

The Management Moments That Matter

6 conversations your managers aren't having and why closing that gap is the highest-leverage investment your organisation can make.

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The Management Moments That Matter:

How Conversational Skill and a Coaching Mindset Transform Organisational Performance

6 conversations your managers aren't having — and why closing that gap is the highest-leverage investment your organisation can make.

INTRODUCTION

The performance gap created one quietly neglected conversation at a time.

You have the strategy for success. You have the talent to deliver it. And you've invested in the key areas that should set you up for success: systems, processes, leadership.

Yet performance is not where it should be.

Delivery is inconsistent. Standards drift under any kind of pressure. And change initiatives that take hold at the top are evaporating in the middle.

Your best people are becoming quietly but worryingly restless, and the gap between what the business is capable of and what it's actually delivering keeps widening.

The most common responses to this problem are familiar: commission an engagement survey, tighten the performance management framework, run leadership and management training, add reporting and oversight. When none of that moves the needle, it might be something more extreme.

While each response has its place, none of them, on its own, will close the gap. Because the gap isn't structural, strategic or one that an increase in headcount will fix.

The gap lives in the conversations that should be happening every week, across every team, but aren't.

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The single most important capability a manager can have is the ability to hold a high-quality, honest, development-focused conversation with the people they lead. It is also the capability most consistently (and most expensively) overlooked.

This article is about precisely that gap: what it costs, why it persists and what it takes to close it.

THE REAL PROBLEM

Your organisation doesn't have a management problem. It has a conversation problem.

Ask any senior business, L&D or HR leader to describe the symptoms and the list is consistent:

- performance conversations avoided or handled badly;
- feedback that's either withheld or delivered too late to be useful;
- accountability that's fragile and almost entirely dependent on the manager chasing rather than the individual owning;
- top performers quietly disengaging while their managers choose to ignore;
- change announcements at the top that are never translated into the conversations that would make it real for those doing the work.

These are not isolated failures. They are the predictable, recurring consequences of one underlying condition: managers who have not been equipped with the conversational capability and the performance mindset the role demands.

The key distinction is that this is not a capability problem in the conventional sense. It is not a question of intelligence, attitude or commitment.

The problem is that they haven't been equipped for the high-stakes, emotionally complex conversations that determine whether a team performs or plateaus.

Only 1 in 5 employees strongly agree that their performance is managed in a way that motivates them to do outstanding work.

— Gallup State of the Global Workplace

This statistic can read like a referendum on employee attitude. But I prefer to view it as a verdict on the quality of the management conversations employees are experiencing.

The cost of low-quality conversations is not abstract.

- When performance conversations fail to happen and happen well, standards drift, performance falls away, and worst of all: nobody names it.
- When feedback is withheld, people optimise for the wrong things and never know.
- When mutual accountability is weak, follow-through becomes optional and senior leaders fill the vacuum.

- When top performers don't receive the conversation that takes their restlessness seriously, they leave, taking with them the disproportionate contribution they were making.
- When change isn't reoriented at the team level, it never makes the transition from announcement to reality.

Every one of these failure modes is a conversation that didn't happen, happened too late, or didn't land with the clarity, candour and skill it needed.

Collectively, they represent an extraordinary amount of performance, potential and commercial value that the organisation is leaving on the table.

WHY IT PERSISTS

The lever your organisation isn't pulling.

If the problem is this clear (and it is), why does it persist? Why, in organisations that invest seriously in strategy, talent, technology and systems, does the quality of the management conversation remain a chronic weak point?

There are three reasons.

1. We've equipped managers to manage process, but not people.

Traditional management development focuses on process: goal-setting frameworks, performance review structures, delegation models, stakeholder communication. These things matter, but address the scaffolding of management, not the substance of it.

A manager who knows how to write a SMART objective but can't hold a candid conversation about performance has been equipped for management on paper, but not in practice.

The conversations that determine whether a team performs or stagnates are not process conversations.

They are emotionally complex, relationally charged, often deeply uncomfortable conversations. The skills required to navigate them well are categorically different from the skills required to complete a performance review template.

2. We've assumed the conversations are both happening and landing.

In many organisations, there is no mechanism for surfacing the conversations that aren't happening or are happening but not well. The performance gap that could have been closed three months ago if someone had named it. The high performer whose restlessness was noticed but never addressed. The feedback that was formulated, thought better of, and quietly abandoned.

These absences are not immediately visible on any dashboard: they don't show up as incidents, failures or red flags. They show up weeks and months later as attrition, underperformance and failed change initiatives – by which time the connection to the missing conversation is near-impossible to trace.

The impact of conversations that aren't happening accumulates quietly and we pay for them – primarily in commercial results.

3. We've underinvested in the layer that matters most.

There is a well-established pattern in organisations that the development investment directed at this tier is rarely proportionate to the importance of its role.

The management tier sits at the most demanding intersection in any organisation: responsible for translating strategic intent into daily execution, while developing people in parallel.

Managers are, by any measure, the most pivotal layer in the business, with more daily touchpoints than any other leader, and more direct influence over performance, engagement and retention than any policy or framework.

