



Meaningful Conversations Guidance

Meaningful conversations between managers and their members of staff help create an environment that supports wellbeing and motivates everyone to do their best work and to achieve individual, team, and organisational goals. These conversations provide opportunities for personal and professional development and support individual and organisational achievement. At the heart of these conversations are a set of shared values and [behaviours](#). This guidance provides a framework, prompts and further support to enable managers to have regular, productive, two-way meaningful conversations.

Through active listening, careful questioning and providing objective feedback, managers can use meaningful conversations to support and encourage employees to:

- Develop their self-awareness and maximise their wellbeing
- Reflect on how they are working, what they are achieving, and any opportunities for improvement
- Identify objectives for themselves
- Articulate and prioritise actions
- Take ownership for their own development

It can be difficult to know what type of conversation is most relevant. Below are some suggestions that may help you prepare and plan for the most productive conversation for that particular moment. Conversations can also cover multiple areas and topics, so you may have to incorporate elements of different conversations. Each conversation type in this guide contains additional resources and references. Related courses and resources are available through [our HR webpages](#)

- Present-focused conversations:
 - For regular check-ins, try a **One-to-One/1:1 Conversation**.
 - If there are concerns about wellbeing, try a **Mental Health and Wellbeing Conversation**.
- Future-focused conversations:
 - If the conversation is about improving individual performance, try an **Improvement Conversation**.
 - If the conversation is about resolving workplace conflict, try a **Diversity of Thought Conversation**.
 - If the conversation is about progression to another role, try a **Career Conversation**.
 - If the conversation is about setting specific objectives and identifying resources and support available, try an **Objective Setting Conversation**.

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One-to-Ones/1:1s Conversations

It is important that we have regular conversations so everyone knows what and how they are doing. These conversations help you to get to know your staff, their motivators, their aspirations and how they like to work. They also provide space to discuss progress and support, and update objectives when necessary. Below are prompts to help you hold an effective conversation and some of the associated behaviours you are helping your member of staff demonstrate.

Prompts	Associated Behaviours
Review progress made towards objectives or updates since the last 1:1. Are there obstacles that could prevent them from being achieved on time? How might these obstacles be overcome? Are all objectives still relevant? Do they need to be changed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aiming to continuously improve our work
Celebrate successes. Ask what they are particularly proud of.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking pride in our work
Discuss priorities and new ways to approach them. What are the priorities for the next few weeks (individually, for the team, and as an organisation)? Have they changed recently?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being open to feedback and new ways of working
Raise any issues relating to behaviour, attendance and performance early on.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing our best to deliver what is expected of us
Talk about ways forward to address any issues raised and help them identify their strengths and skills to encourage them to consider the positive behaviours they have that can help them overcome the issue or problem.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being open to different ways of thinking and new ideas
Talk about support they may need. This could be to do with their role, situations they are dealing with, their physical and mental health, their workload or career etc. If you notice differences in their behaviour, share this here. Go beyond “how are you?” (e.g., how are you feeling? What has been the best part of your week so far?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking for help when we need it • Proactively looking for new and better ways of doing things
Agree specific actions (to be discussed at the next meeting)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing what we say we will

Resources and References

[Marshall Goldsmith's Feedforward](#). More about this in Teaching on [Teaching Matters](#)

Bouskila-Yam, O. & Kluger, A.N. (2011). Strength-based performance appraisal and goal setting. Human Resource Management Review, 21(2), 137-147. DOI

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2010.09.001>

[Behaviours Charter](#)

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Career Conversations

Career conversations can help clarify career aspirations and identify resources and support to achieve these. As a manager these conversations can provide you with space to talk about what motivates their member of staff, how engaged they are in their current role and identify potential successors for future roles. This affords all the opportunity for personal and professional development and supports individual and organisational achievement

Below are prompts to help you hold an effective conversation and some of the associated behaviours you are helping your member of staff demonstrate.

Prompts	Associated Behaviours
Have regular honest conversations to help them recognise their strengths, skills, and behaviours that will support them achieve their career aspirations. Use the Behaviours Charter to discuss behaviours that reflect our values.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being open to feedback and new ways of working • Aiming to continuously improve our work
Be open to the possibility of them moving teams, departments or away from the University if that will help them to meet their career aspirations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embracing change and the opportunities that it provides
Discuss their career aspirations and share ideas on how they can best meet them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcoming feedback to support our ongoing development
Agree any support that you can provide them with. For example, if you can see opportunities which meet their strengths, skills, and aspirations in other areas of the University or with other employers, tell them what you see and offer suggestions of how to use these skills more in their current role or other roles to prepare them for future opportunities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactively looking for new and better ways of doing things • Actively aligning our work to the achievement of Strategy 2030

Here are some specific questions to help you depending on their career aspirations:

They enjoy their current role and do not want to move at this stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is their current role fulfilling? • What is important to them? • Are they continuing to learn, or see opportunities to develop within the timescales they have set themselves? • Do they want to deepen their knowledge or understanding to become an expert?
They wish to progress their career	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have they seen roles they are interested in? • What skills and behaviours would they need to develop to be ready for that role? • Have they connected with people in that area to get more information on what is required?



