



Career Development Conversations: A Guide for Managers

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1. About this guide

This guide for managers provides a structured approach for managers to support their staff at the UN Secretariat in exploring and planning for their future. It provides targeted questions and tips to help guide each step of career development conversations.

2. A partnership

Career development conversations are the single most important factor in building, motivating and developing a highly skilled, professional workforce. These conversations are based on a 3-way partnership involving the Organization, the staff member and you, the manager.

The Organization strives to foster an environment in which career development is valuable to its staff, provides access to up-skilling and delivers workforce flexibility. Research tells us overwhelmingly that this type of environment results in a more productive workforce, with committed and engaged colleagues who genuinely enjoy coming to work.



What is your role as a manager? Inspire, guide and support your team members in the formulation, planning and navigation of their journeys.

It is your job to help create a transformational environment to allow staff an opportunity to share and make sense of their experiences. This requires you to engage and discuss career aspirations and support staff continuously.

Keep in mind: What your staff value in terms of career development might be very different from what you value.



It is the staff member's responsibility to define what a satisfying career looks like and how they will achieve it. They are in the driver's seat of managing their careers.

Today, individuals can expect to have between 12-15 jobs in their lifetime. And the traditional view of a career as a ladder has been replaced by something resembling a rock-climbing wall, where advancing involves moving up and laterally towards an individual's own definition of career success. This means they must actively manage their career at all phases: explore options, put together career plans and take steps towards fulfilling them.

The Organization provides career-related support through learning programmes, a mentoring and networking programme, online tools and [more](#).

As a facilitator in the developmental journey of your staff, you do not have to reinvent the wheel. Familiarise yourself with the available resources so that you can guide them.



3. Why is it important to talk about careers with my staff?

"When the grass looks greener on the other side of the fence, it may be that they take better care of it there." – Cecil Selig

The purpose of a career conversation is to help staff members identify their goals and create a development strategy to reach them.

There are two main benefits for staff in having regular career conversations:

1. They help enable a learning culture that empowers them to continuously grow and develop.
2. There is a direct correlation between regular career conversations and a more engaged and productive workforce.

By having a conversation that focuses on the staff member's future career plans, you can help them:

- Identify their career-related strengths and development needs
- Anticipate barriers that might block career development
- Determine what resources are necessary
- Manage their career and development planning expectations
- Develop greater ownership for their own career development

These conversations have benefits for managers too. They can:

- Build more open, trusting relationships
- Develop a greater understanding of staff members' future development challenges
- Increase awareness and alignment between staff and the Organization
- Develop your management skills
- Build a strong reputation as a supportive manager
- Improve the retention and motivation of staff

Encourage Career Conversations with others:

Managers should encourage staff to discuss their career goals and related development activities with peers, other supervisors and mentors who may be able to add significant value.

4. Concerns managers have

Some managers have concerns or anxieties about initiating career conversations. Some of the more common ones are described below.

| Manager Concerns | A different perspective |
|---|--|
| I do not possess the skills or information to have effective career conversations. | We know it can be challenging, so let's acknowledge that. But these conversations are not as difficult as you might anticipate. The minimum required skills for having effective career development conversations are curiosity, honesty, frankness and a non-judgmental approach! We've included a few questions (see page 8) on how to approach these conversations. |
| I do not have the time to devote to planning and conducting career conversations with all of my staff. | As a guideline, the minimum you have to plan for is two formal conversations with each staff member per year (2 hours per staff member). Remember it is their responsibility to come up with their career development plan, not yours. |
| I will not be able to satisfy staff requests for career advancement so why bother having these conversations? | More likely than not, your staff expect that you provide feedback to help them grow in their current role and that you will share information on opportunities and career options within the Organization. They likely do not (and should not) expect you to fulfil their career plans. |
| If I actively support the career aspirations of my direct reports, I will end up losing all my high performers . | Rather than worry about losing your high performers, give them a reason to stay! Showing an interest in and supporting a high performer not only builds leadership credibility for you, but also shows that you care about the person and provides you with a proactive opportunity to ensure that the individual's goals are aligned with the Organization's goals. Having career development conversations can be a way of <i>retaining</i> your high performers. |

Try not to let your concerns lead you to avoid career conversations. A talented staff member who receives no encouragement from their manager to stretch and develop may believe that the manager does not see their potential; in such a context, leaving may seem the most sensible option.



