

A Leader's Guide to *Career Growth Conversations*

Practical tools for growth conversations
that build trust and retention

*Connecting top talent
to meaningful work.*



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included after each step

WHY THIS MATTERS



Career pathing *needs a refresh*

When an employee asks about their future, most leaders want to give a real answer. That's harder than it sounds.

Organizations are flatter, roles change quickly, and business needs shift often. Some employees want to move into leadership; others want to go deeper into their expertise or gain influence without managing a team. Almost everyone wants to know there's room to grow.

Traditional career ladders tie growth to promotions or new titles. In reality, growth also looks like expanded scope, sharper decision-making, more stakeholder trust, deeper technical skill, or ownership of higher-impact work.

Without a shared way to talk about it, growth conversations depend on whoever an employee's manager happens to be, one might weigh initiative, another collaboration, another technical depth. Without shared language, employees get mixed signals about what actually helps them move forward.

A modern approach gives employees direction without promising something the business can't deliver. That distinction matters — once a promotion, mentorship, or high-profile project is framed as "coming," it's hard to reset expectations if priorities or leadership change.

Career pathing should help leaders talk about growth with clarity and care, explaining what readiness means and how someone keeps building the skills that make an impact.

This doesn't mean getting rid of structure, it means building the right kind: clear enough to feel fair, flexible enough to reflect how the business actually works.

Career development *insights*

94%

of employees say they'd stay at a company longer if it invested in their career development. Source: Paycor

34%

higher retention is reported among employees with clear development options, compared with those who don't have them. Source: Chanty

~30%

of employees believe they have a clear career path within their organization. Source: Hirex



What we've seen work *(and what hasn't)*

We've sat across the table for a lot of these conversations, on both sides of them. A few patterns show up repeatedly.

What tends to work

- **Clear expectations** for the role someone is in today, before anyone talks about the next one
- **Career conversations** that happen more than once a year, folded into one-to-ones and project debriefs, not saved for a single annual meeting
- **Development tied to real work:** stretch assignments, project ownership, mentoring and cross-functional exposure, not just a course
- **Honest feedback**, even when it isn't what someone wants to hear
- **Shared ownership** between the employee, their leader and HR, rather than HR carrying the whole process alone

What tends to go wrong

- Treating time in a role as the same thing as readiness for the next one
- Building a ladder that looks good on paper but doesn't match the roles the business can actually support
- Vague feedback like "not strategic enough" that nobody can actually act on
- Assuming every employee wants to manage people
- Writing a development plan once and never opening it again
- Avoiding the hard conversation when someone isn't ready, or a promotion isn't coming

The pattern across all of it:

Growth conversations land when they're **honest about what's realistic** and **specific about what comes next**.

SETTING EXPECTATIONS



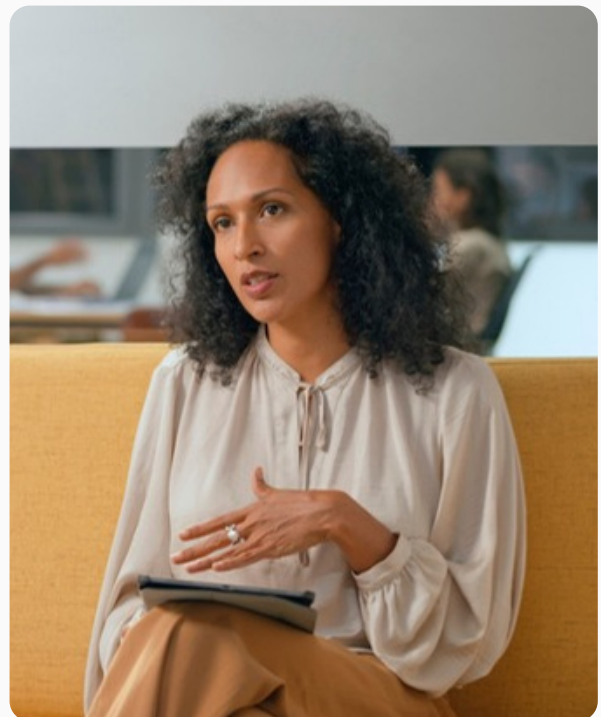
Set these expectations early. It makes every conversation after this one easier.

Career pathing is...

- > A structured conversation about growth
- > A way to clarify what success looks like
- > Based on skills, impact and readiness
- > Flexible enough to reflect different career goals
- > Connected to real business needs
- > A shared responsibility across the employee, leader and HR
- > A way to make development more visible

Career pathing is not...

