

Straight Talking: Effective Career Discussions at Work

NICEC

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The Effective Career Discussion Consortium

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Employees need access to information and advice on their careers in order to manage their own career development effectively. The accounts of over a hundred managers and professionals indicate that effective career discussion often leads to practical actions and can be highly motivating for employees.

This Briefing identifies:

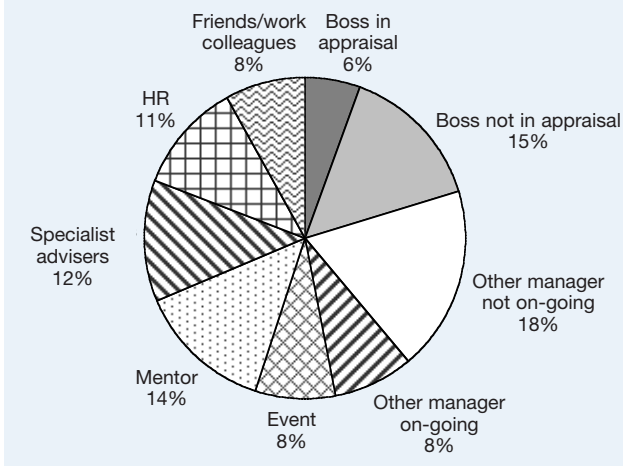
- the types of people with whom good career discussions tend to be held;
- the settings in which effective career discussions take place;
- the impact that these discussions have on individual employees;
- the skills and personal qualities of those who give good career support.

It includes a framework of practical do's and don'ts for those giving career support and for individual employees receiving it.

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WHERE AND WITH WHOM?

Figure 1 Types of discussions



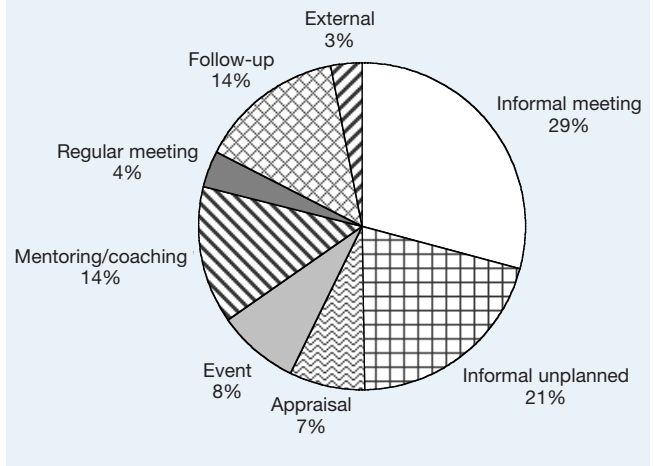
A breakdown of the 162 positive conversations reported by receivers of career support revealed very diverse sources of support (figure 1).

- Over half the conversations (55%) took place with managers in the organisation, including the boss. Discussions with managers other than the direct boss were often 'on-going' (ie they involved some degree of informal mentoring), although most were not.
- Only a fifth were with the individual's line manager, and the majority of these were outside formal appraisal.
- Individuals also had good conversations at career or training events (8%); with formal mentors or coaches (14%); and with specialists, such as external advisers or psychologists (12%).
- Discussions with HR, including both generalists and HR development specialists, represented 11% of all positive discussions.

THE PROJECT

The project set out to examine good experiences of career discussion at work as a means of discerning how more employees might receive effective career support. Five major employing organisations helped the research team to locate employees (mainly managers and professionals) who had experienced an 'effective career discussion'. An effective career discussion was defined in terms of its perceived positive value to the individual concerned. In confidential interviews, these 'receivers' of career support gave accounts of one or more positive and negative experiences of career discussion. Interviews were also held with some effective 'givers' of career support. The study gathered information from 118 receivers and 33 givers, producing details of 250 specific conversations. Givers and receivers were also asked for their general views on the subject of career discussions at work. Most of the data presented here are based on the 162 positive conversations described by receivers of effective career support.

Figure 2 Settings for positive discussions



Conversations also took place in a wide range of settings (figure 2).

- Half the discussions were not part of any formal HR process. Only 7% took place as part of a performance appraisal or development review, and a further 4% in regular 'one-to-one' review meetings with the boss. 14% took place as a follow-up to another event (eg failing a selection interview, or after a development centre).
- The vast majority (80%) of discussions took place by appointment, as did the majority (59%) of discussions which were not part of any formal HR process. Three-quarters of discussions with friends and work colleagues were unplanned, as were about half of the discussions with other managers with whom receivers had an on-going relationship.
- About three-quarters of the discussions for which length was recorded lasted over 45 minutes.
- Of the 60% of discussions clearly initiated by the receiver or the giver, twice as many were initiated by the receiver as by the giver.
- Most discussions (83%), apart from those that took place in a group setting, took place with someone who was older than the receiver; 64% took place with someone of the same gender as the receiver.