What most individuals want is simply the opportunity to have a meaningful discussion with their manager regarding their career interests.

They don't expect you to have all answers, but they DO expect you to listen and have an open and honest dialogue with them.

5. When should I talk with staff about their careers?

FORMAL CONVERSATIONS

As the driver of their own careers, staff members should request career conversations to discuss their aspirations and plans with their manager. If this does not happen, the manager should schedule the conversation with the individual's agreement. This should happen at least twice annually or after significant projects or changes in the Organization. Do not hold a career conversation at the same time as an annual workplan discussion or a formal performance review.



Important: Do not hold a career conversation at the same time as a performance discussion.

Formal career conversation

Frequency = At least once a year

Duration = Approximately 1 hour



Tip: Celebrate a staff member's birthday or work anniversary by inviting them for a career conversation – possibly over coffee or lunch.

Career 'check-in'

A career 'check-in' is a brief meeting – initiated by either the staff member or the manager – to follow up on progress on a career action plan. The timing, frequency and duration should be mutually agreed upon by both parties at the end of the annual career conversation, or as needed.

Frequency = Quarterly or as needed

Duration = Approximately 15 min

INFORMAL CONVERSATIONS

While more formal career discussions are good practice, don't underestimate the value of informal career conversations. Ongoing career conversations allow your staff member to constantly evolve and improve. Receiving regular feedback from you encourages your staff member to focus on areas of strength and areas to be improved upon. It also allows for reflection on behaviour and creates an opportunity to make adjustments to reach short- and long-term goals.

Find the right time

While the annual workplan meeting may seem like a convenient date to also have a career conversation, it is probably better to do it separately – and give it the special attention it deserves.

It is important to consider the timing of the conversation. Research shows that individuals tend to think about their careers in line with personal career 'risk trigger points' (work or life events that prompt them to reflect on, and possibly reconsider their careers). These moments are often characterized by decreased career satisfaction and increased job search activity. So, consider whether your staff are at or near any of the following career risk trigger points; these might be helpful times to have a career conversation.

- Tenure in the role or the Organization (e.g., 2-year mark in a position)
- A change in manager or responsibilities
- Missing out on a job or growth opportunity
- Being bored or over-worked
- Seeing no future job prospects
- No longer feeling that the work culture is a good fit

To detect potential career risk trigger points, stay attuned to staff attitudes and behaviours and try to pick up on cues that may indicate career dissatisfaction.

6. Taking a coaching approach

The role of the manager is to ask questions to encourage staff to come up with their solutions and to be proactive in executing their career action plan – also known as a coaching approach.

When taking a coaching approach, you can use the GROWTH framework on the next two pages. It enables the manager to listen and asking questions. It can help staff to clarify what they want to achieve for their professional development and how they will achieve it. Strengthening two-way dialogue through using the GROWTH framework can contribute to more productive discussions and greater readiness to give and receive feedback.

The first phase of a GROWTH conversation focuses on exploration and thinking about what is desirable and what is possible:

- What is the **goal**?
- What is the **reality** of the situation?
- What are the possible **opportunities, obstacles and options**?

This is followed by a phase of **planning** that moves from exploration to action:

- Committing to a **way forward** from among the potential options
- Defining specific and realistic action steps and grounding them within a **time-frame**
- Establishing **how** success will be achieved

Following this simple process will offer a path to support staff members in exploring and planning for their growth, no matter where they start from.

REMEMBER:

The questions provided for each of the GROWTH steps are designed to structure a conversation. It is not necessary to use all the questions or follow a particular order within the step. Other questions may also come to mind during the conversation.

In some cases, it might be possible to work through all the GROWTH steps in one meeting. Or you might need one meeting just for exploration and then book a follow-up meeting to do the planning. Keep in mind that most people will need some time to think about career aspirations because our day-to-day commitments demand a shorter-term focus.



