

Career Discussion:

Talk That Performs



RIGHT VIEWPOINT™

Many managers never discuss career development with their employees. Some engage in such discussions once a year. Only a small minority do so frequently. Yet a major Right Management study of organizational effectiveness shows that career discussion can play an important direct and indirect role in driving employee engagement and productivity.

MELVIN J. SCALES

Our study surveyed the views of more than 28,000 employees in 15 countries and 10 business sectors on nearly 100 specific statements related to employee engagement. We found that respondents who indicated that they were fully engaged by their job and organization were very likely to respond favorably to the statement “There are career opportunities for me at my organization.” We found, as well, that favorable responses to this statement were also likely to be accompanied by favorable responses to the statement “My immediate manager facilitates effective discussions about my career development.”

AN ENGAGING CONVERSATION

The inferences to be drawn from these findings are clear: providing your employees with career opportunities helps drive engagement, and facilitating effective career discussions helps create career opportunities. In other words, a line can be drawn from career discussion through career opportunities to employee engagement. As a large and growing body of research suggests, engagement is a key contributor to the productivity of the individual and, ultimately, the performance of the organization.

Neither career discussion nor career opportunities, however, should be regarded as magic bullets. As our research shows, career discussion is one of several factors contributing to an employee's sense that his or her organization provides career opportunities, just as career opportunities, in turn, represent one of several factors driving engagement. Engaging employees is a complex challenge requiring a multi-pronged approach.

MAKING A SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION

Yet career discussion, we should recognize, can play a special role in driving both career opportunities and engagement directly. In the list of learning and development factors identified by our study as driving career opportunities, career discussion ranks seventh, but is clearly implicated in the first and third highest drivers:

Top Learning and Development Factors:

- 1. I am encouraged to take ownership of my own development**

2. I receive the development I need to do my job well

- 3. I know how to progress in my organization**

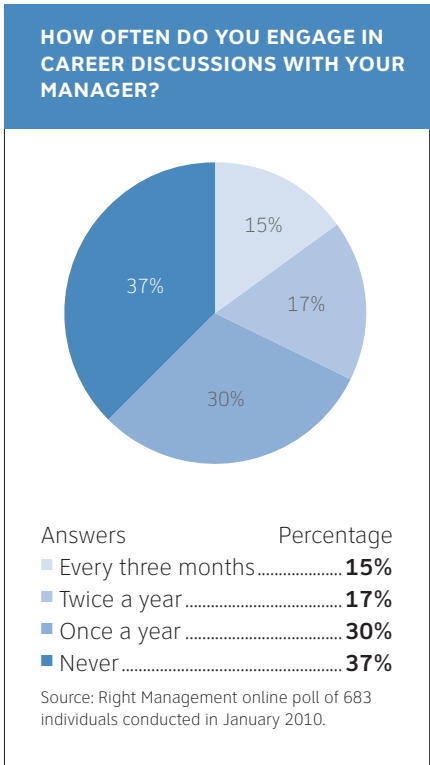
4. My organization invests in its people's learning and development

5. There is sufficient incentive to perform well at my organization

6. My organization ensures that there are people ready to move into jobs when positives become available

- 7. My immediate manager facilitates effective discussions about my career development**

Empowering employees, making them partners in their own development, is essential to providing them with career opportunities. It is precisely through career discussion that employees can be empowered—that they can be encouraged to take ownership of their own development and be shown how to progress in their organization.



Career discussion is similarly implicated in many of the top drivers of engagement itself. Among the nearly 100 statements correlating with engagement, our study identified the following as the top 10 individual drivers:

1. I am committed to my organization's core values
2. Our customers think highly of our products and services
3. My opinions count
4. I have a clear understanding of what is expected of me at work
5. I understand how I can contribute to meeting the needs of our customers
6. I have been fairly rewarded
7. Senior leaders value employees
8. Everyone is treated with respect at work, regardless of who they are
9. I can concentrate on my job when I am at my work area
10. My personal work objectives are linked to my work area's business plan


While career discussion itself does not make this list, it presents clear opportunities to activate most of the drivers that do. Career discussion can be used to explore and foster commitment to the organization's core values (#1); demonstrate that the opinions of the employee count (#3); clarify what is expected of the employee at work (#4); explain how the employee can meet customer needs (#5); show that senior leaders value employees (#7); demonstrate that the organization treats employees with respect (#8); and link work objectives to the business plan of the employee's work area (#10). No fewer than seven of the top 10 drivers of engagement can be addressed through career discussion.

