Coaching as Conversation:
a Guide for FAS Managers

Performance management, as we have come to know it, is changing for most employees. The era of the "annual performance review discussion" is in the rearview mirror. In many organizations, including Harvard, managers are encouraged to provide regular input to employees through ongoing coaching conversations. While early signs indicate that this is a better approach, some help may be needed on how to approach this new normal. Below is some guidance for having these conversations.

Approaching the Conversation

- **Set aside time and keep to it.** Regular, recurring meetings provide continuity to your conversations.

- **Be on time**. This signals to your employee that this conversation is important to you.

- **Be intentional**. Think in advance about what "coaching" you want to provide. Focus on these topics.

- **Be fully present**. Think of these meetings as an important time to really connect with your employees. Avoid the temptation to check your devices or pick up a phone call.

- **Listen**. Active listening is essential for building trust and solidifying your relationship with your employee. Listen with the intent to understand, not to "defend" when your employee responds to your coaching.

- **Discuss what's happening now**. Find out what the employee is working on and what the challenges they're facing.

- **Focus on guidance**. Don't let the fact that you might not be able to provide a solution make you reluctant to offer your perspective on a problem.

Identify Strengths and Discuss Development

- **Acknowledge success**. Recognize your employees' accomplishments and help them to identify their strengths, based on your perspective and observations.

- **Be specific when praising**. Take the time to understand what your employee did and why it was so great. Be as specific and as thorough as possible.

- **Talk about your employee's career growth**. When possible, give employees the opportunity to discuss long-term goals.

- **Find what is needed**. Talk with your employees about relevant trainings and other learning opportunities that might help them grow their skills and/or take the next step in their career.

- **Contemplate new challenges**. Discuss "stretch" opportunities with your employee in an effort to identify areas in which they can "stretch" their skills.

- **Connect development with goals**. When possible, help your employee to identify those areas they need to develop in order to accomplish their stated goals.

Providing Constructive Criticism

- **Frame your guidance**. Begin by sharing your intent: to help your employee to improve and/or grow.

- **Start from a positive place**. Set the tone by beginning with something positive.

- **Be timely**. Try to provide feedback in a timely way, so an employee can directly connect the feedback to recent behavior or actions.

- **Be brief and specific**. Describe the *situation*, give specific examples of the employee's *actions*, and/or *behavior* and discuss *impact*. Offer suggestions for different approaches so your employee understands how they might approach similar situations differently next time.

- **Don't make it personal**. Keep your guidance focused on the work, not the person. Discuss changes that would be helpful within the context of behaviors and actions.

- **Think of yourself as a GPS**. If you guide your employee on an ongoing basis with some frequency, any issues that arise will be easier to solve. Less time "off road" makes it easier to get back on track.

Performance Management – Coaching in Conversation

Remember...

Set the stage for this "new normal."
Let your employee know that you would like to use some of your regular time together to coach them on performance. Be transparent about this so they are aware.

Coaching conversations increase productivity and engagement.
Research indicates that having regular coaching conversations increases employee productivity and overall development.

Regular conversations are part of the annual performance management process.
Ongoing conversations help to align employees and managers regarding the employee's performance.

Coaching Conversation Starters

Below are some examples for how to start conversations and how to "tee up" certain topics:

General Coaching
- I have some thoughts to share on the work you just completed on X project. Is this a good time to do that?
- Next time you work on X project or with Y person, what might you keep in mind? Is there anything you might approach differently?
- What went well regarding the project you worked on?
- What have you tried so far on X project? What might be some other options?
- What did you learn on this project? Were certain skills required you felt you needed but didn't have?
- I'm going to describe a problem I see. I may be wrong and, if so, I hope you'll tell me. If I'm not, let's discuss ways to address it.
- What do you need to do next, and is any of this unclear to you? If so, can you say more?
- What's one thing I can do to help you?

Team and Environment
- What are your favorite aspects of our department/group/team?
- What might you change and why?
- How can I support you in X project? In your long-term goals?
- What are some things you'd like to see more of from me?

Development
- Do you have the chance to work on projects that use your skills and expertise in the best way? Are there projects or areas you'd like to work on if you had the chance?
- Given the opportunity, which skills and/or competencies would you most like to develop?
- What is most important to you in your work?
- What are your key priorities as you think about your career? How does that connect to your current work?
- Are there things you'd like to accomplish that you don't yet feel prepared to do? If so, what's the nature of the 'gap?'

Constructive Criticism
- I have some feedback that might be difficult to hear. Are you open to hearing these thoughts?
- Based on my own observations, you may be engaging in some behaviors that are getting in your way. Can we discuss this?
- What do you think worked with X assignment, and what could have gone better?
- How might you do things differently next time?