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| EXPLORE | G | Goals | Helping the staff member identify their growth goal. This could be about enhancing their current job, learning a new skill or exploring career progression. | <p>What is important to you right now in terms of your development /career aspirations?</p> <p>What are you aiming for in the short /medium / long term?</p> <p>Where do you see yourself in terms of your professional growth level (see page 10)</p> <p>What goal have you set for yourself? Why is this important to you?</p> <p>To what extent are you interested in progressing within your current function – or another function?</p> <p>Are there any particular roles or areas you are interested the UN Secretariat?</p> <p>Are you interested in a move that requires different skills or a new application of existing capabilities (in a different function or area)?</p> <p>How do you feel about moving to a different location?</p> <p>Have you considered which skills, competencies, roles and types of project work the UN will need in the future?</p> |
| | R | Reality | Exploring where the staff member is now. This includes strengths and desires. This also helps the staff member with self-reflection. | <p>Where are you now in relation to your goal?</p> <p>What have you done to get there?</p> <p>What has contributed to your success so far?</p> <p>What do you consider to be your strengths? Which of your strengths could be optimized /leveraged to achieve your goal?</p> <p>How do you like to learn new things? What gives you energy?</p> <p>How would you describe your transferable skills in relation to other internal roles?</p> <p>What are you good at that you want to continue?</p> <p>What do you like or dislike about your current work?</p> <p>Tell me about the projects you have worked on that gave you the most satisfaction.</p> <p>What aspects of your job motivate you to excel?</p> <p>Which technical or functional activities energize you most?</p> <p>What do you think your key skills and competencies are?</p> <p>What part of your current role do you find most challenging?</p> |
| | O | Opportunities, Obstacles and Options | <p>Explore the Opportunities, Obstacles and Options</p> <p>TIPS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore a range of options for learning such as shadowing, mentoring, networking, online learning and workshops. • Obstacles can be both internal (e.g., motivation) and external (e.g. availability of resources). People view obstacles differently. Acknowledge their point of view. Start by encouraging the staff member to imagine possibilities, but if you see opportunities and options, share them. | <p>What are the various ways to achieve your growth goal?</p> <p>Which options interest you the most?</p> <p>What opportunities are there to practice achieving the goal?</p> <p>What networks have you built to support your career progression? How can you leverage these networks to achieve your goals?</p> <p>Who should you network with to get a different perspective on your career goals?</p> <p>What other resources could I help you with?</p> <p>What resources do you have to help you?</p> <p>What holds you back from achieving this goal?</p> <p>What obstacles could derail your progress?</p> <p>What competing demands might distract you?</p> <p>Are the obstacles internal or external?</p> <p>If you had no constraints, what would you do?</p> |

| | | | | |
|------|---|-------------|---|---|
| PLAN | W | Way Forward | <p>The planning process begins here, first with a commitment to take on specific actions or practices identified in the previous step.</p> <p>TIPS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1-3 action steps are enough! • Help the staff member identify something doable – set them up for success. • Remember that it is the responsibility of the staff member to do something for their own growth and they need to commit to doing it, not be talked into something. | <p>What will success look like? What will you do? What steps will you take? What growth experiences and development opportunities outside your current tasks would help you achieve your goals? How will you manage this in terms of your workload? Where will you start? What is the smallest step you can take to start you on the path? How confident are you that you will be successful? How motivated are you to carry out your plan? What else could I (or other UN colleagues) do to support you?</p> |
| | T | Timeline | <p>The second step in planning for growth is to set up a timeframe, to commit to taking specific actions by specific deadlines.</p> <p>TIPS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage the staff member to schedule GROWTH actions to ensure that they don't get forgotten. • Put any agreed check-ins in your own calendar. When the time comes, ask them how they are doing. | <p>When are you going to start? How long do you think it will take? Are there milestones along the way that you can set in time? When will you check in or ask for feedback? Is there a tool that you will use to track your progress? What is the one thing to move forward today and tomorrow?</p> |
| | H | How | <p>The last step in planning is to prepare for the growth journey and consider how the staff member will deal with difficulties and how she or he will acknowledge success.</p> | <p>How will you stay on track? Stay motivated? How will you overcome obstacles? How can I help you? Who else might be able to help you? How will you know you have succeeded? How will you celebrate success?</p> |



PROFESSIONAL GROWTH LEVEL

When talking to staff about their career goals in step 1 of the GROWTH model, encourage them to consider their professional growth level in relation to their current job. At times in our career we might spend more time developing skills to master our current job while at other times we can be more focused on expanding out skills beyond our current role. The graphic below shows some professional growth levels to consider.



