As part of the field research for our book “Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go,” we asked employees throughout North America about the last great career conversation they had with their manager. The responses became increasingly predictable, falling somewhere between “never” and “so long ago I don’t remember.”

That is until we met research subject No.164. After furrowing his brow for a moment, it appeared that his would be a similarly disappointing response. But then, his de-
meanor took a 180-degree turn and he animatedly shared:

“It was such a great conversation. My boss couldn’t have been more interested in me, what I like and what I wanted to do. He was asking — and really seemed to want to hear — about my talents and strengths. And we spent quite a bit of time talking about how I could contribute to the team. It was so energizing and inspiring.”

Finally, we’d stumbled upon an employee with a manager who had cracked the code around career development, and we inquired about how recently this conversation had happened.

“About eight years ago during my employment interview,” he said. And then, he posed an important and haunting question for leaders everywhere: “Why can’t managers make the interview last?”

At the risk of diluting this young man’s powerful words and pointing out the obvious, too frequently the interest talent leaders demonstrate when determining if candidates should be extended an employment offer immediately runs dry when they join the team.

With that in mind, how can leaders be so fascinated and captivated by someone one minute and then become seemingly ambivalent about what makes them tick once they become part of the team?

Research consistently suggests that employees across all five generations that make up today’s workforce want their bosses to get to know them. And yet, the human connection that’s established during employment interviews frequently gives way to administrative and task-oriented exchanges as everyone dives in to get the job done.

As a result, items like “information sharing,” “feedback” and “career conversations” consistently fall to bottom of engagement and climate surveys in most organizations.

Tell Me About a Time

The interview is a powerful metaphor and helpful framework for considering how to incorporate more meaningful conversation into the workflow. Maybe it would serve talent leaders well to dust off and retool the standard behavioral approach to interviewing — because it has tremendous application for ongoing and routine connections with employees.

Think about the best interviews you’ve conducted or been on the receiving end of. They likely included a lot of probes that started with “Tell me about a time when…” followed by a specific competency, challenge or task and additional questions about the steps taken and results realized.
Why Managers Go Quiet

Ask managers to rate their comfort with the variety of conversations they’re responsible for in the workplace, and most will score themselves low. That is, if they were telling the truth. Focus groups highlight some of the most common reasons.

Time: I just don’t have it.
Managers are now being asked for frequent “check in” conversations instead of the once-a-year performance and career development dialogue, on top of routine delegation, alignment, coaching, feedback and recognition. So time is a legitimate concern.

Skill: I don’t know how.
Lack of role modeling on the part of senior managers leaves middle managers and supervisors without a clear idea of what these conversations could look like. It’s assumed that they’ll just know what to say — and they don’t.

Boundaries: It’s not my style.
When conversations move to areas that are outside of the current work settings, managers are just not at ease. Easier to put these discussions off, than go where the direction is fuzzy.

Trust: Won’t they wonder why am I interested in areas that I haven’t been in the past?
Trust is the backdrop for authentic, important conversations. Direct reports want to know that their leaders genuinely do care and want to learn more about them. Trust on both sides matters. And trust builds trust.

—Beverly Kaye and Julie Winkle Giulioni

| people | practice | insights |

Incorporating more dialogue and conversation into the workplace and the workflow is easier than most managers realize. Keeping the interview going is as simple as asking a question. Questions are powerful because they:

• Keep the focus squarely on employee — where it belongs.
• Demonstrate respect, value and genuine interest in the other person.
• Shift ownership, putting responsibility for answering the questions on the employee.
• Provoke deep reflection, insights, constructive discomfort, ideas and actions.

Asking questions informally as part of talent leaders’ ongoing “interview” builds self-awareness and understanding in others. This is increasingly becoming an important core competency for many organizations.

But many leaders feel compelled to bring both the questions and the answers to the conversation. This is not necessary — nor is it helpful. Just like in an employment interview, the manager owns the questions and the candidate (in this case the employee) needs to own the answers. Failing to understand this dynamic does no one any favors and compromises the quality of the conversation.

‘Interviewing’ as a Vehicle for Getting Real Work Done
Cultivating engaging, ongoing conversations need not become “extra” work or additional to-dos on an already overflowing list of priorities. This interview-based approach to dialogue lends itself to a great deal of the “real work” of managers. Consider retwoeling these standard leadership responsibilities and making them part of leaders’ never-ending interview.

Performance reviews: Ratings and rankings are disappearing, and managers are now expected to swap the one-and-done annual appraisal conversation for frequent check-ins. What better excuse to conduct a performance interview? Imagine the effect on communication, learning and engagement when a manager trades that mind-numbing form review for something like, “Tell me about the results you’re most proud of over the last month.”

Why can’t the conversations captured in an initial employment interview last? Why can’t we continue to deepen our understanding of employees and help them deepen their own self-awareness? Why can’t we engage in ongoing inquiry as a fundamental methodology for all that we do as leaders?

The answer is: we can. When we choose to make work a never-ending interview, we just might see never-ending commitment, never-ending retention — and never-ending results. tm

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Implementing changes: Anyone who’s ever had to manage change knows the value of asking vs. telling. Engaging others in an interview can surface critical information, but it also helps others figure out how they can plug in and contribute to the effort. It’s as simple as something like, “How is this change similar to others you’ve successfully navigated, and what are you best suited to do to help make this happen?”

Setting goals and expectations: Employees consistently report they have talents and strengths that are underutilized by their employers. And the research of psychologist Michelle McQuaid and others suggests that labeling and talking about strengths enhances engagement. So why not infuse delegating and goal setting with strength-based inquiry? It could all start with something like, “I’d love to hear about the strengths and talents you can bring to this quarter’s goals.”