

Inclusive Line Manager Conversations

A culture of conversations is at the heart of an inclusive organisation. Developing an inclusive culture leads to more innovation, higher performance, and healthier workplaces. However, not all businesses empower their line managers to have inclusive conversations and so miss out on the opportunities that arise from this approach. We use 'line manager' in the broadest sense here: this means everyone who line manages someone else, from the Leadership team to Team Leaders, volunteer coordinators and staff managers to a temporary project team. Every interaction between a manager and a colleague is an opportunity to build a culture of conversations. This guide is designed to give you some hints and tips for developing a culture of conversations in your organisation.

Why is a culture of conversations important?

As with any organisational development consideration, it is best to start with the why. We know that inclusive cultures benefit everyone and every aspect of a business, but why specifically are good quality conversations between line managers and staff important?

- It enables line managers to understand more about their employees – their performance, aspirations, development needs – therefore giving them the tools to be better managers.
- It allows employees to establish connections with their line managers and their business, which is essential in keeping them motivated in the workplace.
- It allows for clearer understanding of performance objectives and the values of the organisation, giving people the tools to perform better.
- It gives the employer a chance to understand what employees need to perform at their best in their jobs.
- It creates trust and understanding between people.

What does a culture of inclusive conversations look like?

An organisation with a culture of inclusive conversations predictably has a lot of conversations! Managers and colleagues speak regularly about progress, areas for development, ideas and reflections. These

conversations are a dialogue about development, where the perspective of the employee is as important as the perspective of the line manager. Performance reviews and annual appraisals are a summary of the year's conversations, a time for reflection and setting of new goals. Both manager and employee adopt a growth mindset, where forward-looking conversations focus on development of all parties. Importantly, this behaviour is visibly modelled from the top by the Leadership team.

The impact of these ways of working include:

- Because conversations about performance, development and aspirations are had throughout the year, the end-of-year review should not come as a surprise to the employee.
- A culture where employees feel they receive constant feedback, allowing them to adjust their performance without having to second guess what they are doing well and what they need to develop.
- A culture where all employees feel looked after.
- Employees feeling comfortable about approaching managers about topics that may be sensitive and yet important to them, such as mental health, family, interpersonal relationships.
- Employees and line managers feel empowered to have conversations and they trust the organisation and leaders to do the right thing. They feel like the work environment is a safe space where they can have conversations about things that are important to them.

Tips for having inclusive line manager conversations

- Think about frequency: for some it works to have a scheduled regular meeting in the calendar, for others an informal catch up can work just as well. For employees new to the team these might need to be more regular as they are learning the ropes of the new job, for more established ones they might need fewer meetings. The important thing is not to guess – ask your employee what works for them.
- Think about where the conversation can take place. If it is taking place online, make sure you can see each other's faces if possible.

- Is it in the office? Or could it be in the breakout area or in the coffee shop if this will create a more relaxed atmosphere?
- If you have feedback to give to your employee, do you have examples or evidence that you can give them? Make sure you come prepared to your conversations.
- You may choose to open your conversation with questions so that the employee can share their experience before they hear your feedback. This will also allow you to provide constructive feedback that takes in consideration the employee's experience, rather than second guess how they are feeling. Remember to ask questions throughout the conversation and allow for them to ask you questions as well. This should be a two-way dialogue.
- Use open questions and agree a way for you to discuss your management approach e.g. you could ask what behaviours you could start/stop/continue to help your colleague be their best.
- Be flexible about your approach: a conversation about performance can also be about ways of working, reasonable adjustments, mental health, development, and career opportunities, etc. Each interaction is an opportunity for development.
- As a manager, remember that showing vulnerability is a great way of establishing rapport. You don't need to know the answers to everything and remember this is a developmental dialogue for you both.
- Take a supportive approach in your conversations: encourage your employee to think about their development, what engages them in their job, what would help them perform at their best. Create the environment where you are setting up people to succeed.
- Finish your conversation by providing a summary of what was discussed and agreeing on next steps.