7. Preparing for a career conversation

Taking time to reflect on what you know about your staff member's career aspirations before you meet can help you decide what topics to explore and the type of support to offer.

CHECKLIST TO HELP YOU PREPARE:

- **Schedule career conversations** with staff well in advance so that they can prepare.
- Emphasize that the **focus will be on career planning**, not performance.
- **Ask staff to come prepared** to discuss their career aspirations and related strengths, preferences and development needs. Perhaps ask them to draft potential career development goals.
- **Review notes from previous conversations** on the individual's career aspirations and progress to date.
- **Prepare tailored questions** to explore career-related thoughts and actions using the GROWTH framework.
- Prepare to have a **candid discussion** regarding the likelihood of promotion or other internal growth opportunities.
- **Consider the level of trust** between you and your staff and how this influences the conversation and your preparation steps.
- Familiarize yourself with **career support provided by the Organization** – see the last page of this guide.

TIP: Anticipate the tough questions!

Managers should place themselves in the shoes of their staff members and anticipate their concerns. It's more important to anticipate the questions than have all the answers. The objective is to create an honest and authentic dialogue. Consider some tough questions that could come up in the conversation:

- *What can I do to recover from mistakes I've made and repair my reputation?*
- *How can I talk about my accomplishments without sounding arrogant?*
- *How do I learn about other options in the Organization without turning off my manager?*
- *How do I stay current with all the changes in the Organization? Who do I need to know? What do I need to do?*



8. Facilitating a career conversation

The success of career conversations depends on preparation, expectation management and efficient management of the conversation.

Below are some topics, techniques, and tips to help you do this.

Step 1: Start the conversation off right

How do I do this?

- Select a location that is conducive to the supportive nature of the conversation
- Make sure you are calm, present and prepared
- Create a comfortable atmosphere and give the staff member your undivided attention.
- Confirm the purpose, duration and importance of conducting the conversation.

Step 2: Use the GROWTH Framework to guide your conversation

The growth framework will help you to structure the conversation. Its questions can open up thoughts about future choices and provide some soul-searching for both parties and open doors in thinking about one's own abilities and future aspirations. See here for more on the GROWTH Framework.

In addition to following the GROWTH Framework, keep the following in mind:



Be curious and show genuine interest; ask open questions to gain a full picture of the individual's career aspirations and related strengths and growth needs.

- Build rapport by showing empathy and giving the staff member time to share their ideas and concerns.
- Regularly summarise what is being said to acknowledge that you are listening and eager to understand their view or ideas
- Actively listen and encourage the staff member to do most of the talking; don't dominate the conversation but offer guidance and advice as needed.
- It is important that you are frank and honest in your assessment of the staff member's career goals. Validate or 'reality check' these, as appropriate.
- You may be aware of potential that the staff member has, but they are not connected to that potential yet. Take the opportunity to encourage them with your belief in their ability.
- Be transparent about the likelihood of advancement; support the individual's decision to look for a position externally if opportunities (or the lack thereof) in the Secretariat cannot satisfy their needs.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Don't pretend to know. Don't make promises that can't be kept. Turn a lack of knowledge into a joint exploration and shared experience.



Step 3: Finish well



It's especially important to set realistic expectations. If a staff member isn't ready for certain responsibilities, discuss what they need to develop first.

The action points from the discussion should be documented. End the conversation by asking the staff member to summarise their next steps (e.g., what else do they need to think of, by when will they send you the documented action plan, when will you have a follow-up conversation, etc.).

