

Manager Conversation Guide Pack

Introduction

“Send it to HR.”

There is a persistent myth that HR is responsible for all people management in an organization. If others in your organization aren't clear on the scope of HR's role, you might end up being asked to handle every employee relationship issue, need for performance feedback, or difficult conversation that managers face with their direct reports.

The reality is that people management is a core responsibility of every manager, and HR's role is to support and empower managers to be effective leaders. If a manager delegates all disciplinary action, feedback, or conflict resolution to HR, it undermines your authority and the HR department's strategic focus.

That's why we've created this **Manager Conversation Guide Pack**: a practical guide to the top five conversations managers need to have with their people and are likely to seek support with. HR provides the tools; managers lead the conversations. Support your managers by becoming a partner in their leadership development.

Tip 💡

Dive deeper with these additional resources:

-  Facilitating Salary Conversations
-  Listening and Feeding Back Effectively
-  Exit Interview Template
-  Conflict Resolution Playbook



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For HR: Empowering Managers Through Coaching

When a manager asks HR to facilitate a conversation with an employee, it's often a sign that they need support. Whether it's skills, confidence, or clarity, before stepping in, pause to explore what's behind the request.

Sometimes the best support is not to take over but to coach the manager through how to lead the conversation themselves. Other times, HR may need to co-facilitate or step in directly (for example, if the situation involves risk, policy breaches, or potential legal implications). The key is to assess what the situation calls for, then choose the right balance between coaching, partnership, and intervention.

What coaching looks like in this context

When supporting managers in having important conversations, coaching looks like a structured and goal-focused dialogue that helps a manager reflect, build insight, and make an action plan. It's about partnering with them to build their capability and confidence in having these conversations and handling people matters effectively. This is a collaborative, goal-oriented process where the HR professional facilitates the manager's learning and leadership development. It's about empowering the individual to unlock their potential, rather than telling them what to do.

EXAMPLE COACHING QUESTIONS

Topic: Navigating conflict in their team

Exploring the situation

"Can you describe the conflict in question as objectively as possible?"

"What are the different perspectives involved in this conflict?"

Building ownership

"What outcome are you hoping for in resolving this conflict?"

"What role do you believe you might play in this dynamic?"

Planning next steps

"What communication strategies could you use to address this conflict constructively?"

"What's one step you can take to move towards resolution?"

Tip

Want to learn more about **coaching**?

Check out the full Coaching Conversations for People Managers Toolkit.



For People Managers: Top Five Manager Conversations

Giving feedback, navigating conflict, and talking about compensation are just a few of the many nuanced and sensitive conversations that make up a critical part of your role as a people manager. Having these conversations can be challenging, no matter how many years of experience you have.

This resource is designed to support you in confidently preparing for and facilitating conversations with the people you manage.

Make sure to customize each conversation to align with your organization's specific needs, culture, and policies.

The role of HR vs. the manager

When it comes to facilitating important conversations with employees, the role of HR and the manager can be unclear sometimes.

Managers play a central role in shaping everyday employee experiences through conversations. Each discussion, whether about pay, performance, or conflict, takes place within the organization's HR frameworks and policies. HR ensures fairness, compliance, and consistency. Managers apply these principles in daily interactions and involve HR when a situation requires formal action or specialized guidance.



Area of responsibility	Role of HR: The enabler & advisor	Role of the manager: The leader & coach
1. Talking about compensation	- Provides pay frameworks, salary ranges, and talking points to help managers explain decisions clearly and consistently - Ensures compliance with internal and legal standards	- Leads the compensation conversation with transparency and empathy - Explains how decisions connect to performance and contribution, addresses concerns openly, and applies policy consistently
2. Giving feedback	- Develops feedback principles, tools, and training - Coaches managers on tone, documentation, and escalation for persistent or serious performance issues	- Gives regular, specific, and actionable feedback - Recognizes good work, addresses issues early, and documents patterns when performance doesn't improve - Involves HR for guidance if formal steps are needed
3. Holding meaningful one-on-one meetings	- Provides templates, discussion guides, and coaching on effective 1:1s - Helps managers link team goals and development conversations to the broader performance framework	- Uses 1:1s to build trust, understand challenges, align on priorities, and support development - Listens actively and follows through on agreed actions - Raises recurring or systemic issues with HR when appropriate
4. Exit conversations	- Advises managers on tone, compliance, and timing - Conducts or supports exit interviews and identifies organizational risks or trends	- Handles exits respectfully and with empathy - Focuses on understanding the employee's experience, maintains professionalism, and follows HR guidance on process and communication
5. Resolving conflicts	- Provides training and coaching on early intervention and mediation - Leads or oversees investigations when conflicts involve policy breaches or serious misconduct	- Addresses tensions promptly and objectively - Encourages open dialogue, seeks fair solutions, and escalates to HR if the issue breaches policy or requires formal investigation

