



# **CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS:**

A GUIDE TO ESSENTIAL  
EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION



The effectiveness of your employee conversations affects nearly every aspect of work: from productivity and innovation...to engagement, workplace safety and retention...to your own success as a manager or leader.

Whether the topic is simple or complex, straightforward or potentially contentious, use these strategies to have honest, meaningful conversations that drive positive change:



## WHY EFFECTIVE EMPLOYEE CONVERSATIONS MATTER

Employee conversations affect every facet of a business, from employee productivity and engagement to workplace safety and retention – to say nothing of how well the company stacks up against its competitors or the value it provides customers.

### When in-house conversations are effective:

- **Transparency improves**, boosting confidence and helping employees focus on what matters.
- **Knowledge-sharing increases**, giving an added boost to skill-building and helping employees complete tasks more effectively.
- **Feedback deepens**, allowing for more targeted, high-quality information employees can implement immediately.



# WHY DO WE STRUGGLE TO CONVERSE?

Humans are naturally social beings. Yet, workplace conversations are difficult for many employees to have. High-quality conversations are even tougher.

## Challenges facing employee conversation today include:

- **Fractionalization:** Employees who only have part of the puzzle may not know who else has a complementary role or how to seek out other parts of the whole.
- **Over-reliance on digital communications:** Information can get lost in digital communication, leading to misunderstandings or lack of essential information. Using multiple digital channels can increase fractionalization as well.
- **Lack of training or knowledge on effective communication:** Communication is a skill. Employees without adequate training or knowledge in that skill will naturally struggle to implement it.




# LET'S TALK: BUILDING BLOCKS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

In any conversation, three building blocks lay the groundwork for effective sharing and communication:

- **Active listening and empathy.** Open-ended questions and a real willingness to listen for understanding are essential to effective communication. Listening to understand doesn't mean automatic agreement – it means listening for a full comprehension of how the other person sees the problem.
- **Clear and concise messaging.** *Often, less is more.*

**Communication crafted to be clear, simple, and direct helps everyone:**

- understand where the conversation is,
  - where it's going,
  - and what matters.
- **Encouraging feedback and open dialogues.** A conversation isn't a conversation if employees feel their only allowed responses are scripted agreements. An effective conversation must allow everyone in the room to express opinions, give feedback, and participate in open dialogue.



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## LET'S TALK LEARNING

Learning conversations focus on gathering information for better decision-making. In today's complex business environment, no one person can stay on top of everything. It takes a team to bring all the necessary perspectives and information to the table.

### To have an effective learning conversation:

- **Take the time to get everyone's views.** Resist the urge to rush ahead to decision-making.
- **Encourage different perspectives,** even when they constitute disagreements.
- **Engage in reflection** and encourage team members to do so as well.



## LET'S TALK DESIGN

Design conversations focus on planning. During a design conversation, the group makes decisions, sets priorities, and plans where to focus energy and resources.

### To have an effective design conversation:

- **Open by reminding team members of the organization's mission, purpose, values, goals, and metrics.** These offer an outline for organizing plans effectively.
- **Talk through the pros and cons of suggested goals and strategies.** Avoid the impulse to announce a goal at the meeting without discussing its opportunities and challenges.
- **Discuss whether the goal and strategy you choose solves the most impactful problem** – or if it's solving a secondary problem and avoiding the main one.





## LET'S TALK FULFILMENT

Fulfilment conversations focus on execution. Execution deals with meeting goals, creating value, and demonstrating that the team and the organization are as good as their word.

**To have an effective fulfilment conversation, answer six questions:**

- Who is the customer?
- Who is fulfilling the promise to the customer?
- What outcomes do customers value?
- How does this promise fit in with others made by the company?
- When will the promise be fulfilled?
- How will parties be kept informed?



# MASTERING THE ART OF FEEDBACK

Effective one-on-one conversations with team members are one of the most valuable investments a manager can make. These conversations build relationships, clarify expectations, create ownership, and achieve better business results.

## To hold effective one-on-one feedback conversations:

- Schedule enough time – at least 30 minutes
- Talk about why you're meeting and what you hope to discuss. Ask the other person what they want to discuss and address these points before the conversation ends.
- Ask open-ended questions and really listen to the answers.



## LET'S TALK GROWTH MINDSET

A “growth mindset” is one in which a person believes the ability to move forward lies within them. A growth mindset commits to dedication, work, and learning to change a person’s circumstances, whether earning a promotion or addressing a crisis.

By contrast, those who operate from a “fixed mindset” believe their basic qualities can’t be changed – which means the results of those qualities, like their current role or response to a specific situation, can’t be changed either.

### To foster a growth mindset in an employee conversation:

- **Embrace imperfection.** Focus on improvement, not mastery.
- **Frame challenges as opportunities.** Ask the team, “What can we learn here?” or “How could solving this problem help us with other issues as well?”
- **Ask,** “What would it help you to know or have access to in order to address this issue?”
- **Be realistic about expectations.** A growth mindset doesn’t assume anything is possible. Instead, it acknowledges that challenges exist – and then asks how it can frame those challenges as opportunities or surmountable obstacles.



## LET'S TALK TAILORING FEEDBACK

Tailoring feedback builds relationships. It helps each team member grasp exactly what they need to do.

### To tailor your approach:

- Consider each person individually – their communication style, motivations, and circumstances. Adapt your approach accordingly.
- Ask for the person's input, especially about what they plan to do next time or what they're working toward.
- Ask what you can do to support each team member.



## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES FOR SUCCESS

To hold better employee conversations:

### FOCUS ON THE SITUATION.

Address the challenge or opportunity the team faces. When you discuss people, talk about what they can do rather than any fixed qualities or traits.

### BE SPECIFIC.

Whether you're in a learning, design, or fulfilment phase, be clear and specific and encourage other team members to do the same.

### PROVIDE ENCOURAGEMENT.

Often, fostering a growth mindset is as simple as encouraging others to extend an existing skill into a new space or context. Encourage team members to participate and to put their knowledge and skills to work.

### OFFER CLEAR, ACTIONABLE FEEDBACK.

Tailor responses to individuals to help them move forward and grow.





## LET'S TALK ABOUT GREAT STAFFING CONVERSATIONS

Need the right people for your team? Another great conversation to have is with your staffing partner!

### When talking to your staffing partner:

- **Focus on the building blocks of any good conversation.** Active listening, clarity, and open dialogues can help you and your recruiter understand your business's needs and how to meet them.
- **Include your staffing representative in company conversations.** Invite them to talk to members of your HR team in learning, design, and fulfillment conversations.
- **Accept – and offer – feedback.** Let your staffing partner provide their honest opinion on how to improve your hiring process. When your staffing team recommends candidates, let them know how the recommendation worked – or didn't – for your team.