HUMAN RESOURCE'S

ULTIMATE GUIDE

TO FOSTERING GREAT MANAGER-EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIPS

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Make Work Better.

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STRONG RELATIONSHIPS ARE FOUNDATIONAL

Studies show that the manager-employee relationship is one of the most important aspects of the employee experience and a major contributor to productivity. **According to Gallup, managers alone account for 70% of the variance in team engagement.**

Great managers are guides, champions, communicators, change makers, cultural ambassadors, mentors, and coaches who can motivate and inspire their teams to deliver their best performance — and advance personally and professionally.

Unfortunately, many new (and even experienced) managers come to the role unequipped and inexperienced, with little to guide them on how to meet the needs of their reports. Hybrid and remote work also bring new challenges to managing a team and require managers to be more relational.

What are employees' needs? Surveys, including our own 2023 State of Performance Enablement survey and report, have shown that employees crave more frequent and substantive conversations, coaching, career development, empathy, and emotional support from their managers.

In short, good conversations matter, and as human resources leaders, it's important that we teach managers how to have them while also providing the support managers need to be more effective without feeling overburdened.

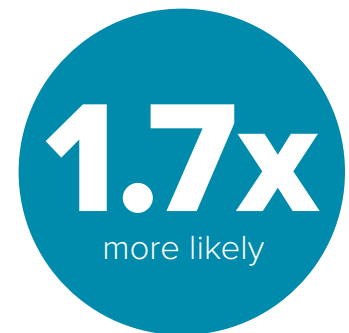Research from RedThread backs the value of conversations...

When managers focus on making connections within teams, their employees are:

2.2x
more likely

to see their managers as **highly effective**

1.8x
more likely
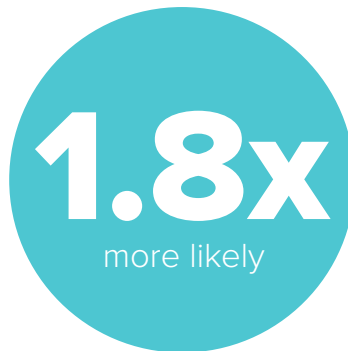
to give a **positive eNPS score**

1.7x
more likely

to **stay with** the organization

According to RedThread, managers can be more effective by becoming comfortable with transparency, helping employees identify tasks that drive goals and stay on track, and removing barriers. All of this is accomplished through conversations.

This guide is designed to give Human Resources actionable advice to help managers plan, structure, and conduct more effective conversations and build authentic and transparent relationships with employees.

*Source: RedThread Research, 2022

12 TRAITS THAT MAKE A MANAGER A GREAT COACH

A 2019 Gartner study shows that when managers are effective coaches, their people have a 26% increase in productivity and performance, a 40% increase in engagement and job satisfaction, and a 20% decrease in turnover.

The 12 traits of a great manager can be broken down into four main categories, what we call B.E.S.T.: build, empower, show, and teach.

1. **Build** trust: Managers can only effectively develop or help an employee if that individual trusts them. Managers build trust through honest and authentic communication.

2. **Build** leaders: Great leaders lift others up. The measure of a manager's success and legacy is how people learn from them and improve upon their learnings.

3. **Empower** curiosity: The best managers are open to learning new things, rather than always being right. They promote questions and discussion. Curiosity is the birthplace of innovation and creativity.

4. **Empower** disagreement: Strong managers enable people to disagree with them. A "yes" environment stifles growth. Creating space to be challenged teaches others problem-solving and critical thinking needed to find the right answers to complex issues.

5. **Show** a sense of humor: Humor builds connection, especially with challenging personalities, and connection increases an employee's trust in their manager.

6. **Show** integrity: A manager should avoid sharing secrets and talking badly about people. They should be ethical in challenging situations, having high standards and unimpeachable character.

TRAITS OF THE **B.E.S.T.** COACH

BUILD	**EMPOWER**	**SHOW**	**TEACH**
Trust	Curiosity	Humor	Let go of ego
Leaders	Disagreement	Integrity	Guide
		Candor	Listen
		Confidence	Communicate

7. **Show** candor: Managers should develop a tolerance for hearing criticism and receiving honest feedback with earnestness and without retribution. This may take time, but humility and vulnerability are important aspects of leadership. Managers should also be able to accept responsibility for their failures.

8. **Show** confidence: Employees ground themselves in how their manager expresses themself. Confidence is built through hard moments, not just easy ones. Managers may communicate worry, although it is important to inject some optimism and confidence. They should be able to present a plan, be transparent, and maintain control.

9. **Teach** humility: Good managers support their employees' interests and aspirations. They hold no one back, do not prejudge anything, and play a supporting role in their employees' achievements.

10. **Teach** by guiding: Managers should ask their employees questions and suggest paths they may not have thought of, rather than providing all the answers. They enable people to be strategic thinkers and develop new skills.