Shared principles

HR and managers work together to create a fair, engaging, and high-performing environment:

- ✓ HR builds and maintains the frameworks that ensure equity and compliance.
- ✓ Managers bring those frameworks to life through consistent, respectful, and confident conversations.

When HR needs to be involved

- ✓ A discussion could lead to disciplinary action, termination, or a change in employment terms.
- ✓ You suspect harassment, discrimination, or a breach of policy.
- ✓ You need guidance on documenting or escalating a performance or behavior issue.
- ✓ You're unsure how to communicate a sensitive or complex decision.

1. Talking About Compensation

"I understand that number might be different from what you hoped for, and I want to walk you through the factors that led to this decision."

Why it's important to get it right

Discussing pay can feel challenging, especially when the outcome differs from what an employee expects. These conversations shape how people perceive fairness, value, and opportunity—so getting them right matters.

Your goal isn't just to share numbers, but to reinforce trust, transparency, and a clear connection between performance, contribution, and reward.

Why it matters

Compensation discussions carry emotional weight and must be handled with care. A well-managed conversation helps employees understand how decisions are made and how they can influence future outcomes. Clarity, consistency, and empathy are essential for maintaining engagement and confidence in the process.



AI prompts: Use AI to help you prepare

`"Draft a script for explaining a smaller-than-expected merit increase in a way that is empathetic and transparent."`

`"Role-play as an employee who feels underpaid. Challenge my explanation so I can practice my response."`

`"Rewrite this compensation message so it sounds clear but supportive: [paste draft]."`

EXAMPLE CONVERSATION FLOW

Introduction

- Welcome the employee and set the tone for the conversation.
- Clarify the purpose of the discussion.
- Encourage the employee to ask questions.

Explain compensation philosophy and policy

- Share the organization's compensation philosophy and how it aligns with overall business goals.
- Discuss the compensation policy, including factors considered in determining compensation, such as market rates, individual performance, and internal equity.

Present compensation package

- Provide a detailed breakdown of the employee's compensation package, including base salary, bonuses, incentives, benefits, and any other relevant components. Also, highlight any changes to any of the components.
- Make sure you are aware of the rationale behind each component and how it reflects the employee's performance and contribution.

Address questions and concerns

- Address any concerns that the employee raises related to their compensation.
- Listen actively and provide clear and transparent explanations, ensuring a two-way dialogue.
- Collaboratively set performance goals and objectives for the upcoming period.
- Briefly discuss potential growth opportunities, promotions, or career advancement prospects.
- Discuss how achieving these goals may impact future compensation.