The other key feature of positive discussions which emerged from the study was the importance of the relationship between the giver and receiver. Although under half the positive conversations were part of an 'on-going' career support relationship, these relationships could be very important; some lasted for years.

Of the remaining positive discussions, many took place with people the receivers did not know well. However, some had carefully selected the individual with whom they intended to have a discussion.

IMPACT

About three-quarters of positive career discussions led to practical action of some kind, ranging from follow-up meetings to a job move or development activity.

Effective career discussions had a wide range of impacts on the individual, including practical actions but also affecting how they thought or felt (figure 3).

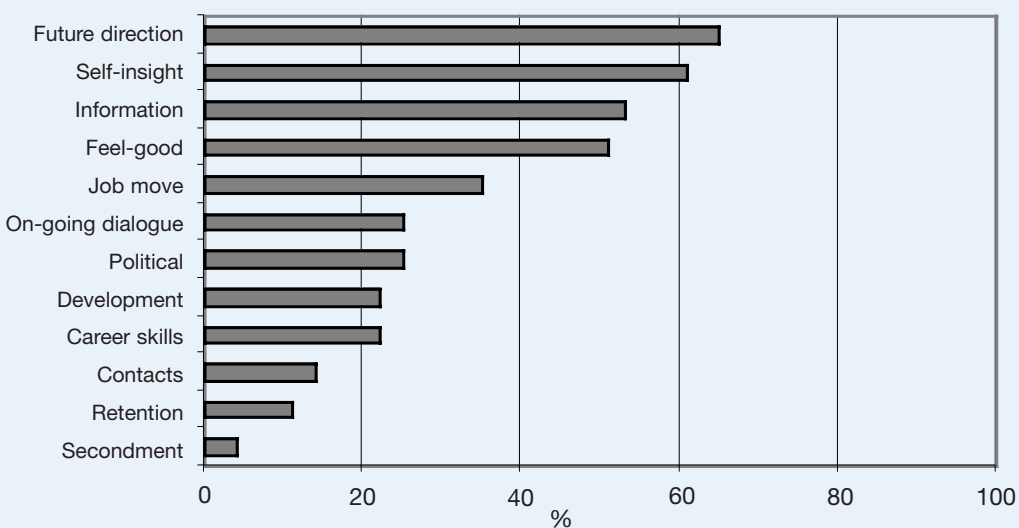
- Four main types of impact occurred in over half the positive discussions: a clearer future career direction; self-insight; information about career opportunities; and generally 'feeling good' (eg feeling reassured, feeling valued). Other impacts included: job moves, on-going dialogue with the organisation, greater political awareness about internal processes, development opportunities, and improved career skills.
- Nearly all positive discussions had no negative impacts; but over half the negative discussions had negative impacts and only a quarter had positive ones. The main impact from negative discussions was emotional: feeling bad about oneself, work or one's job.
- Conversations with different people and in different settings had different, but overlapping, impacts. An individual was likely to benefit from a variety of career discussions: some giving information, and others of a more exploratory or reflective nature.

EFFECTIVENESS

What makes a career discussion effective?

- In general, the most important requirements in givers of career support were: the giver's personal qualities; challenging the receiver and offering advice where appropriate; using interpersonal skills to facilitate the discussion; and providing information about opportunities.
- The key personal qualities of effective givers were: interest in the individual and commitment to helping; honesty; impartiality; and being seen as trustworthy. These qualities and attitudes were just as important as specific helping skills, if not more so.
- Receivers valued givers being frank and honest, particularly in giving constructive feedback about skills and potential. Communicating information and giving direct advice were also valued. Non-directive counselling-type behaviours were rarely sufficient.
- Individual receivers also needed skills and a positive attitude in order to obtain opportunities for career discussion and to use these opportunities productively.
- Unsuccessful discussions came about because the giver: lacked interest and commitment to the individual; did not attempt to understand their concerns; 'over-managed' the conversation; or avoided frank and honest dialogue.

Figure 3 Impacts of positive discussions



IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANISATIONS

Career discussions are central to self-managed careers. The employees in the sample saw career development as central to their future working lives. Most were happy to take primary responsibility for their own careers, but they also wanted their organisation to offer active support. However, at present relatively few employees have easy access to the kinds of discussions about their careers which would help them significantly.

