

# Coaching as Conversation: a Guide for FAS Managers

Performance management, as we have come to know it, has changed for most employees. The era of the “annual performance review” is in the rearview mirror. In many organizations, including Harvard, managers are encouraged to provide regular input to employees throughout the year through ongoing coaching conversations. While early signs indicate this is a better approach, some help may be needed on how to approach this new normal. Below is some guidance for having these coaching 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 the conversation is important to you.
- **Be intentional.** Think in advance about what “coaching” you want to provide.
- **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. 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 observations.
- **Be specific when praising.** Take the time to understand what your employee did and explain why it was so great. Be as specific as possible.
- **Ask 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 in an effort to identify areas in which your employees can “stretch” their skills.
- **Connect development with goals.** When possible, help your employee to identify needed development areas in order to accomplish their stated goals.

## Constructively Critical Feedback

- **Frame your guidance.** Begin by sharing your intent: to help your employee to grow and develop.
- **Start from a positive place.** Set the tone by beginning with something positive.
- **Be timely.** Try to provide coaching in a timely way, so an employee is able to connect the guidance 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 you would like to use some of your regular time together to provide performance coaching. Confirm that they would be open to this.

### Coaching increases engagement.

Research indicates that regular coaching conversations help to increase employee productivity and overall development.

### Regular conversations keep you connected.

Ongoing conversations will 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

- What went well regarding the project you worked on?
- I have some thoughts on the work you just completed on X project. Is now a good time to talk?
- 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 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? What are your thoughts on how you might obtain these skills?
- 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 if you are unclear, can you say more?
- What’s one thing I can do to help you?

### Team and Environment

- What are the best 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

- Are you working on projects that best leverage your skills and expertise? Are there areas you’d like to work in if you had the chance?
- 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?
- 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 skills gap and what are your thoughts on how to close it?

### Constructive Criticism

- I have some observations 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 well with X assignment, and what could have gone better?
- How might you do things differently next time?
- When you had an issue like this in the past, what did you do that worked?