Explain compensation philosophy and policy

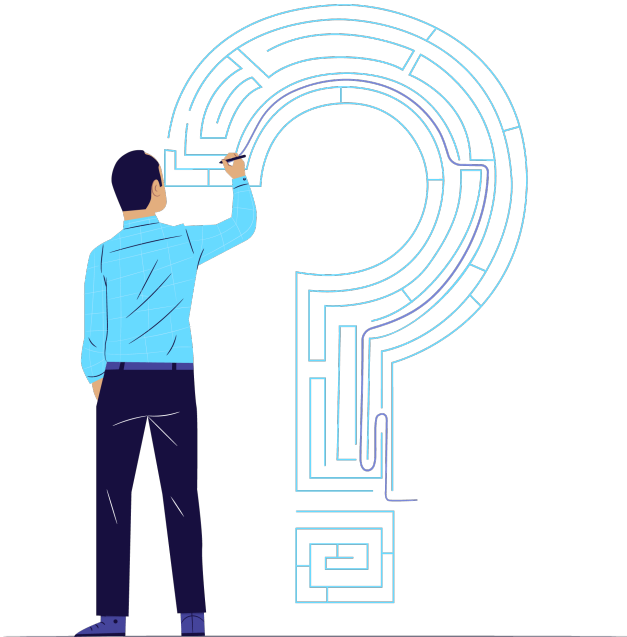
- Summarize the key points discussed during the conversation.
- Express appreciation for the employee's contributions and their commitment to the organization.
- Reinforce that compensation is an ongoing topic and encourage continuous dialogue about this.
- Define when the next compensation conversation will happen.



2. Giving Feedback

"Keep doing that, it demonstrates true leadership."

Effective feedback—both positive and constructive—should be specific, timely, and focused on observable behavior rather than personality. Feedback is an ongoing, performance-focused dialogue. It's a continuous process, not just a once-a-year event, and is an essential skill for every manager.



AI prompts: Use AI to help you prepare

"Turn this feedback into a constructive message: [paste bullet points]."

"Help me give positive feedback that acknowledges an employee for their specific actions and their impacts."

"Role-play as an employee reacting defensively to feedback. Help me practice responding."

"Check the feedback for my direct report for judgmental or generalizing language and improve it to be better received [paste feedback]."

"Check the feedback for my direct report for tone and tell me how it is likely to come across."



EXAMPLE OF DELIVERING POSITIVE FEEDBACK

Positive feedback shouldn't just be “Great job.” It must be specific enough for the employee to know exactly what to repeat and feel acknowledged for their actions.

Phase	Talking points/example	Goal
Situation & action	“I wanted to talk about the client presentation on Tuesday. When you noticed [situation : the technical glitch during the demo], you immediately [action : smoothly switched to the backup presentation].”	State the specific, observable behavior the employee demonstrated.
Result & impact	“That quick thinking meant we didn't lose the client's attention, and we actually finished ahead of schedule. [Result : The client specifically commented on our professionalism].”	Connect the action to a positive outcome for the team, client, or company.
Reinforce	“That level of composure under pressure is exactly what we need on these high-stakes calls. Keep doing that—it demonstrates true leadership.”	Clearly state <i>why</i> the behavior is valued and encourage its repetition.

EXAMPLE OF DELIVERING CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

Constructive feedback should always be given in a timely manner, so don't take weeks to address the issue. The conversation should be private and purposeful. Prepare the facts of the situation ahead of time and avoid using generalizing language like "you always" or "you never."

Phase	Talking points/example	Goal
Set the context	"I wanted to take a few minutes to talk about something I have noticed regarding [context] and get your perspective. The goal is to understand what happened and see how we can do things differently together next time."	Create a safe, private space and state the purpose clearly ahead of the meeting.
State the behavior	"On Monday, I saw that [behavior] : three of your assigned tickets from the priority list were still pending at 5:00 PM], despite being due at noon. Can you walk me through what happened?"	Describe the specific, observable behavior without judgment.
Explain the impact	"Because those weren't completed, [impact] : the QA team wasn't able to start their testing cycle on time], which pushed back our deployment window by a full day. It is important that we understand what caused that so we can prevent it next time."	Clearly articulate the negative effect the behavior had on the team, client, or project.
Listen & understand	"Help me understand what happened. What were the roadblocks that prevented you from meeting that noon deadline? Were there any unexpected blockers or competing priorities?"	Give the employee a chance to explain their perspective and underlying causes (e.g., resources, conflicting priorities).
Define next steps & expectation	"Thank you for explaining that, it helps. Going forward, let's aim to have priority tickets done by the deadline. If something's likely to slip, please let me know a couple of hours in advance so we can adjust. Does that feel workable?" "If not, what would you need in order for it to be?"	Clearly define the desired future behavior and commit to support if necessary.
Follow-up	"Let's connect on Friday to see how the new approach is working and what might still need adjustment. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me before we speak then?"	Establish a time for follow-up to check in on progress, acknowledge improvement, and offer additional support if needed.