Much of this support concerned sharing information on a range of issues, including: perceived potential; career options; job moves or development; and company politics. Most of this information was subtle, tacit, and needed to be related to the specific individual and their situation. Conversations with other people are central to sharing such information.

Don't rely on formal appraisal for career discussion. The study provides strong evidence that neither employees nor good managers find appraisal the best place to talk about careers. Only a small number of appraisals contained helpful career discussions. Appraisal is an overloaded process, and its focus on short-term performance and on 'recording' sets the wrong tone for an open discussion of careers.

Appraisals and formal development reviews can be a good place to raise career issues, but not often to explore or resolve them. A separate discussion on another occasion will usually be needed. Frequent one-to-one meetings between boss and subordinate can also be a good forum in which to discuss career issues.

Career support is the job of the line, but not just of the boss. The boss is often not the best provider of career support. Bosses can provide excellent support but only do so in a minority of cases, usually where a trusting personal relationship has developed. Many effective career discussions are with other managers. The immediate boss could be encouraged to give individuals access to his or her own networks and help them to see other people who may have the information they need. The responsibility for offering career support needs to be re-positioned with the line as a community, not just with the boss.

Encouraging informal discussions and providing training. Effective career discussions rely on finding someone you can trust and respect. Organisations need to make it easier for employees to approach people they sense might be able to help them. A much greater emphasis needs to be placed on encouraging informal career discussions and informal mentoring.

Both givers and receivers of career support need skills to make their discussions effective. Managers and employees are trained in objective setting and performance review, but not in how to conduct a useful career discussion. It is high time they were.

Build in some off-line options. Where the line is weak on people management, or the organisation is turbulent, or individuals have deep-seated problems, more targeted career interventions can provide effective career support. Formal mentoring, development centres, career workshops and external coaches all come into this category. Building in at least one of these 'off-line' types of career

development support provides employees with a useful alternative source of information and advice.

Hands-on HR. HR is often seen as predominantly a systems designer in relation to career processes. This often results in attempts to structure career discussion which are too rigid and constraining. The individuals in this study were hostile to the imposition of forms, checklists, elaborate competency frameworks, ratings and scorings. These simply got in the way of serious career conversations.

The study suggests three roles for HR in improving the quality of career discussions: a hands-on role in giving direct career support; the procurement of internal or external career specialists or formal career interventions; and building the capability of the individuals within the organisation to conduct effective career discussions.

A motivated bottom line. The most experienced givers of career support saw career discussion as part of developing the potential of employees (maximising their business contribution over time) but even more as an essential component of a motivational style of leadership (maximising their engagement). They believed in a strong business benefit via the motivational impact of attending to the real concerns that employees have about their futures.

Career discussions as part of organisational life. The project reported here does not advocate a new formal initiative called 'career discussion'. Rather it should be recognised that people need to talk about their careers as a normal part of organisational life. Part of the strength of the idea of effective career discussion is that it makes the link between the abstract and mysterious notion of career development and something as tangible and everyday as a conversation.

Effective career discussions can be characterised by the actions of receivers in obtaining and using help, and by the actions of givers in making their support and advice genuinely useful. The practical tips shown in the chart on the back two pages summarise some of these lessons.

August 2001

FURTHER INFORMATION

The full report, *Straight Talking: Effective Career Discussions at Work*, is available price £25 (inc. p&p) from NICEC, Sheraton House, Castle Park, Cambridge CB3 0AX tel. 01223-460277; fax 01223-311708; e-mail: nicec@crac.org.uk

Also available is a short NICEC Guide, *Practical Tips for Effective Career Discussions at Work*, aimed at employees and at those who may advise them on their career development. Copies of both the Guide and this Briefing are available from NICEC on receipt of an A4 stamped (20p for 1 or 2 copies, 31p for up to 4, 38p for up to 6) and addressed envelope.

