they think through career-related questions. Some existing processes, such as coaching and mentoring, may already provide aspects of this strategy.

Taking this into account, there are at least three practical things the TD manager can do to promote inner dialogue:
• Provide feedback and other opportunities for self-understanding.

- Help employees acquire the reflective and analytical skills to become more self-aware and manage their own career planning. Professional development could include helping employees craft personal career narratives from past through present to future and role modeling through mentoring.

- Encourage and support mentoring and coaching to enhance the depth, breadth, and quality of the inner conversation.

Systemic Dialogue With Immediate Stakeholders

Helping employees have conversations with their key stakeholders can have a major effect on their intention to stay in the organization and their approach to career and self-management. Immediate stakeholders often provide different points of view, which can inform an individual's thinking.

The TD manager can play a significant role in facilitating the continuous, evolving, and dynamic process related to performance and

FIGURE 3. SKILLS AND RESOURCES REQUIRED FOR CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

Type of Conversation	Skills or Resources Needed
Internal Dialogue of Employee	• High level of reflection and introspection, including self-awareness, environmental awareness, and clarity of purpose. • A quiet space and time for reflection. • Skilled coaches or mentors who can help the employee develop career-related self-awareness by providing a role model and asking penetrating questions.
Systemic Dialogue With Immediate Stakeholders	• Ability to examine the learning and experience that team members need to progress toward their career and personal developmental goals, and knowledge of what opportunities might arise in the foreseeable future for work tasks to support them. • Support for line managers to facilitate developmental conversations with direct reports in a safe environment that encourages positive challenge. • Ability to provide and encourage continuous dialogue that supports everyone in the team. A team development contract can assist with this.
Employee/Organizational Dialogue	• Ability to explore and understand identity and individuality. • Engagement of all employees in career and self-development dialogue. • Understanding of what the organization predicts will be needed in the future, so that appropriate aspects of talent can be addressed—such as growth, creation of new roles, skills and knowledge, track record, and tenure.
Social Networking Dialogue	• Understanding of how to identify opportunities to participate in and lead learning communities. Confidence to explore a new environment and commitment to open dialogue. • Ability to facilitate the creation of learning communities and equip employees with the skills to use them. • For the future, leadership of virtual communities.
HR, Senior Management, and Line Manager Dialogue	• Understanding of how to hold developmental conversations. Confidence in supporting talent development shifts within and external to the team. • Ability to facilitate and encourage continuous dialogue among the business, managers, teams, and individuals.

developmental conversations. Individuals and teams also have a role to play. From a tactical perspective, there are at least three practical things the TD manager can do to promote dialogue with immediate stakeholders:

- Align developmental conversations with what is happening for the employee so that the focus is on current, live issues.

- Be attentive to employees' transition points, and demonstrate interest in their evolving perceptions about their roles and career progress.

- Identify opportunities to engage the wider team in conversations about developmental opportunities that support team members' career aspirations.

For many, if not all, employees, a key stakeholder is the immediate line manager. The ability of the line manger to facilitate developmental conversations should not be taken for granted.

Conversation is about connection—reaching the position of manager or leader does not necessarily mean being skilled in authentic and insightful conversation. We know from experience that all too often people are promoted based on their performance in their current role, not based on their potential to fulfil a more senior role. The Preparing and Facilitating the Developmental Conversation Job Aid can help prepare line managers to facilitate developmental conversations with their direct reports.

> THE ABILITY OF THE LINE MANGER TO FACILITATE DEVELOPMENTAL CONVERSATIONS SHOULD NOT BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED.

Employee/Organizational Dialogue

Broader conversations between the organization and employees are vital in sharing information, ambitions, and new horizons, and in facilitating individual and organizational change.

It's helpful for the TD manager to facilitate conversations between employees and the organization as a whole. In this situation, it is likely that employees' career plan and strategy will focus on opportunities within their existing organization—therefore having a direct link to retention and reputation. Research conducted by The Right Conversation, a UK-based consultancy, found a direct link between employee/organizational dialogue, employee engagement, relationships with key stakeholders, and the strategic development of the organization, according to Baker and Warren.

From a tactical perspective, here are three things that the TD manager can do to encourage conversation:

- Help employees identify what they want to know from the organization for their own career planning.

- Understand what the organization needs to know about employees' career aspirations.

- Understand the relationship between employees' goals and organizational goals.

Addressing these issues through an ongoing broad dialogue with employees—through focus groups, intranet discussions, and other media, for example—also allows the organization to initiate dialogue around future career development pathways.