BEST PRACTICE ADVICE

How can organizations make the most of the opportunities career discussion offers? How should managers approach it to maximize its contribution to career development and its impact on employee engagement? As a starting point, we offer the following practical advice:

Initiate discussions regularly and often. In a recent poll, Right Management asked 659 U.S. respondents how often their managers engaged them in career discussion. Thirty-seven percent, the largest segment by far, responded, "never," while a further 30% said that they engage in such discussions only once a year. A mere 15% reported participating in career discussions quarterly. Given their substantial benefits, career discussions should be part of a formal process and held regularly. Creating and sponsoring a formal, planned program of career discussion presents the organization and its senior leaders with a significant opportunity to demonstrate that they value and respect employees.

"No fewer than seven of the top 10 drivers of engagement can be addressed through career discussion."



Use career discussion to empower employees. While any career discussion is better than none, career discussion is most effective when it helps empower employees. Career discussion can play a central role in helping employees take control of their own development. It's a means by which managers can help employees map a career path by exploring their talents, desires and aspirations.

Use career discussion to align talent with strategy. Employees are mobilized by purpose: they want to find interest, challenge and meaning in their work and they want to be able to help the organization meet its strategic goals. Career discussion can help employees understand how they can progress in the organization. And at the same time, managers can communicate the needs of the organization and ensure that employees' development goals are aligned with these needs.

Career discussions should encompass not only skills and capabilities, but career interests. To make sound decisions about where you want to go in your career, you need an objective perspective of where you currently are. Career discussion should include an element of performance to ensure career goals are grounded in the reality of the employee's skills and capabilities. While employees and managers need to talk about these, it is also very important to include a discussion about the employee's interests. The key is to emphasize actions and behaviors, not traits. Employees who have a clear sense of their strengths and weaknesses, as well as their interests and what the organization expects of them will have a better idea of the direction their development should take.

Take a broad approach to career discussion. Don't focus too narrowly on the nuts and bolts of development itself. Career discussion is an occasion to help guide employees to a better understanding of themselves and the organization's changing needs. For example, employees who better understand their own values, as well as the values, mission and strategy of the organization, are more likely to be engaged by their organization and job.

MEETING THE DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE

According to *Talent Management* magazine, 60% of organizations report that developing talent is their greatest talent management challenge. A program of regular, structured career discussion can make an important contribution to meeting this challenge and driving engagement. Career discussion not only helps employees acquire performance-enhancing capabilities, but also helps motivate them to put their skills to optimal use—with clear benefits for the organization. Career discussion is truly talk that performs.

About the Author

Melvin J. Scales is Senior Vice President for Right Management's Global Solutions team with responsibility for overseeing the firm's Workforce Transition and Outplacement solutions portfolio. He can be reached at melvin.scales@right.com.

About Right Management

Right Management (www.right.com) is the talent and career management expert within Manpower, the global leader in employment services. Right Management helps clients win in the changing world of work by designing and executing workforce solutions that align talent strategy with business strategy. Our expertise spans Talent Assessment, Leader Development, Organizational Effectiveness, Employee Engagement, and Workforce Transition and Outplacement. With offices in over 50 countries, Right Management partners with companies of all sizes. More than 80 percent of Fortune 500 companies are currently working with us to help them grow talent, reduce costs and accelerate performance.

© Right Management 2010.
All Rights Reserved.

www.right.com 1.800.237.4448



Follow us on twitter:

twitter.com/rightupdates