

# When managers are not comfortable or capable of having career conversations: Seven pitfalls to avoid



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*This article is an excerpt from [Retain and Gain: Career Management for Non-Profits and Charities](#), a free publication from CERIC. [Click here to download your copy.](#)*

Sixty-three percent of Executive Directors and managers told us that they believe managers find career conversations difficult – for good reason.

In more than 75% of the organizations we spoke with, there are no career-related resources or tools in place for managers to use. Couple this fact with the lack of support to assist new leaders and managers are left to navigate different relationships, roles and conversations on their own.

Interestingly, when we spoke with nonprofit people managers, we heard the same three constraints small- and medium-sized business managers had identified that kept them from feeling comfortable engaging their direct reports in meaningful career conversations:

- “The conversation goes to compensation and we have little room to move.”
- “Sometimes managers and leaders don’t even know where we’re going so it’s hard for us to explain to the employee where the organization will be in 2-5 years. The sector is changing or is about to change. How can I lay out a map when I don’t know the future?”

- “We are so busy working in support of our organization’s mission. It is hard to find the time and resources to explore and develop the team. Funders don’t let us build this into proposals and so it falls to the bottom of our commitment and priority list.”

Most of the organizations we spoke with had a very small team of people managers, with many organizations only having 1 or 2 people in this role. Nonprofit and charity people managers need to wear many hats and develop strong internal and external relationships.

They cannot rely on a large group of peers, and managers lacking strong people skills are unlikely to succeed. Based on these findings, it seems evident that Executive Directors can help enhance the quality of career conversations by:

- Providing non-financial recognition and reward suggestions to managers in advance of meeting with employees.
- Considering how the organization’s priorities and projects for the next 6-12 months might provide career-building opportunities for staff. Ensure managers know which of these opportunities are available to staff.
- Helping managers prioritize career conversations as a critical strategic activity.

## Seven common pitfalls

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Good preparation for career conversations is critical, even when the staff member and manager know each other well and have worked together for a long time. Here are 7 pitfalls to avoid in career conversations (adapted from *Managing Human Resources: A Guide for Small Business Managers*):

1. **Ignorance:** Prepare for the conversation by reading the employee’s file or reviewing their work. Look for unexplained gaps, contradictions or unfinished business. If this leaves you with questions, ask them and listen carefully to the answers.
2. **Inattention:** Do not allow interruptions during the conversation. Answering the phone or permitting disruptions insults your employee and undermines the value of the discussion.
3. **Verbosity:** Try not to talk too much during the discussion. Let the employee speak and listen carefully. Ask the employee what they want to talk about before dominating the agenda.
4. **Inconsistency:** Treat everyone the same. Stick to the same schedule or trigger point for career conversations. Maintain regular frequency.
5. **Aimlessness:** Covering irrelevant details reveals more about you than the employee. Try sticking with specific experiences and on-the-job examples to support your discussion.
6. **Mismanagement:** Always stay on track in the conversation. Stick to the time you had allotted, recognizing that you are committing to regular conversations. There should not be urgency to the discussion – this is a long-term ongoing relationship and discussion.

**7. Procrastination:** Don't take too long to make a decision. Keep your discussion process reasonable and non-bureaucratic. If you agree to do something, set short-term and long-term time commitments for follow up.

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