

Dialogue for Development

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Sometimes a simple conversation can unearth targeted development options that may not come to light through observation alone.

Imagine this scenario. Sarah, a new manager who was promoted from within her team, says to her supervisor, “How do I get my team to start showing me more respect?” What should the supervisor do? Immediately offer advice about earning respect? Tell stories about how he had to earn respect? Or does he engage Sarah in a conversation to flush out more details about her issue and help her find a solution she can act on?

Too often, leaders and managers voice their suggestions before a conversation has progressed far enough to unearth the root issues behind a situation. Other times decisions are made without considering past lessons or future implications, which can result in unintended consequences for employees and for the organization.

Talent managers can use a developmental dialogue to avoid these pitfalls and ensure that all parties learn from the past, appropriately consider the future, explore options and actually take appropriate actions. This dialogue can accelerate learning for the workforce and increase organizational effectiveness.

The Dialogue Process

Developmental dialogue allows employees to identify opportunities for growth and learning, while simultaneously allowing talent managers the freedom to work alongside direct reports. The model (Figure 1) uses a cyclical process that moves conversations along four milestones: reflect, envision, explore and act — and there are tangible benefits at each milestone:

1. **Reflect:** Enable people to invest an appropriate amount of time in learning past lessons and understanding the current situation.
2. **Envision:** Ensure people clearly see and understand desired outcomes, and provide them with a route for current and ongoing conversations.

3. **Explore:** Offer people an opportunity to discuss options, possible courses of action, and consequences of such, giving them the time to sort through and narrow down ideas.

4. **Act:** Propel people to make a decision, choose a path of action, or take a first step toward a solution.

Each of the four steps in the developmental dialogue process does not require equal amounts of time, but each should be considered. For example, if Sarah and her supervisor start at the explore step and begin looking for solutions to her problem right away, they may overlook vital information about what is causing this problem or what Sarah wants to gain from a solution. Even five minutes in the reflection or envisioning stages can bring clarity and focus.

People can enter this sequential process at any point. For instance, once people complete the act phase, they can circle back, reflect on the outcomes, explore options for midcourse correction, and decide on appropriate actions. People could even condense these steps into one complete conversation so action is always the result of every dialogue. This kind of dialogue helps keep the talent conversation flowing, moving individuals and organizations toward the kind of collaborative learning environment that can unleash potential talent.

Once the full developmental dialogue cycle is complete and action is taken, it is natural for people to come back together, reflect on what occurred and make adjustments, starting the process over again. This type of personalized conversation has more impact than generic advice, and it provides a way for employees and managers to engage in productive conversations that can align the needs of the individual with those of the organization. Then, all parties can move forward with understanding and clarity.



The Four Phases

Over time people will move through the four phases of the developmental dialogue many times and in many ways. It's important that employees be able to look back and see progress that highlights how they have grown in their understanding of a topic, handling of a situation or attainment of career skills.

- 1. Reflect:** Reflective conversations allow people to discuss motivations, search out greater awareness of intentions and future desires, and outline understandings that can help recap important points as they emerge. When Sarah approaches her supervisor about earning respect, he should start a developmental dialogue with her to completely understand the current context before jumping to conclusions or giving advice. He can help Sarah see where she needs to gain more understanding or insight by asking questions that dig deeper into her view of respect, how disrespect is being demonstrated, her emotional state, whether she is taking any responsibility for the situation, and how to resolve it.
- 2. Envision:** After reflecting on the past and present, resist the temptation to jump to an immediate decision. Instead, stakeholders should determine what they want the future to look like. Shaping an appropriate vision and the desired outcomes gives the dialogue a sense of direction and movement, and creates motivation and engagement.

Through dialogue with her supervisor, Sarah reflects and realizes she has failed to give appropriate feedback to her team out of fear of rejection by her former teammates. Her first attempts were met with resistance, but long-term this team has great potential for effectiveness, and Sarah believes she can grow into a quality leader with the right guidance — the envision step.

- 3. Explore:** People tend to begin their journeys at this step, and it's understandable why they want to immediately explore solutions, but it needs to be done at the right time and with the right frame of mind. Understanding the past, envisioning the future, and then exploring possibilities and options will help people see the entire picture and give forethought to actions they may want to take.

Sarah and her supervisor take a candid look at the core issues at play in her dilemma. They brainstorm a number of options and arrive at two workable approaches: Meet with each team member individually, explain the critical nature of the situation and discuss the contribution needed from the team member to meet deadlines, or hold a team meeting and ask the team what needs to be done by each member to meet deadlines. Each approach has strengths and weaknesses. Now Sarah has to move the dialogue with her supervisor from options to decisions.

**FIGURE 1:
OPENING THE DOOR TO THE RIGHT CONVERSATION**

To effectively apply the Developmental Dialogue Model, consider using the following questions for each phase to spark appropriate conversation.

REFLECT:

1. What is your current understanding of ...?
2. What bothers you most about your present situation?
3. How would describe where you are now on this journey?
4. What are your current assumptions about ...?
5. What have you learned so far about yourself?

ENVISION:

1. If you were the best in the world at this, what would define your success?
2. What is the highest result you can hope for?
3. What could you accomplish if you had no limitations or restrictions?
4. What organizational goals and business needs align with this outcome?
5. Where are you currently as compared to where you want to be when you envision your future?

EXPLORE:

1. What have others done in similar circumstances that has worked or not worked? Why?
2. How could you get additional information, support or resources?
3. If you did nothing, what would change regardless? What would get worse?
4. What else might be possible if you changed a few things under your control?
5. What is most important to you or non-negotiable?

ACT:

1. How would you describe the specific goal in terms of time and measurable results?
2. What are some steps you could take? What should you do first?
3. Can you commit to this course of action? Are you comfortable with it?
4. Do you see the implications of ...? Are you aware that ...?

4. Act: The goal of developmental dialogue is change, be it in behavior, affecting circumstance, a goal or an attitude. Each person's path to change will be unique, and helping people act can be harder than it sounds. Some people go around and around in the option cycle, trying to find the perfect solution. Others get sidetracked by less important details and lose sight of the most important aspects of the decision. Talent managers can help people determine the appropriate sequence in which actions or tasks should be enacted. They also can provide ideas on how to measure success.

Sarah's supervisor helps her understand that she must grow in her leadership skills to achieve her ambitions. With his guidance, she sees that she needs to begin this change by taking decisive action to pull her team together to meet deadlines. Sarah decides to take the team meeting approach she and her supervisor had brainstormed during the exploring stage. She believes her team will respond better to a group setting and will engage in a productive problem-solving conversation if all team members participate. This indicates a crucial understanding of her team and a new step forward on her journey as a leader.

Sarah decided to lead the team meeting using the four stages of the dialogue process. She began by admitting

her own failure in giving appropriate feedback, taking responsibility for the decrease in performance and inviting each team member to reflect on the state of affairs and a looming deadline. She then had the team envision what they needed, as individuals and as a group, to become more productive and committed to accomplishing not only this project, but other large projects in the future. Next, the team brainstormed changes that could get them up to speed quickly on the project. Lastly, Sarah asked each team member to state exactly what commitments they would make to accomplish that goal. She committed to doing her part in giving appropriate feedback and helping the team track progress toward the goal.

In the end, this developmental dialogue approach helped Sarah recognize weak areas of her own leadership skills, and also helped each team member make commitments to the whole team, not just the boss, ultimately providing them with a plan to meet a critical deadline for the organization. This result would not have happened if her supervisor had simply given her a few tips on earning or demanding respect. **TM**

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