

4 Steps to Address Challenges to Continuous Performance Conversations

By Alistair Kidson

Organizations want managers to have more frequent and effective performance conversations with employees, but several barriers stand in the way. HR leaders can take four key steps to ensure employees get timely and valuable performance feedback from the right sources.

Fifty-four percent of employees feel that feedback is critical to improving their performance, yet only 46% believe they are getting feedback they can act on to improve.¹



In response, organizations are investing heavily in making sure managers give good feedback — typically by encouraging regular performance conversations and providing tools, training and other formal guidance.

The need for feedback conversations is even greater during times of disruption: Midway through 2020, during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, one in three employees said they were more reliant on feedback than before.² Anticipating future volatility, 70% of organizations plan to increase the frequency of their feedback conversations.³

There can be many reasons managers and employees do not have regular performance conversations, such as lack of time or employee buy-in, or negative previous experiences. If organizations want to reap the rewards of regular conversations, they need to address these reasons head on. We have therefore identified four main barriers to continuous performance conversations along with solutions for overcoming them (see Table 1).

1. Establish the Value of Performance Conversations by Setting Coaching Expectations

A major barrier to conducting continuous performance conversations is that employees and managers often struggle to see the value in them. In fact, employees’ most frequent complaint about performance management in general is that it demands too much time and effort. Organizations have responded by trying to reduce the amount of time and effort required — for example, by taking out formal performance management steps — but this approach has seen little success.

Instead, organizations should increase the value of performance management sessions by setting coaching expectations so employees know how the sessions will help them achieve their goals.



Table 1. Role of Humans and Machines in Decision Making

Barrier	Solution
Employees do not see the value in performance conversations and do not think they are worth the time and effort.	Establish the value of performance conversations by setting coaching expectations at the start of the performance cycle.
Employees perceive certain risks related to receiving feedback in performance conversations.	Support psychological safety to mitigate the perceived risks in performance conversations.
Performance conversations lack utility, as managers do not always have visibility into employee workflows and cannot always provide useful feedback.	Leverage performance conversations to connect employees with the people who are best-positioned to assist with their development.
Employees do not know how to make the best use of feedback from performance conversations and other feedback discussions.	Give employees guidance in seeking feedback during performance conversations.

Source: Gartner

For example, Phillips 66 created an agreement between employees and managers that outlined what to discuss in performance conversations. It also covered when, how and where to have these discussions to ensure employees would hit their goals (see Figure 1). Specifically, managers and employees are expected to agree on what three different discussion types will look like for them:

- Check-in and feedback conversations about day-to-day work
- Conversations about professional development and career plans
- Alignment conversations (used only if employees are off task)

Agreeing on how to handle feedback discussions sets early expectations and clearly outlines the responsibilities of both parties. Phillips 66's three use cases are designed to encourage regular conversations and ensure all feedback session types are valuable to the employee.

Challenging the perception that performance conversations are not useful to employees

and managers is a big step toward having continuous performance conversations that improve employee performance and increase engagement.

2. Support Psychological Safety to Mitigate the Risks of Feedback

Even with training and support on how to have effective performance conversations, the process fails when employees and managers perceive risks in doing so. Often, in anticipation of feedback exchanges, each party worries they will strain the relationship, damage their image, or just have an unpleasant, awkward interaction. The fear of experiencing one of these outcomes from a performance conversation can be enough to discourage employees from having them at all.

To overcome this challenge, organizations first need to identify the risks managers and employees perceive in feedback exchanges, then use risk mitigation tactics to address them.

Figure 1. Coaching Agreement for Check-In and Feedback Conversations
Illustrative

Coaching Agreement for Check-In and Feedback Conversations (Last updated 20 March)	Employee: Fred	Manager: Joyce
What to Discuss: Real-time feedback on projects and goals, especially focusing on how well I am seeking and applying different perspectives.	✓	✓
When to Discuss: Meeting monthly to discuss collaboration will best help support me in achieving my goals.	✓	✓
How to Discuss: I will send an agenda with expectations for each check-in a week prior to our meeting for each of us to prepare.	✓	✓
Where to Discuss: Discussing behaviors face-to-face will support my development the most.	✓	✓

Agreeing on which behaviors will be most critical for coaching **makes them a natural part of discussions.**

Agreeing on how, when and where the employee would like feedback **helps ensure the employee is prepared to receive it.**

Source: Adapted From Phillips 66

SABIC

SABIC equips employees and managers to discuss topics that may be perceived as risky — such as career goals, performance feedback, well-being and development — by building those topics into the performance management system. The system has a dropdown list of topics employees can select from to build the agenda for the conversation (see Figure 2). SABIC ensured the dropdown options were employee-sourced, informative for managers, encouraging and insight-generating.

Having the options built into a system dropdown reassures employees that topics such as well-being are normal and open for discussion during

performance conversations. Furthermore, when an employee selects a topic for their conversation, it gives their manager insight into the employee’s priorities, allowing the manager to prepare for, and ultimately improve the value of, those sessions.

Organizations should use tactics like SABIC’s to help employees become comfortable with topics they perceive as risky, breaking down fear and creating an environment of trust. If employees feel a sense of psychological safety in performance conversations, they will be encouraged to regularly participate.

Figure 2. Example of SABIC’s Midyear Conversation Topic Dropdown List



Select Your Conversation Topic	
Topics:	Select...
	Career Goals
	Feedback
	Well-Being
	Development
	...