Social Networking Dialogue

The larger and more complex organizations, communities, and societies become, the more important are the skills to create and manage links with people outside our immediate circle of friends and colleagues. Organizations consist of many different structures and teams that may be dispersed in nature. Encouraging people to connect broadly across the organization will be ever more important.

For individual employees, social networks have in many cases become an important part of defining their identity—in both professional and outside-of-work lives. In general, most social networking is unfocused, both in terms of what people give to their networks and the rewards they seek from them. The TD manager can

play a strategic and tactical role in supporting employees by:

- providing training in network management, access to wider resources, and technology platforms that support networking

- promoting communities of interest around specific job roles, technical specialties, or other areas of perceived commonality, such as gender, nationality, or disability

- helping employees add value to existing social networks by, for example, facilitating the wider dissemination of responses to information requests or creating topic bulletins that network members will want to circulate to their other networks.

HR, Senior Management, and Line Manager Dialogue

It is vital that line managers understand the organization's talent management strategy and are able to hold developmental conversations with their team. The conversations among HR, senior management, and line managers are pivotal in developing mutual understanding. The TD professional can play a strategic and tactical role in supporting HR, senior management, and line managers by facilitating:

- how, when, and where the company's talent management strategy is discussed within and beyond the wider team

- conversations about changes in the business and talent management strategy, paying attention to at what level, how, when, and where these conversations occur

- support for line managers to have developmental conversations with their team, including considering the effectiveness of the support.

CONCLUSION

Despite the recognition that conversations are at the heart of organizations, very few of them invest sufficient resources in developing the skills needed for quality conversations that are critical

to individuals, teams, and the organizations. This is increasingly so as corporations are doing away with annual performance reviews in search of a system of talent development that works better.

The levels and types of conversation that we discussed in this issue of *TD at Work* show what is possible when employees reflect and when conversations about talent development are held between manager and employee and between managers and senior leadership.

The story of the retail employee's transition to an office role illustrates these types of conversations in the context of one career transition point. The individual in the case study described at least four in-depth conversations that took place over a fairly short period of time. These conversations were absolutely necessary for the individual to make the mental and physical transition needed to take the next step in his career journey. Fortunately, he was able to connect with individuals who helped him gain the clarity and confidence he needed.

In turn, the organization has benefited because it has retained more than 15 years of tactical and explicit knowledge that is invaluable to the continued success of the organization. The individual is high performing and thoroughly engaged in his new role, thereby adding significant quantifiable and unquantifiable value to his team and the organization.

But does the case study depict the usual experience of individuals in organizations, or are individuals isolated and feel unable to have an open and honest conversation with their current and potential future line manager? The case study in the sidebar illustrates how a line manager grappled with these questions and took steps to promote conversation on his team.

Three points help sum up the nature of critical conversations described in this *TD at Work*:

- At least seven levels of conversation happen at work. Each has implications for talent development managers in encouraging the growth of their employees. The TD manager can encourage and facilitate networks for all these levels of conversations.

- Five critical conversations play a vital role in career management and succession planning and in each individual's overall engagement

CASE STUDY: MANAGER FACILITATING CONVERSATION

The following is an account of a line manager's approach to finding the time and space to help his direct reports have one-to-one conversations as well as team conversations. The account focuses on the practical issues of having quality conversations in the workplace.

Conversations are the responsibility of everyone in the organization; of particular importance is the role of the line manager in facilitating conversations that will drill below the surface and answer questions on both an individual and organizational level.

Working in an open office—a busy and noisy environment—is not always conducive to holding conversations that require in-depth contemplation—a time where you can "hear yourself think." In addition, finding the time in the workday can be challenging, as can wresting team members away from their desks. Sitting at a desk nearly all day, staring at a computer screen, can stifle creative thinking and conversation.

With the agreement of the team, the line manager introduced a team lunchtime walk, during which all members completed an outdoor circuit of up to two miles. This allowed for up to 30 minutes of uninterrupted conversation. The group included six direct reports of varying ability, both in terms of performance and productivity, and also relative to their well-being and level of fitness. Initially, the team would walk together as a large group, but they quickly realized this wasn't producing the desired results, as some team members moved on ahead while others struggled to keep up with the pace and talk at the same time. The team decided on a new approach; they would walk in pairs, and the line manager would join a pair. Each day, the pairs would alternate. One of the team members particularly struggled with the pace and talking; team members paid special attention to this colleague so he would not feel left behind.

The conversations often focused on context—what is happening in the business and why. Within this sphere, the members talked about how the team fit in with the organization, as well as how the individuals fit in with the team and the company as a whole. They also discussed how their work aligned within the immediate and wider context. The team members discussed their needs and how they could ensure they met their needs—as individuals and as a high-performing team. Performance is measured in many different ways in the organization, and the degree to which the team performs is directly influenced by the line manager's leadership and management capability.