- > A guaranteed promotion
- > A promise that a future role will exist
- > Based mainly on tenure
- > A one-size-fits-all career ladder
- > A document created once and forgotten
- > Something HR owns alone
- > A substitute for performance management





Before *we start*

Career pathing is often reduced to titles and org charts. In reality, strong career paths come from clear expectations, ongoing development, and real growth opportunities — which requires employees who reflect on their goals, leaders who have honest, regular conversations, and HR that keeps those conversations consistent across the org.

Roles and responsibilities

Employees know their own goals better than anyone else. Their part is to reflect on where they want to grow, name a few specific development areas and follow through on what they commit to. That ownership is what keeps the plan from becoming just another document.

Leaders are closest to the day-to-day work, which puts them in the best position to say what's really going on: clarifying expectations, giving honest feedback and flagging opportunities as they come up, not just once a year.

HR's role is less visible, but it matters just as much. HR builds the structure and tools that keep these conversations consistent across the organization and supports leaders who might be having one of these conversations for the first time.

Strong career development tends to be built on *four things*:

- 1 Role Clarity**
Employees need to understand what success looks like in their current role, including responsibilities, expected outcomes and decision-making expectations.
- 2 Capabilities and skills**
Growth happens when employees build new skills, strengthen existing ones and expand their ability to contribute in different ways.
- 3 Business impact**
Career development should connect to meaningful contribution — not time in a role, but the value someone creates and the readiness they demonstrate for broader responsibility.
- 4 Individual growth planning**
Development should reflect both organizational needs and individual strengths, interests and goals.

Okay, now let's get started →

Step 1: Have the career growth conversation

Part A: Where they want to grow

Before anything else, get a real sense of what growth means to the individual.

This should begin with curiosity. If a leader jumps straight to titles, they can miss what the employee is really looking for. Some people want to manage a team. Many are looking for something else entirely: more complex work, deeper expertise, more visibility or a stronger connection to business decisions.

Listen for themes. What kind of work energizes this person? Are they looking for a new role, or to grow inside the one they already have? This step doesn't need to produce a perfect career map. It needs to produce a clear direction.

Daniel, in practice

Daniel's manager notices he's most engaged when discussing how data can shape planning decisions.

When asked about his future, Daniel says he enjoys building dashboards, but wants to be involved earlier, before the decisions get made. He mentions that he tried to raise a recommendation in a planning meeting a few months back and it didn't really land. Nobody pushed back exactly, it just didn't go anywhere.

He isn't asking for a promotion. He wants more influence and a stronger line between his analysis and what leaders actually decide.

*Templates included
after each step.*



Part B: What success would look like

With the direction clear, it's time to get specific about what success would actually require. Career pathing turns vague fast here if you let it. A leader might sense someone has potential but struggle to explain what needs to change. Focus on observable behaviour, not polished-sounding labels.

Here are some language examples:

Less helpful	More helpful
Needs more executive presence.	I've noticed that your ideas resonate when you share them, but I'd like to see you feel more comfortable speaking up with senior stakeholders and standing behind your recommendations, even when you're being challenged or asked follow-up questions.
Needs to be more strategic.	One opportunity for growth is connecting your day-to-day work to the bigger picture. I'd love to see you start identifying patterns, risks and opportunities, then sharing your perspective on what they might mean for the business.
Not collaborative enough.	I'd like to see you bring stakeholders into the conversation earlier. The stronger relationships and context you build throughout a project, the easier it becomes to gain alignment and move the work forward.

Part C: Strengths and development areas

With a picture of success in hand, compare it against how the employee is performing today. Keep this evidence-based.

Start with strengths, then narrow the areas for development to two or three. Any more than that and nothing gets real attention.



Step 1: Career Growth Conversation Guide



Who fills this out: Leader and employee, together

When to use it: The career pathing conversation takes place, in one sitting or two

a) Where they want to grow

Prompt	Notes
What kind of work gives you the most energy right now?	
Are there responsibilities you'd like to take on more often?	
Do you see yourself growing through leadership, deeper expertise, broader influence or something else?	
What would make the next year feel like real progress?	
Growth direction (fill in together)	Daniel's Example: Build stronger business partnership skills and expand from reporting data to influencing decisions through insight and recommendations.

b) What success would look like

What to compare	Today	Next level
Example: Scope of work	Builds accurate reports and dashboards	Uses data to shape recommendations
Decision-making: what they decide with and without support		
Stakeholder relationships: who they work with and how		
Communication: how they explain their work and its impact		
Ownership: how much of the outcome is theirs		



This is where the leader puts words to what "next level" actually looks like. The more specific and tangible this gets, the easier the rest of the process becomes.