Source: Adapted From SABIC



3. Connect Employees to Other Sources of Feedback

Frequent manager feedback is an important resource for employees’ professional development. However, managers may lack the visibility into specific employee workflows they need to understand and provide the type of feedback employees would find most valuable. Organizations should therefore equip managers to not only provide feedback to employees but also connect employees to other sources of feedback and coaching.

We have identified four types of managers (see Figure 3). Among those, Connector managers are the most effective. Connector managers rely on their strengths to develop employees while also guiding employees to best-fit connections when the development need does not match their own strengths. This approach can improve employee performance by 26% and triple the likelihood that managers’ direct reports are high performers.⁴

Connector managers succeed by making three key connections for their employees:

- **The Employee Connection** — Connector managers really get to know their employees by investing in diagnosis and understanding of their employees’ strengths and needs. They focus on coaching the person, not the problem.
- **The Team Connection** — Connector managers create an environment based on trust that facilitates peer-to-peer skills sharing. They recognize they should not be the sole source of coaching and feedback for all their employees.
- **The Organization Connection** — Connector managers provide targeted coaching and feedback, but they also help their employees connect to others who are best-suited to provide coaching and feedback on needed skills. They also take an active role to ensure their employees are learning from their connections.

Figure 3. The Four Types of Managers



Source: Gartner

Managers can leverage performance conversations to build their employees' organization connections and help prepare them for conversations with those connections. Rather than take an "always on" approach and risk coaching in areas they are not well-positioned to address, managers should connect their direct reports with other people in the organization who can assist in their development. Table 2 shows example questions managers can use with their direct reports before and after connecting them with someone else.

By using performance conversations to connect employees with others who can provide developmental support, managers not only reduce the coaching burden on themselves but also increase the utility of these sessions, providing frequent value to employees.

4. Give Employees Guidance in Seeking Feedback

At the same time managers are connecting employees with other sources of important

feedback, they should also provide employees with guidance on how to seek feedback and what kind of feedback to look for.

Seeking, engaging in and receiving feedback can require an entirely different skill set, and employees typically struggle with questions such as when to ask, whom to ask and how to ask.

Kimberly-Clark saw that employees were struggling with this, so it created short and simple feedback formulas that employees can use to frame their feedback questions and respond to feedback requests in a way both parties understand. Managers can leverage this guidance in performance conversations and work with employees to ensure they are confident in when, how and to whom they should reach out for feedback.

The more sources of feedback employees can have, the more useful feedback is to them, and the greater the impact it has on their performance. Organizations should focus on building employees' comfort in seeking feedback from different sources that can provide input on their performance.

Table 2. Questions to Prepare and Debrief Employees for the Organization Connection

Prepare Questions	Debrief Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the goal of this connection? • What thoughtful questions have you prepared? • How might you question your connections' ideas and opinions? • How will you keep track of what you're learning from these sessions? • How many times, and how frequently, are you planning to meet with them? • What type of feedback can you ask for? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was your biggest take-away from the experience? • What will you do differently tomorrow? • What surprised you most? • What are your next steps with this particular development connection? • What other development areas will you need to keep working on? • How can you transfer some of what you learned to the rest of the team?

Source: Gartner

Conclusion

Organizations are continuing to invest in ensuring managers and employees have regular performance conversations, but four barriers continue to prevent those conversations from happening. HR leaders can overcome these barriers by:

1. Setting coaching expectations at the start of the performance management cycle to establish the value of these conversations
2. Supporting employees' psychological safety during conversations to mitigate the perceived risks in having them
3. Developing Connector managers who can connect employees with the colleagues best-positioned to help their development
4. Encouraging managers to guide employees on when and where they should seek feedback

¹ 2021 Gartner Performance Management and Feedback Survey: This survey was conducted online from 19 November through 2 December 2021 and contains responses from 3,510 full-time employees in 12 countries and 24 industries. The objective of the survey was to understand employees' experiences and opinions regarding performance management and feedback at their organizations. Survey design and development, administration and data analysis were done by Gartner's HR research team.

² 2020 Gartner Culture of Quality During Disruption Survey: In April 2020, we sent invitations to employees globally to complete an online survey. We received 1,203 completed responses during the survey period. These responses were spread across multiple industries, including manufacturing (n = 380); retail and wholesale (n = 271); technology and telecommunications (n = 239); banking, finance and insurance (n = 133); energy and utilities (n = 66); life sciences (n = 55); transportation (n = 42); and services (n = 17). Most participants (863) belonged to an organization with the annual enterprise revenue of at least \$1 billion, and nearly 500 had more than 10,000 full-time employees working in their organizations. Additionally, 608 respondents primarily worked from North America, 240 from EMEA and 355 from Asia/Pacific. Disclaimer: Results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

³ 2021 Gartner Performance Management Benchmarking Survey for HRBPs: This survey was conducted online from 4 May 2021 through 7 June 2021 and contains responses from more than 54 HRBPs across 15 countries and 18 industries. The survey design and development, administration and data analysis were done by Gartner's HR research team.

⁴ 2017 Gartner Manager Effectiveness Survey. This survey was conducted online from 16 February 2017 through 10 March 2017 and contains responses from 7,309 full-time employees across 30 countries, 25 industries and 18 functions. The survey design and development, administration and data analysis were done by Gartner's HR research team.