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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have they considered taking a sideways step to build new skills?• Have they considered getting involved in cross team/department projects to widen their knowledge of what other departments do?
They enjoy some elements of their role and would like to explore related areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do they enjoy? And what do they not enjoy in their current role?• What strengths, skills and behaviours do they have that they can build on in future roles?• Do they know others who have chosen a similar path to them?• Are they happy to push themselves out of their comfort zone of current knowledge and skill?• Do they see themselves leaving their current team and department?
They would like to move into a manager or leader role	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are there people they could mentor?• Are there opportunities for them to support other colleagues? For example, buddy with new starts, provide day-to-day support for work experience or student interns?• Have they worked through any of the online development resources - for example the University development toolkits?• Talk through the Leadership Behaviours within the Behaviours Charter to identify strengths and also areas to focus on.

Resources and References

[Planning Your Role and Career Development](#)

[Behaviours Charter](#)

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Diversity of Thought Conversations

Disagreements are a natural part of working with others due to differences. However, the process of debate and opposition through conversations can lead to better work outcomes, stronger working relationships, and an inclusive work environment. Demonstrate your commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusion by promoting positive conversations which celebrate differences, challenge prejudices, and ensure fairness.

Below are prompts to help you hold an effective conversation and some of the associated behaviours you are helping your member of staff demonstrate.

Prompts	Associated Behaviours
Refer everyone to the Dignity and Respect Policy. Make it clear that disagreement and conflict are expected and respected but unacceptable behaviour will be addressed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Valuing and exchanging different knowledge and skills • Challenging bullying and harassment
Acknowledge the strengths of their position and ask open questions to understand. Ensure you understand their side and demonstrate that you do.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking to understand issues that arise and working constructively to resolve them
Acknowledge your role in the disagreement. This can lead to the development of trust, a better understanding of each other, and makes it easier to find a solution together.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being open to different ways of thinking and new ideas
Pinpoint where the disagreements are. Highlight areas of agreement and build a case for the differences between areas of agreement. Be honest with what can be changed and what cannot.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactively looking for new and better ways of doing things
Agree on next steps and actions. Realise that not all will be resolved in one conversation and continue to discuss regularly with the continued commitment to focus on resolution. Try again if the conversation does not go well.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing what we say we will • Embracing change and the opportunities that it provides

Resources and References

[Why We Should Be Disagreeing More at Work](#)

[Managing Difficult Conversations](#)

[A to Z of HR Policies](#) including ([Dignity and Respect Policy](#))

[Behaviours Charter](#)

Additionally, the University has a network of trained [Dignity and Respect Advisors](#) (DRAs) who can provide advice and appropriate support to staff when they believe they have identified or been accused of behaviour contrary to this policy.

Mental Health and Wellbeing Conversations

Life inside and outside of work can be challenging and overwhelming at times and we recognise the impact this can have on our mental health and wellbeing. Mental health and wellbeing do not have one set meaning. We might use it to talk about how we feel, how well we are coping with daily life or what feels possible at the moment. This could also manifest itself in differences in behaviour at work. When this happens it is important to address these changes openly, honestly, and with empathy. By having open and honest conversations about mental health and wellbeing, managers can help staff individually and collectively reflect on what support they need to feel safe and well at work. This will not only benefit our employees, but also our communities within and beyond the University.

Below are prompts to help you hold an effective conversation and some of the associated behaviours you are helping your member of staff demonstrate.

Prompts	Associated Behaviours
Start by checking in. Give your staff space to share what is happening for them and how they are doing. Taking time to share thoughts and feelings can help to stop things from festering and helps highlighting strengths and good things too.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking for help when we need it • Welcoming feedback to support our ongoing development
Using simple conversation prompts that go beyond “how are you?” will aid this conversation. Examples include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How are you coping? ○ What has been the best part of your week so far? ○ What have you been reflecting on since we spoke about this? ○ I want to help, what can I do? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking for help when we need it • Seeking to understand issues that arise and working constructively to resolve them
Ask what they need from you and what they need from others. The current situation warrants honesty about what people need to work at their best.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking for help when we need it
Leave time for a check out. What is left to say – both anything appreciative and anything that is left unresolved that may need more work – and what might happen next as a result of this conversation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening to and acting on constructive feedback

Resources and References

[Wellbeing Hub](#)

[Supporting Others Mental Health and Wellbeing](#)

[Employee Assistance Programme](#)

[Behaviours Charter](#)

Objective Setting Conversations

Setting clearly defined objectives has been proven to be an effective motivating tool by providing structure, direction and purpose (Locke and Latham, 2002). The conversation provides an opportunity for you and them to actively participate in identifying specific objectives based on priorities for the university, your department, you as a manager, and the individual.