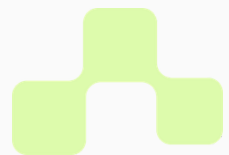


c) Strengths and development areas

Capability	Current level	Evidence	Growth focus
Example: Business storytelling	Developing	Understands the data but doesn't always connect it to business priorities	Include the business implication in every analysis
Example: Curiosity	Strong	He asks thoughtful questions about what the data means	Turn those questions and data into recommendations



Rate the current level as **Emerging** (just starting to show this), **Developing** (building consistency) or **Strong** (consistently demonstrated). Ground the evidence in something specific you've actually observed. Two to four capabilities are plenty.





Step 2: Build the growth plan



Now the conversation turns into action. The best plans are specific enough to guide real work, and simple enough that people actually use them.

"Improve communication"

is hard to track.

"Present quarterly planning recommendations to department leaders"

is much easier to support, observe and follow up on.

Keep it to one or two development priorities at a time. A plan with too many goals rarely gets actioned.

A wish list isn't a growth plan. The stronger version ties back to the employee's actual work, what the organization needs and the capabilities that matter for what comes next.

Step 2: Growth Plan



Who fills this out: Leader and employee, together

When to use it: After the career growth conversation; Section 2 every 60-90 days after that

Section 1: Initial Plan

Section	Prompt	Your entry (X date)	Daniel's example (Sept 1, 2026)
Employee	Who is this plan for?		Daniel
Current role	What role are they in today?		Data Analyst
Growth direction	What kind of growth are they working toward?		Build toward Senior Data Analyst responsibilities, with stronger business partnership and recommendation skills
Development focus	What capability should they build first?		Business storytelling
Specific goal	What exactly will they do?		Present not only what the data says, but what it means for business decisions
Actions	What steps will get them there?		Lead the analysis for quarterly planning and prepare two or three recommendations

Section	Prompt	Your entry (X date)	Daniel's example (Sept 1, 2026)
Timeline	When will this be done?		By the next quarterly planning meeting
Success measures	How will you know it's working?		Recommendations are clear, relevant and discussed by department leaders
Support needed	What help will the leader or organization provide?		Manager reviews the presentation structure and helps prepare for stakeholder questions, after Daniel's first draft leaned too heavily on the data itself
Review date	When will you check in on this?		After the quarterly planning meeting





Step 3: Check in on progress

Use this roughly every

60–90 days

or after a major development activity.

Check-ins work best when they **recognize real progress** and keep the plan honest.

If someone has grown but isn't ready for the next step yet, say that plainly and be specific about what still needs to happen.

Note:

Nobody should walk out of a check-in feeling like they passed or failed. Keep it useful instead: help the employee see what's changed, what still needs work and how to keep moving forward.

Step 3: Progress Check-in



Who fills this out: Leader and employee, together

When to use it: Every 60-90 days — add a new entry to this document rather than starting a new one

Prompt	Your entry (X date)	Daniel's example (Sept 1, 2026)
What's improved since the last check-in		Presented recommendations to department leaders and explained the business implications clearly
What evidence supports that?		Stakeholders discussed two of his recommendations during planning. Manager observed stronger confidence and clearer storytelling
What feedback did he receive?		Stakeholders found the analysis useful and easy to follow. He can keep building confidence answering unexpected questions
What still needs work?		Responding to challenges and adapting recommendations in the moment
What happens next?		Co-lead the next business review and prepare scenario-based recommendations
What support is needed?		Manager will help him prepare for likely questions before the review
Next check-in		After the next business review

Career pathing doesn't need to be linear to *be meaningful*



The most useful development conversations move past upward titles and focus on the work itself.

What does this person want to build? Where could they have more impact? What does the business actually need? Those questions get you further than any org chart.

Not every future step needs to be mapped out. What people really want is honesty: where they stand today, what success could look like from here and what they need to do next to get there.

Get this right consistently, and the career ladder stops being the point.

One final tip:

Keep these documents somewhere they'll actually get reopened — the employee file in your HRIS, a shared drive or wherever your team already tracks development.

The most important part is that the employee, their leader and HR can all find the same version and that it is revisited at each check-in rather than being filed away after the first conversation.



Let's keep the conversation going

Whether you're rethinking career pathing, tackling a broader HR challenge or planning for your next hire, we're here to talk.



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"Career growth isn't something you hand someone once a year in a review. It's a conversation you keep having, honestly and more often than people expect. My favorite part of this job is watching what happens once someone actually believes there's a path for them here. That's really the whole point."

—Alia Dean, Director of People and Culture, Altis

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