Never lose sight that career conversations are aimed at building, motivating and developing staff members. Career conversations help open doors for career choices, build trust, and engage people to realize the goals of the Organization. Ensure that the tone of your conversation aligns with these ideas.

9. Facilitating check-ins

Follow-up career 'check-ins' should be held as mutually agreed by you and your staff member during the career conversation, or as needed.

Use the check-in to give feedback on progress, provide updates related to career interests, and offer ongoing support and motivation.

In addition, managers should, on an ongoing basis:

- **Support** the execution of the career action plan by making resources available – such as approving a training request or facilitating the purchase of software, etc.
- **Encourage** the staff member to meet with peers, colleagues and other supervisors who can provide specific support.
- Check in at scheduled intervals to **discuss progress** and **provide feedback** and clear direction on the focus areas of the career action plan.
- **Share timely updates** on career information, resources, and potential job opportunities
- Provide **growth assignments** for staff to further develop.
- **Advocate** for staff by promoting their career aspirations and visibility to others.
- **Give feedback** on behaviours or performance issues that may impact reputation.
- **Welcome staff** from other areas who want to learn about the work of your unit.

Schedule a follow-up conversation whenever you feel that the individual's career strategy or plan may need adjusting to respond to changing circumstances.



Don't forget: congratulate your staff on their successes and communicate how their development aids organizational goals.

10. Dealing with difficult career conversations

Below are some considerations to help you prepare for career conversations that might be difficult.

| Typical scenarios: | How you could respond: |
|--|--|
| A staff member who is dissatisfied with his/her career development and progress | Acknowledge the dissatisfaction with empathy. As uncomfortable as it may be, you will not shift the conversation without first validating the staff members' emotions. Then engage with curiosity and non-judgement and ask questions about their ideal outcome. Where do they think they should be? What do they think they could do to accelerate that? If their expectations of progress are unrealistic, be honest but respectful and kind with your input and feedback. Also consider asking them about what aspects of their jobs they find fulfilling or satisfying. Refer them to the Career Satisfaction Framework for further exploration of this theme. |
| A staff member who may feel that you – as manager – have not been supportive | Whether you agree or disagree with their experience, acknowledge that you hear them and say that you are really sorry that this is their experience. What it is that you did that made them feel unsupported? Listen with the purpose to understand and reconnect. What it is that they need from you? What can you both do to build on your connection? How can you move forward in a way that will be experienced as supportive? |
| A staff member who is disappointed at not being selected for a growth opportunity | Acknowledge the disappointment and allow time for the colleague to digest the experience. Affirm their abilities and strengths. Assure them that you are there to support their development. Remind them that this is one opportunity and there will likely be more. What do they need from you as they process their disappointment? What can they take as learning from the experience? How does this experience impact their career aspirations (both positive and negative)? What do they need to move forward? |
| A staff member who is unhappy because a peer has been promoted, but they haven't | Acknowledge the unhappiness and invite the colleague to have a conversation on why they think this might be the case. Assuming the recruitment process was fair and transparent, engage in the conversation with sincerity, but correct any misconceptions about the job opening requirements and provide your honest feedback about what the staff member will need to develop to be considered in future. Did they meet all the requirements of the job opening sufficiently? What can they take as learning? How can they ready themselves for the next opportunity? |
| A staff member is close to retirement and not interested in talking about career goals | Tailor the conversation to focus on the skills transfer aspect of their role. What meaningful contribution can they make, while still part of the team? What can they offer to other colleagues in the team or Organization in the time they have left? Retiring is the next phase of their career and life. What do they need to think about so that they are prepared for the change? What are their aspirations for retirement? How will they make the adjustment? |
| What if the staff member struggles to articulate their career goals? | Most people struggle to articulate their longer-term aspirations. This is normal. Stay engaged and assess why they are struggling. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have they not had the opportunity to reflect on their career goals? • Have they not been encouraged to consider their career goals? • Are they unaware of career development strategies and resources? • Do they not see opportunities for career growth or change? |
| The staff member's career goals are unrealistic in my opinion. | Make sure that you are objective in your assessment of their goals as being unrealistic. Just because it is not the path you followed does not make something unrealistic. Rather than tell the staff member outright that they have unrealistic goals, engage around how they hope to achieve their goals. What would they need to have in place to achieve their goal? What do they know is expected of the level they are aiming for? How do their current skill sets match those expectations? What do they need to have in place before they can reach their ideal goal? What does the path of progression look like? If you notice a disconnect between how the staff member sees their capabilities and reality, provide useful and clear feedback. Focus on being relevant and objective with examples where their capabilities did not match how they see themselves. |