3. Holding Meaningful One-on-One Meetings

“What is one thing you’re currently working on that you feel is moving your career forward?”

One-on-one meetings are one of the most important ways you spend time with your direct reports. They are not status updates; rather, dedicated time for coaching, feedback, and career growth. The ideal 1:1 meeting is structured but flexible enough to prioritize the employee’s needs, and the agenda is co-owned between the manager and the employee. Effective 1:1s are consistent, have a clear purpose, and center on active listening by the manager.



EXAMPLE MEETING AGENDA

Employee’s time (15–20 minutes)

- *Purpose:* This allows the employee to bring up their priorities, concerns, or requests first
- *Questions:* What’s at the top of your mind? What are your biggest challenges right now?

Manager’s time (10–15 minutes)

- *Purpose:* Manager provides coaching, alignment, and critical feedback.
- *Topics:* Deliver timely constructive or positive feedback, discuss alignment on major upcoming projects, review performance goals.

Forward look and admin (5–10 minutes)

- *Purpose:* Focus on the future and clear up administrative necessities.
- *Topics:* Discuss next steps, learning goals, administrative check-ins (PTO, training deadlines).



EXAMPLE QUESTIONS

“How are you feeling about your workload and priorities right now?”

“Is there anything I should know about how things are going with you or your work since we last spoke?”

“What’s one thing I could do differently as your manager to support you better?”

“What’s taking up the most time or energy that isn’t adding much value?”

“What project or task feels most meaningful or is helping you grow right now?”



AI prompts: Use AI to help you prepare

“Generate five open-ended questions to use in a 1:1 with a team member returning from maternity leave.”

“Suggest three coaching questions to help an employee stuck on a project.”

“Summarize these notes into a 1:1 follow-up email.”

“Analyze these notes from recent 1:1s and highlight recurring themes or concerns.”

4. Exit Conversations

"Would you like to share any feedback or reflections you might have about your time in this role?"

The final one-on-one meeting: The manager's conversation with a departing employee is a moment for personal closure and practical handover. Remember to stay professional and neutral if the employee's departure involves frustration or underperformance.

This conversation is separate from the formal HR exit interview, which focuses on systemic feedback and logistical compliance. Double-check with your HR team to understand what the exit interview will cover and which points you should focus on in your final 1:1. In any case, always maintain confidentiality and data security during the handover, a common oversight in exit processes.



AI prompts: Use AI to help you prepare

"Draft five thoughtful questions to use in a manager-led exit conversation to understand what I could do better as a leader."

"Role-play as an employee leaving due to limited growth. Help me practice responding with empathy and professionalism."

"Write a closing message that expresses genuine appreciation without sounding scripted."

"Summarize exit notes into key takeaways to share appropriately with HR."



EXAMPLE MEETING AGENDA

The tone of this conversation should be personal, grateful, and focused on practical next steps.

Acknowledge and thank

“I truly appreciate your three years here. I especially valued your work on the [mention specific accomplishment]. I wish you the best in your new role at [new company, if known].”

Give room for feedback and final reflections

“Is there anything that wasn’t covered in your exit interview with HR that you’d like to share with me specifically? Or any additional feedback or reflections you might have about your time in this role/team?”

Focus on handover (logistics)

“Our main priority now is ensuring a smooth transition for the team. Let’s review the knowledge transfer checklist and confirm that [successor/teammate] has access to everything they need by [date].”

Offer reference (if appropriate)

“If you would like me to serve as a reference in the future, please let me know. I would be happy to share my positive experience working with you.” (If you cannot give a positive reference, do not offer; simply wish them well.)

Offer personal connection

“I’d love to stay in touch. Let’s stay connected on LinkedIn.”

5. Resolving Conflicts

Conflicts will naturally arise at work due to differing working styles, personalities, and ways of communicating. As a manager, knowing how to resolve day-to-day conflicts between team members effectively preserves team productivity, morale, and prevents issues from escalating to HR unnecessarily. However, HR always remains a partner—especially when power dynamics, potential misconduct, or discrimination are involved.