11. **Teach** by listening: Solid managers listen to understand what their people are saying *and* what they're not saying (reading between the lines). They are quiet and focused on the employee while listening. Speaking least in a conversation gives an employee the chance to problem-solve on their own.

12. **Teach** by communicating: Good managers don't assume their employees always know what to do or fully understand a situation. Managers should be clear, concise, open, and transparent. Transparency goes far and employees appreciate being told the truth.

HR'S ROLE

People are often promoted to management roles because they have subject expertise and have excelled as individual contributors. But managing requires a different skill set, and managers require organizational resources, structure, and support to be coaches. As you make coaching a core competency, you must train managers to be effective coaches and mentors. This can involve:

» Mentorship programs for both new and more tenured managers

» Frequent check-ins between people managers and senior managers

» Coaching courses and training in soft skills

» Reducing managerial responsibilities so first-time managers can focus on strengthening connections with their people

Having the right technology helps. It provides managers with a framework for:

» Asking the right questions, which form the basis of effective conversations

» Motivating, engaging, and nudging employees

» Using insights from conversation and feedback data to guide decisions

In addition to technology, your organization can help managers improve their outcomes by offering these guidelines for great conversations.

1. **Establish a culture of check-ins**
   If managers meet regularly with employees, the talk will be part of an ongoing conversation. Employees are less likely to feel blindsided.

2. **Encourage managers to prepare**
   Advise managers to look back through past conversations, metrics, goals, and feedback to ensure they have an objective, fact-based perspective.

3. **Set and communicate expectations in advance**
    Suggest managers schedule plenty of time for the conversation and offer an agenda to help to avoid a defensive posture.

4. **Be factual, calm, direct, and clear**
    Have managers consider what they want to say in advance so they can clearly articulate their ideas and not become flustered or go off track.

5. **Connect as a human, first**
    Encourage managers to focus on empathy, listening, and relating to their employees on a human level.

6. **Communicate actionable solutions**
    Conversations, especially tough ones, should include achievable solutions — and corrective actions if necessary — to help employees meet expectations.

7. **Encourage two-way conversations**
    Encourage managers to proactively ask for the employee's perspective.

8. **Emerge with a shared understanding of events**
    Have managers document conversation outcomes, so employees can absorb them over time and take part ownership of what happens next.

ANATOMY OF A GOOD MANAGER-EMPLOYEE CONVERSATION

Developing transparent and meaningful conversations requires ongoing relationship-building. As a best practice, Betterworks recommends check-ins that occur weekly or every other week.

Whether the conversations are planned or not, it can be stressful for employees to receive evaluational feedback. A good structure lets managers help employees know what to expect and feel more comfortable and in control of situations.

Consider providing managers with this structure to guide their conversations:

1. Prepare the conversation according to each employee's needs
2. Communicate your intent clearly
3. Prepare an agenda or checklist to guide the conversation
4. Provide context and examples
5. Define your expectations
6. Create space for listening
7. Recommend next steps
8. Document agreed-upon takeaways and actions
9. Track ongoing progress
10. Celebrate success

QUESTIONS TO JUMP-START GREAT CONVERSATIONS

Looking for questions to share with managers and leaders to help them create more meaningful check-ins? Consider sharing these lists of structured (scheduled) and unstructured (anytime) conversation questions below.

Structured (for employees):

» At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day. (4-pt scale)

» How do you feel about your goal achievement this past quarter? (3-pt scale)?

» What would you like to achieve over the next quarter? Why?
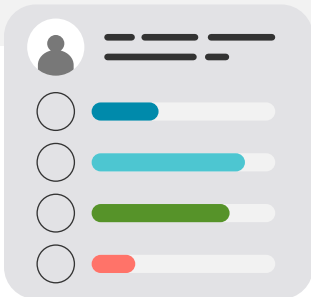
Structured (for managers):

» How would you describe your employee's performance this quarter?

» What are some areas the employee can focus on to enhance their performance?

» How can you help your employee achieve their goals?

Unstructured (for employees):

» How is the progress on your goals going? Are there any that need to be reviewed / re-prioritized?

» What is your confidence level in achieving your goals this quarter?

» Do you understand what you need to do to have more impact?

Unstructured (for managers):

» Are there any priorities to be reviewed or shifted?

» What opportunities do these goals provide your direct report?

» What are some skills that would be valuable for their growth, and what opportunities can you suggest to support their development of those skills?

CONVERSATION TYPES AND TEMPLATES

Here's a list of the types of conversations managers can have with their employees. We suggest you have conversation templates available to your managers and employees. These provide guidance on giving and receiving coaching and feedback and ensure consistency when recording responses.

- **Open Lines of Communication:** regular, informal touch points with your team and direct reports.