The University offers learning resources and support to all staff to facilitate their career and development, including but not limited to programmes, online courses, networking and mentoring. Discussing these can support your member of staff to identify learning objectives and tailor development to meet these objectives. Good practice suggests a mixture of objectives, with some focusing on achievable objectives and others that are more challenging with focus on the medium to long-term. You may also discuss development objectives and career aspirations or decide to keep this separate.

Often, we know what has to be done, but how to approach it can be slightly more challenging. Talk about what is to be achieved and also discuss how they are planning to do it. Be clear about expectations to achieve including what authority/decision making they do and do not have and the standard that you expect them to reach.

Below are prompts to help you hold an effective conversation and some of the associated behaviours you are helping your member of staff demonstrate.

Prompts	Associated Behaviours
What work objectives do you want to set yourself this year? What will be the main challenges to achieving your long- and short-term objectives?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking individual accountability for achieving high performance
What will help you to achieve these outcomes and overcome the challenges? Discuss what support you can offer and what time and financial resources are available.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking for help when we need
Do you have the knowledge and behaviours you need to do your job and achieve this year's objectives?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing our best to deliver what is expected of us
What development or learning will help them achieve certain objectives? Reflect and discuss what you both hope you and your member of staff will get out of completing this development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcoming feedback to support our ongoing development
Talk about specific skills, behaviours and development aligned to individual and department short- and long-term priorities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively aligning our work to the achievement of Strategy 2030
Identify measures of success. How will we know if you are making progress developing these skills and behaviours? What should we measure?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking individual accountability for achieving high performance



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Explore different learning opportunities that will meet needs and resources available. “How do you like to learn?”

- Being open to different ways of thinking and new ideas

Here are some specific learning opportunities depending on how the employee prefers to learn:

Formal learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Self-directed learning through online learning and toolkits✓ Attending courses and programmes✓ Attending talks and conferences
Learning from others	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ One-to-one and group support from peers and/or accredited coaches✓ Joining networks relevant to your role (further information on networks available can be found in the Planning Your Role and Career Development pages)✓ Shadowing others
Learn from experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Seeking feedback✓ Joining a working or steering group✓ Taking on a secondment✓ Visiting other departments to share ideas and approaches

Resources and References

[Setting Objectives Toolkit](#)

[Using Behaviours in Objective Setting Conversations](#)

[Setting Goals](#)

[Planning Your Role and Career Development](#)

[HR Courses and Resources](#)

Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (2002). Building a practically useful theory of goal setting and task motivation: A 35-year odyssey. *American Psychologist*, 57(9), 705–717. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.57.9.705>

[Behaviours Charter](#)

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Improvement Conversations

At times you may need to speak together about performance and behaviour that does not meet the agreed expectations or goals. The most important thing is to raise concerns at an early stage and work together to identify ways to improve their work. We aim to create an environment that supports and motivates us to do our best work and to achieve the University's goals.

Below are prompts to help you hold an effective conversation and some of the associated behaviours you are helping your member of staff demonstrate.

Prompts	Associated Behaviours
Provide clear examples of their underperformance to do with how they are working and what they are working on. Use the Behaviours Charter to help you both be clear on where there is poor performance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking to understand issues that arise and working constructively to resolve them
Sensitively explore any possible underlying reasons for their poor performance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking for help when we need
Explore what, if any, additional support could be put in place to help them improve their performance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking for help when we need
Clearly establish what they need to do to improve their performance, including expectations of standards of performance and/or behaviour.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aiming to continuously improve our work
Agree when you will review these together. As part of this allow them a reasonable, specified amount of time to improve and to benefit from any agreed support which you and they will be putting in place.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing what we say we will • Taking individual accountability for achieving high performance
On a regular basis review the action(s) taken and the impact of any support put in place and provide feedback on their progress.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing our best to deliver what is expected of us

Resources and References

[Managing Capability Policy](#)

[Behaviours Charter](#)

[A to Z of HR Policies](#)

You and your member of staff may wish to seek advice and support from a manager, HR Advisor or Trade Union representative.

If absence and/or health reasons (including stress) are contributing to the poor performance and behaviour, you can also gain support from the [Occupational Health Service](#).