Remember that psychological safety is the most essential ingredient of conflict resolution. Making sure both parties feel seen, heard, and respected is crucial for the success of this conversation.

Preparation and ground rules

- ✓ *Assess how ready both parties are to meet:* Are the individuals involved in a place where they are able and willing to resolve this conflict constructively? If emotions are still running high, consider delaying this process until some time has passed.
- ✓ *Meet separately first:* Before the joint meeting, meet individually with each employee to understand their perspective, validate their feelings, and confirm their willingness to resolve the issue professionally.
- ✓ *Focus on behavior, not personality:* Emphasize that the conversation should stick to specific, observable actions and their impact on work, rather than character flaws.
- ✓ *Set the stage:* Hold the meeting in a private, neutral space. Allocate enough time (at least 30–60 minutes).

Phase 1: Define the problem and impact

 **Goal:** Establish psychological safety and mutual respect. Create the space for both parties to clearly state the core issue and acknowledge the impact of the conflict on the team.

Manager’s talking point	Purpose
Opening: “Thank you both for being here. Our goal today isn’t to assign blame, but to create a shared understanding of the problem and agree on a path forward. The focus here is on how this conflict affects our work and how we can collaborate better going forward, while acknowledging the challenges you both have experienced.”	Sets the neutral, constructive, work-focused tone

Eliciting perspective: "I'd like to give space for [Employee A] to share. Can you describe what happened and how [Employee B's] actions affected your ability to complete your work?" (Then repeat for Employee B.)	Gathers both sides' perspectives in a structured manner
Establishing impact: "It sounds like the core issue is [summarize, e.g., communication style on deadlines]. How does that land with you both? Has this unresolved issue impacted the rest of the team?"	Shifts the focus from personal feelings to professional consequences

Phase 2: Empathize & explore solutions



Goal: Guide the employees to propose specific, mutually acceptable solutions. Co-define “what good looks like”.

Manager's talking point	Purpose
Shifting responsibility: “It sounds like [summarize understanding of conflict and impact up until this point]. Now, what specific behavioral changes do you believe will help prevent this next time? Start by thinking about what you can do differently and then what others can do differently.”	Makes them accountable for finding solutions, not just stating problems
Testing specificity, to employee A: “You suggested that [B] should ‘communicate better.’ Can you translate that into a measurable action? For example, does that mean sending a daily update email by 10 AM?”	Ensures solutions are actionable and easy to track, avoids vague commitments
Checking agreement, to employee B: “[B], is that new expectation—the daily 10 AM email—something that feels workable for you? What, if anything, do you need from [A] or from me to help you meet that commitment?”	Secures mutual understanding and commitment

Phase 3: Commit to action and follow-up



Goal: Formalize the agreement and establish a follow-up cadence.

Manager’s talking point	Purpose
Formalizing commitments: “Excellent. To summarize, [A] is committing to [Action 1], and [B] is committing to [Action 2]. We agree these actions will take steps to resolve the conflict around [Core Issue].”	Creates a clear, documented agreement
Establishing review: “I want to ensure this sticks. Let’s touch base individually during our next 1:1s, and I’ll schedule a brief 15-minute check-in with both of you next Tuesday to see how these agreements are feeling in practice and if you need any support.”	Ensures accountability and allows the manager to assess if the conflict is truly resolved
Final note: “I appreciate both of you approaching this professionally and committing to a solution. Let’s keep our focus on the team’s goals and continue checking in with each other about how to collaborate best.”	Closes the meeting on a constructive, forward-looking note

** Remember to document this conversation and know your escalation pathways if you need further support.*



AI prompts: Use AI to help you prepare

- “Write a neutral, professional opening statement for a joint conflict-resolution meeting.”
- “Give me tips on facilitating a conflict resolution conversation if one party stays defensive or uncooperative.”
- “Role-play as an employee reacting emotionally to feedback about a conflict so I can practice de-escalation.”
- “Give me an outline to document a difficult or emotional workplace conversation.”