Finding the time for and gaining the commitment to having in-depth conversations is not always easy, but it is imperative. This initiative has been running for more than six months and became an embedded activity in the team's daily schedule. The level of social, technical, tactical, and strategic dialogue of each individual has improved. The benefits are clear: greater team cohesion; improved frequency and depth of dialogue; enhanced engagement with the business strategy and context; improved awareness of synergies among individuals, team, and the organization; value-added networking; and an energized team, in both mind and body.

in the organization. Figure 3 shows the skills needed for each of these types of conversation.

- Numerous challenges get in the way of quality conversation. TD managers encourage people to develop and express themselves through conversation, particularly at critical juncture points in their careers.

Conversations are at the heart of learning. Even writing on one's own is a form of conversation with oneself. By equipping employees and their managers with awareness and skills related to each of the seven levels of conversation, TD managers can increase the scope and variety of learning that occurs in an organization.

The five types of conversation provide contexts in which dialogue takes place and ensures that it is focused on the development and retention of talent (however we define it) and foster a culture of high alignment between the aspirations and development of employees and the organization in which they work.

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QUESTIONS TOOL FOR CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

Conversation	Sample Questions for TD Managers to Ask
1. Internal Dialogue of Employee	• What is your contract with yourself? • What is the critical benchmark question you use to test difficult alternatives in work and career decisions? • When new job opportunities arise, what values will you apply to assess whether they are right for you at this time in your life? • Are the career options you envision likely to open up horizons of opportunity or narrow them? • Who and what do you want to become?
2. Systemic Dialogue With Immediate Stakeholders	• What will take this team closer to where it wants to go? • What will take each employee closer to where he or she wants to be (both within the organization and outside it)? • What do we do together to ensure an appropriate mix of routine tasks and stretch projects? • What learning can each team member assist colleagues with? • What opportunities can we identify that will assist any (or all) of us to build career-relevant experience and expertise?
3. Employee/Organizational Dialogue	• What do employees want to know from the company for their own career planning? • What skills and knowledge will become more important and valuable in the future in this organization? • What kind of track record will be valued in the future? • What constitutes talent in this organization? • What can individual employees do to increase their chances of role advancement or movement?
4. Social Networking Dialogue	• To what extent are you involved in learning communities? • How do you access virtual learning environments, such as symposia, Second Life, or similar fora? • How do learning communities stimulate ideas and generate interest? • How are you using your resources to support others? • To what extent is that contribution being reciprocated by your fellow learners?
5: HR, Senior Management, and Line Manager Dialogue	• How, when, and where is the talent management strategy discussed with the wider team? • What conversations around changes in the business and talent management strategy are happening, at what level, and how, when, and where? • What support is in place to help line managers have developmental conversations with their teams? • How effective is the support provided to encourage these developmental conversations? • What plans do line managers have in place to facilitate the movement of their team around the organization?

PREPARING AND FACILITATING THE DEVELOPMENTAL CONVERSATION

The following is a list of some possible questions talent development managers can use to assess various aspects of developmental conversations with their direct reports. These questions can be asked, in many cases, of the direct report, but the TD professional may also pose the questions of herself during or after the conversation.

The Conversation	Questions to Ask
1. Getting in the Right State	• Are you in the right state of mind to hold a developmental conversation? • Are you relaxed and in tune with your mind and body? • Is your breathing relaxed and in control? • Is your body relaxed? • Are you sitting comfortably? • Is the environment right to have a conversation?
2. Engaging the Conversation	• Are you truly present in the conversation? • Are you asking opening questions to put the other person at ease? • To what degree have you shared something of yourself? • How have you demonstrated curiosity? • How is your body language influencing the conversation?
3. Listening and Silence	• How focused are you on what the person is saying? • Are you noticing his or her body language and the signals you are receiving? • Are you waiting for the person to stop speaking so you can speak? • What is the degree of silence between each party involved in the conversation? • How comfortable are you with this silence?
4. Questioning	• To what extent are you engaged in "what," "why," and "who" matters, questions, and discussion? • To what extent are you really drilling beneath the surface to get to the heart of matters? • What is the level of comfort with the style of questioning? • How do you know the level of comfort?
5. Dealing With Roadblocks	• To what extent are you noticing shifts in thinking? • What blockages are appearing and why? • Are you able to reflect back the conversation and identify where the roadblock might have appeared? • Pause and reflect on the approach to questioning and the openness of the dialogue.

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