



New Dynamics

People and culture

Career development: turn ambition into practice

Run useful career conversations and create development plans grounded in real work and support.

Practical guidance · Worked examples · Printable worksheet

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Read in order for the full approach, or use the linked contents to find a section. The final worksheet gives you space to record decisions and next steps.

Run useful career conversations and create development plans grounded in real work and support. This practical guide to career development plan brings together a step-by-step approach, illustrative examples, a reusable worksheet and answers to common questions. Start with the section closest to your current challenge, then use the working session to turn the guidance into a clear next action.

Explore direction without promising a role

A career conversation helps an employee understand possible directions, strengths and learning needs. Ask which work they find meaningful, which responsibilities they want to explore and what they would like to become better at. Do not assume everyone wants to manage people.

Be clear about the difference between a development opportunity and a promotion commitment. Managers can offer support and explain the process; they should not promise an unavailable role or an outcome controlled by another decision maker.

Connect aspirations to capabilities

Review the expectations for the employee's current role and the kind of work they want to pursue. Use specific examples of demonstrated strengths and capabilities to develop. If role frameworks exist, use them as discussion aids rather than a checklist that guarantees progression.

Ask what opportunities the employee has already had. A missing example may reflect lack of access rather than lack of ability. Consider how project allocation, working patterns or informal sponsorship affect who gets to practise.

Choose a small development experiment

Select one capability and a real piece of work where it can be practised safely. Agree the scope, support and feedback. Training can provide concepts, but the plan should also identify where the employee will apply them.

Make the manager's contribution explicit: arranging a shadowing opportunity, reviewing a draft or protecting time. Avoid adding development work on top of an already unmanageable workload without discussing priorities.

Worked example: preparing for project leadership

Illustrative scenario: a specialist wants to explore project coordination. Instead of assigning a major programme immediately, the manager arranges a bounded internal improvement project with a sponsor and clear decision rights.

The employee practises planning, stakeholder updates and risk escalation. A colleague gives feedback at agreed points. The final reflection examines what the employee learned and whether they want more of this work. Successful completion provides evidence for future discussions, not an automatic promotion entitlement.

Development-plan worksheet

- **Direction:** What work or responsibility would the employee like to explore?
- **Capability:** What specific skill or behaviour needs practice?
- **Starting evidence:** What strengths and gaps are visible now?
- **Opportunity:** Which real task offers appropriate scope and support?
- **Commitments:** What will the employee and manager each do?
- **Feedback:** Who will observe the work and discuss it constructively?
- **Review date:** When will the plan be adapted based on learning?

Keep the plan short enough to revisit in a 1:1. An extensive catalogue of courses can obscure the capability the person is trying to build.

Review learning and opportunity fairly

Discuss what changed in the person's work, what remained difficult and which support helped. Record the evidence and agree whether to repeat, expand or change the experiment.

Check access to opportunities across the team. Notice whose development actions repeatedly lose priority and whose contributions are less visible. Explain progression criteria and decision routes openly within the organisation's policies. Use the [competency feedback guide](#) to describe progress and the [manager 1:1 guide](#) to sustain the conversation.

Put the guide into practice

Set aside a working session with the people who own this process and one or two people who experience it. Use a fictional or appropriately authorised case, so the discussion can be specific without sharing unnecessary personal information. The purpose is to leave with a usable decision or document, not just agreement that the topic matters.

Prepare the case

Use a fictional employee who wants to explore a different kind of responsibility. List the work they enjoy, the capabilities already demonstrated and the opportunities they have not yet had. Avoid turning the conversation immediately into a job title or a promotion promise that the manager cannot authorise.

Write the starting assumptions down before discussing solutions. If the group disagrees on what happened, identify the information needed to resolve that difference rather than building a plan on an untested story.

Work through the decision

Choose one capability and a bounded piece of work where it can be practised. Define the scope, support and observer. Ask what current work will move if the experiment needs time. Development should have a place in the workload rather than depend on the employee repeatedly working beyond agreed capacity.

Ask each participant to explain the proposed decision in their own words. Differences in interpretation often reveal an unclear criterion, a missing responsibility or an instruction that will be difficult to follow.

Test an exception

Imagine that the planned project is cancelled or the employee discovers they do not enjoy the new responsibility. Decide how the plan changes without labelling the exploration a failure. Also test an employee whose working pattern makes the usual opportunity inaccessible. Look for a relevant alternative practice route.

Record what changes in this situation and what remains the same. An exception should lead to a clear next step, with an owner, rather than an informal workaround that nobody can explain later.

Agree the handoff

Confirm the employee's action, the manager's support and the feedback date. Give any project sponsor a clear brief about the learning purpose and decision boundaries. The employee should know how the experience may inform a future career discussion without assuming that completing it guarantees a role.

Finish by confirming the owner, the next action and the date when the result will be reviewed. Give the person receiving the work enough context to continue without repeating the whole discussion.

Frequently asked questions

What should a career development plan contain?

Include a direction to explore, a specific capability, a practical opportunity, support and a review point. Record how progress will be observed and what the manager will do. Keep the plan focused enough to revisit in ordinary conversations. A catalogue of courses is less useful if it does not explain where the employee will apply learning or how it connects to their interests.

Does development have to lead to promotion?

No. Development can deepen expertise, broaden experience, improve current work or help someone test a different direction. Some employees want greater responsibility without people management; others want to strengthen their present role. Be clear about available opportunities and progression criteria. A useful conversation respects the employee's interests while avoiding promises about roles or decisions that are not approved.

How can managers make development fairer?

Make opportunities visible, explain selection criteria and notice who repeatedly misses access to projects or feedback. Consider working patterns and the capacity needed to participate. Do not assume the most confident volunteers are the only people interested in growth. Review whether agreed development actions actually happen and whether managers provide the support they committed to.

Review the first cycle

Ask what the employee learned from the work and what changed in their capability or direction. Check whether the opportunity and support were delivered. If the experiment did not help, identify why and adjust it. Keep evidence for future discussions without treating a single experience as a complete judgement of potential.

Keep a brief record of what was tried, what participants found useful and what needs to change. Compare the result with the original problem rather than judging success only by completion. If the process created extra work without improving clarity, quality or support, simplify it and test again. Share the agreed change with the people who will use it, and name the person responsible for keeping the guidance current.

About New Dynamics

[New Dynamics](#) connects goals, feedback, recognition and reviews around the way organisations work. This guide is published by the New Dynamics Editorial Team as part of our practical library for HR leaders, managers and People teams.

Use the examples and worksheets to structure your own discussions and adapt them to your organisation. Illustrative scenarios are not customer case studies. Policy and employment guidance needs appropriate local review before adoption.

For questions about this guide, corrections or a conversation about your performance management process, email contact@new-dynamics.com. Explore the complete [guide library](#) for related resources.

Your working worksheet

Use the prompts from this guide to prepare one real conversation or decision. Keep personal or sensitive information in your organisation's approved records. This page is for your own working notes.

Direction: What work or responsibility would the employee like to explore?

Capability: What specific skill or behaviour needs practice?

Starting evidence: What strengths and gaps are visible now?

Opportunity: Which real task offers appropriate scope and support?

Commitments: What will the employee and manager each do?

Feedback: Who will observe the work and discuss it constructively?

Review date: When will the plan be adapted based on learning?

Discuss your next step with New Dynamics: contact@new-dynamics.com