Other considerations when preparing for a difficult career conversation:

- How can you help the staff member reframe his/her career aspirations (e.g., focusing on a cluster of skills and or experiences, as opposed to a targeted job title?)
- Are barriers to goal achievement personal (e.g., competency issues, mobility constraints, behaviour or attitude issues) or organizational (e.g., lack of growth/advancement opportunities, changing skill needs)?
- If career goals cannot be achieved internally, how can you help your staff member pursue external opportunities?
- Have you encouraged your staff member to consider a lateral move to broaden the range of development experiences?



11. Summary: The roles and responsibilities of staff and managers

Summary of roles and responsibilities for staff and managers for career conversations:

| Staff | Managers |
|---|---|
| Own your career conversations Initiate and prepare for career development conversations with your manager. | Prioritise career conversations Help create a transformational environment for staff and allow them an opportunity to share and make sense of their experiences. This requires you to engage and discuss career aspirations and support staff continuously. If staff do not initiate a career conversation, you should do so. Encourage staff to own their career development conversations. |
| Keep the focus on career development, not performance Separate a career conversation from an annual workplan discussion or a formal performance review. | Keep the focus on career development, not performance Separate a career conversation from an annual workplan discussion or a formal performance review. |
| Be open about your career aspirations and goals Understand your strengths and career interests and ask your manager for feedback and a reality check on your expectations. | Be transparent about career development opportunities Provide constructive feedback on the individual's goals and aspirations and give honest comments about their expectations. |
| Identify skills and experience needed to find more job satisfaction and advance your career Identify the types of experience, credentials and skills development needed to find more satisfaction in your career and advance too. | Focus staff on satisfaction and experience, not just title progression or positions Encourage staff to identify and appreciate the satisfying aspects of their jobs and the skills they are actively using and honing, rather than just focusing on moving upwards. |
| Find out about the skills and experience the Organization needs Stay abreast of changes and emerging needs within the UN and your specific professional field. | Communicate future organizational needs Help staff understand the skills and experience the UN is looking to acquire in the future. |
| Seek out development opportunities Actively look for opportunities or experiences that will further your career. | Help staff members find development opportunities, including outside your team or area Use your network and HR colleagues to identify and share opportunities that align with a staff member's interests. |
| Build your network within the Organization Network with peers, other supervisors and senior leaders to inform your aspirations, learn more about available opportunities and growth areas, and determine what skills and experiences to focus on. | Help staff expand their internal networks Help staff connect with peers, other supervisors and senior leaders and tap into networks that match their areas of interest. |
| Understand and communicate your employability Be prepared to articulate your strengths and career aspirations, both internally and externally, to build your personal brand. | Help staff evaluate and communicate their employability Help individuals develop and articulate key factors that distinguish them from their peers. Evaluate their chances of promotion within the Organization (and possibly beyond) and be transparent in your feedback. |

12. Career Support Offered by the Organization

There are a wide range of websites, tools and programmes with information about career support and learning. Here are a few below that are developed and maintained by the Office of Human Resources. Your entity or duty station may also have additional resources for local staff. Talk to your Human Resources Business Partner or administrative contact for more information.

- [Career Centre](#) on the Knowledge Gateway
- [Your Career](#) section of the HR Portal; highlights include:
 - o [Together Mentoring and Networking Programme](#)
 - o [Career Webinars](#)
 - o [Hear from Staff](#)
- [Learning section](#) of the HR Portal; highlights include:
 - o [LinkedIn Learning](#)
 - o [Leadership and Management Training](#)