TIPS FOR GIVERS AND RECEIVERS OF CAREER SUPPORT

SETTING UP THE DISCUSSION

Individual responsibility for career • Awareness of HR systems • Preparation

TIPS FOR GIVERS	TIPS FOR RECEIVERS
See the individual as in the driving seat of their career, and yourself as someone who can help them manage this better. Don't be afraid to offer career support to employees who don't report to you.	Put yourself in the driving seat. Think about who can help you address career issues. Make sure you get the help you need by asking for it.
Talk to those you manage about their future as well as their job performance. In helping other people, consider whether you need to involve their boss.	Try to develop a relationship with your boss such that they will actively support your career. If this is impossible, try to keep your boss informed.
Explain where career development fits with appraisal. Suggest a follow-up meeting if career issues come up in appraisal but need more time. Try to put careers on the agenda in regular one-to-one progress meetings.	If you want to raise a career issue in appraisal, tell your appraiser beforehand. Ask for a follow-up to the appraisal meeting if there are career issues you could not discuss fully. Take advantage of other types of career support offered by your organisation.
Don't spring job moves on staff without warning. Find space for a proper discussion.	If you are planning a job move, start raising the issue well in advance.
Career discussions which occur naturally in day-to-day work can be helpful. If you are giving important feedback do take the time to explain properly.	If you want to talk to someone, ask for an appointment and explain what you want to discuss. Ask for at least half an hour.
Take time to prepare. If you don't know the individual see if they are happy to send you a CV. Tell them in advance if there are issues you want to raise.	Prepare by thinking about your situation and skills and their fit with the business. Think about what you want to discuss and what you want from the discussion.



ESTABLISHING TRUST

Agreeing a contract • Listening and empathy • Questioning and probing

TIPS FOR GIVERS	TIPS FOR RECEIVERS
Share your agenda with the individual. Consider agreeing a 'contract' for the discussion.	Share your agenda with the giver.
Establish an open feel to the conversation. Put the other person at their ease. Show your interest, listen carefully, check you understand what they are saying. Make clear you understand they may wish the discussion to be confidential. Be open about your own career if appropriate.	Go into the discussion in an open frame of mind. Listen carefully to the information and advice offered and try not to be defensive. The more you can disclose your own concerns and feelings, the more you are likely to get out of the discussion.
Don't let short-term business priorities constrain or bias your advice. Show you are interested in the person first and foremost. Think about the business overall, not just your part of it.	Show you realise how your career plans relate to the business. Try to link your skill development to the organisation's needs.





SHARING INFORMATION

Information about self and situation • Exploring pros and cons of options • Questioning and probing • Setting direction

TIPS FOR GIVERS	TIPS FOR RECEIVERS
It may help to have a framework in mind (eg Where are you now? Where do you want to be? How will you get there?).	Listen for the frameworks the giver uses. They may be helpful in the future as well as in this discussion.
Use your own and others' careers to illustrate career paths. But don't expect the individual to want a career like yours.	The giver's career experiences may provide useful insights, but you don't have to behave just like them.
Challenge the individual's ideas where appropriate in a constructive way.	Be ready to have your ideas challenged. Ask why the giver disagrees with you.
Try to meet the individual's needs for information, including opportunities outside the business. Where appropriate, suggest other people to talk to.	Try to broaden your understanding of the kinds of work open to you and how the changing business is affecting these.
Help the individual identify a wide enough range of career options. Which do they feel would suit them best? Are their preferred options realistic?	If you have some career options in mind, seek the giver's views of their relative pros and cons.
Help the individual discuss what they really want out of work. If you sense the individual needs to explore more personal concerns, give them the opportunity to do so, but respect their right to keep these matters private.	Think about what you want in your work and how it fits into your life. Be prepared to discuss broader personal issues if you wish. But if the discussion gets too personal for your comfort, say so.



AGREEING ACTION

Concluding the discussion • Agreeing actions and any further contact

TIPS FOR GIVERS	TIPS FOR RECEIVERS
Leave enough time to bring the discussion to a close and agree what happens next. Ensure the individual knows they can come back to you.	Make sure you come away with a clear view of what to do next. Ask if you can come back if you need to.
Agree which parts of the discussion are confidential, what will be shared with other named individuals, and any links with formal HR processes.	Agree what information should remain confidential. If information needs to be shared with others, clarify who will do this, how and when.
Does the individual need you to take any actions (eg help them make initial contact with others)? If you agree to do something, do it – and quickly.	Try to leave with concrete things to do. Think about who else to inform. Thank the giver. Consider keeping them informed of your progress.

WHAT SHOULDN'T YOU DO?

AS A GIVER OF ADVICE YOU SHOULD NOT:

- Appear uninterested in the person asking for advice or fail to show empathy with their situation.
- Misunderstand the issue by failing to listen or to check with the individual.
- Jump in with a career suggestion or even a job offer without preparing the ground first.
- 'Toe the organisation/party line' rather than being frank and open.
- Promise to do something during a discussion and then fail to follow it up.

AS A RECEIVER OF ADVICE YOU SHOULD NOT:

- Wait for help to come to you rather than going out to find it.
- Fail to prepare the giver for the discussion.
- Reject advice or feedback out of hand, fail to listen attentively, or get aggressive or defensive.
- Appear interested only in yourself and not in the organisation or other people.
- Fail to tell the giver your real career issues.