- **1:1 Check-ins:** Templates to guide conversations with employees, typically 1-2 times a month, about their work and progress on their goals — including what they're working on, struggling with, or enjoying.

- **Recognition moments**: A template to help recognize and appreciate employees for the good work they're doing.

- **Troubleshooting and triage conversations:** A template for difficult conversations or responding to urgent needs as close as possible to the moment in which the problem occurs.

- **Development coaching**: A template for coaching conversations to touch base when employees need specific in-depth discussions around skill-building or career development/planning.

- **End-of-quarter goals and performance review:** A template to use at the end of every period to review employee goals and performance

HELPING MANAGERS HAVE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Difficult conversations can be as tough for managers as for employees. Managers may find themselves dealing with an environmental stressor, such as trying to resolve a conflict within their team or helping an employee deal with a major life event or other trauma.

In challenging situations, managers should follow a framework we call C.L.E.A.R.: communicate, listen, empathize, be authentic, and reflect.

Communicate

Managers should be intentional and in the moment when they talk with their employees. They'll be successful only if their employees trust them and feel they have a relationship with them.

Guidelines:

» Communicate in person, on video, or by phone, not text or email, to understand emotions.
» Be mindful of what you say and how you say it; people appreciate transparency.
» Ask if you understand them correctly and ask how you are being perceived.
» Ask follow-up questions about why and how they feel or respond to the issue, their thoughts or approach, and what the other person may have felt.

Listen

Listening well is an art form. Managers should focus on what the employee is saying and not saying (reading between the lines). Employees may not be able to directly tell their manager what they need, but it's there.

Guidelines:

» Ask if you're unsure.
» Give people time and space to settle, have their own reflections, or adapt to new situations.
» Give people space to vent and be okay with it.

Empathize

Empathy comes in a few flavors. Cognitive empathy is the ability to understand another's perspective. Emotional empathy is the ability to physically feel what another person feels. Empathic concern means being able to sense what another needs from you. Generally, managers should show empathy by accepting mistakes. Failure enables us to find ways to be successful.

Guidelines:

» Offer guidance by asking questions, rather than providing all the answers.
» The manager's role is to teach people how to problem solve and think strategically

Be authentic

Find time for stillness, as well as fun. Not every interaction needs to be about business, giving feedback, or correcting something. Managers should laugh a little, relate a little, and be themselves with their employees.

Reflect

Mindfulness matters. It increases neuroplasticity, which is our brain's ability to change and adapt due to experiences. When the employee can take the time to consider their situation and what they can do differently, this is the start of behavior change. The manager needs to provide their employee with the time and space to decide what they'd do differently the next time.

BE **C.L.E.A.R.** IN CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

Communicate	Listen	Empathize	Be Authentic	Reflect

WARNING SIGNS TO REDUCE BIAS

In our **Manager's Ultimate Guide to Great Conversations**, we talked about cognitive biases — the instinctive gut reactions that often drive our behavior. Here are eight biases to help managers look out for, that can affect conversations and relationships.

1. **Bandwagon effect** – Sometimes called "herd mentality"— this effect means employees are affected by what others are doing on your team or in your organization.

2. **Ingroup bias** – People naturally polarize into groups and see outsiders as inferior. This kind of polarization can impact fairness and inclusion.

3. **Confirmation bias** – People tend to ignore information that does not fit with their beliefs, which can result in skewed evaluations. Including more documentation and feedback from others can help correct this bias.

4. **Negativity bias** – People pay more attention to negative information — so it's best to keep positive and negative feedback separate, where possible.

5. **System justification** – People will always prefer the status quo. For change management, be aware you are working against this bias.

6. **Spacing effect** – We recall information better when it happens or is repeated over a longer span of time. This is an argument for more check-ins.

7. **Recency bias** – This is our tendency to remember recent events most clearly, so it's important not to let too much time pass between check-ins.

8. **Affinity bias** – We can be less understanding of or fair toward those who are different from us. Be sure managers understand and correct for this tendency.

These are just some of the cognitive biases that might come up during conversations. Remind managers these exist, and a little thoughtfulness and applied empathy can go a long way in helping to avoid them.

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Make Work Better.

Does your organization have the technology in place to support good manager conversations, meaningful coaching, and growth?
Tour the Betterworks solution:

▶ **Watch a demo**   📅 **Schedule a detailed demo**

Discover Betterworks

Companies like Colgate-Palmolive, Intuit, Freddie Mac, and Udemy rely on Betterworks as their performance management infrastructure — enabling great performance through dedicated people technology.

Betterworks' best-in-class HR talent management solutions are designed to drive exceptional performance by putting employee experience at the heart of how companies align, motivate, retain, and develop their people. Unlike legacy HR technology, Betterworks is a lightweight, enterprise-ready solution that integrates with the tools employees use every day.

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