Managers account for 70% of the variance in employee engagement scores.

— Gallup

70%! Not strategy. Not culture. Not compensation. The manager – and by extension the quality of the conversations that manager is having every day – determines engagement. **This is where to invest.**

Given the importance of managers, the investment at this tier should reflect their outsized influence. In most organisations, it doesn't.

And when investment does reach this layer, it tends to address either the functional leadership or people leadership aspects, but rarely both – and rarely in a way that acknowledges the genuine difficulty of doing both simultaneously.

What this tier needs is not more process training, but a genuine mindset shift and a set of highly practical, repeatable frameworks for the conversations that determine whether their people perform and grow, or plateau and stagnate.

THE CASE FOR A DIFFERENT APPROACH

Why coaching skills?

While many management development options acknowledge these problems, they attempt to solve them at the wrong level.

Consider what conventional management development offers: frameworks for setting goals, templates for conducting reviews and checklists for one-to-one meetings.

These things are useful, but not sufficient.

Because the barriers to these critical conversations are not knowledge or process. Your managers know they should give feedback. They know they should

address underperformance. They know they should have the conversation about what's next for their top performers who're asking.

The barriers to these conversations are that they're difficult and emotionally charged.

And that anticipated reaction creates anxiety for the manager, who now has to hold the standard without it feeling like a personal attack; or deliver the difficult observation without damaging the relationship; or sit with someone's ambition without dismissing it or making promises they can't keep.

Knowledge and process are of little help when the conversations get hard.

The capability to overcome these barriers is a coaching skillset:

The ability to hold space for challenge and complexity without being overwhelmed by it; to ask rather than tell and listen with genuine curiosity; to challenge with compassion; and to inspire personal ownership and agency in spite of the pressure and pace they're operating under.

These are some of the hardest skills in management, some of the most consequential, but sadly, also the least developed.

But when managers develop this capability, something changes in the system they lead. Not gradually. Quickly. Conversations that were being avoided start happening. Feedback that was being stored starts being given. Accountability that was being enforced starts being owned. Performance that was plateauing starts moving.

THE 6 CONVERSATIONS

What the conversations are, why they matter and why they aren't happening.

Whether at the individual, team or organisational level, performance problems almost always trace back to one or a combination of six conversations that aren't happening as they should.

Not occasionally. But persistently, predictably and at every level of the organisation.

Each of these conversations has its own dynamic, a unique failure mode, an associated cost and an inherent opportunity.

Together, they represent the full range of what's required from a manager who wants to get the best from their people.

Each of them requires a mindset and skill that conventional management training just doesn't develop.

CONVERSATION 1 OF 6

The Benchmark Conversation

Defining, communicating and holding an evolving standard.

“The bar has risen. Here’s what that means for us.”

Every team member needs to know what great looks like in their role and where that standard currently sits. And the bar is not fixed. It rises with the organisation as growth accelerates, as new investment arrives, as OKRs sharpen targets and performance frameworks tighten standards.

It rises with the individual too: as people grow in their roles, more is legitimately expected of them. The manager who owns the standard, names it clearly and revisits it as capability evolves is giving their people the clarity they need to perform.

This is foundational, but many managers don’t do it. Not because they don’t understand the importance of clear expectations but because the standard, in most organisations, is treated as implicit. Assumed to be understood, stable and shared.

It’s none of these things.

When the bar shifts – and in any growing organisation it shifts constantly – many managers are reluctant to name the new standard.

Sometimes uncertain of their authority to do so. Sometimes uncomfortable with the conflict it might create. And often compromised by the fact that they never made the previous standard explicit enough to give themselves solid ground to stand on now.

The result is a slow, near-invisible drift. A gap opens between what’s now needed and what’s being delivered, and nobody names it until the gap is so wide that what should have been a re-calibration conversation has become a crisis meeting.

The manager who avoided the discomfort of naming the new standard three months ago is now having a significantly harder conversation than they ever needed to.

Standards don’t hold themselves. The moment they stop being named and held, they start being negotiated downward.

The Benchmark Conversation, done well, won’t feel like a warning. It’ll feel like alignment, connecting the individual’s work to the organisation’s strategic direction. It will also create a shared frame of reference that makes every subsequent

performance conversation easier, because both people are now working from the same map.

That clarity is neither a nice-to-have nor a luxury. It is a must-have foundation.

CONVERSATION 2 OF 6

The Candour Conversation

Offering compassionate challenge from a place of service.

“I’ll be doing you a disservice if I don’t share this.”

There is a common misconception about this conversation: that it’s solely about criticism.

It’s not. The Candour Conversation runs in both directions. And in a great many organisations, both are being neglected.

The constructive criticism that needs to be shared is known to the manager. What’s more, the feedback is usually fully formed and often precise: a gap in performance, a behaviour that’s landing badly with the team, a habit that is quietly limiting the person’s effectiveness and credibility. These valuable insights don’t need any further refinement or checking – they’re simply not being said.

The same is true of positive praise: the strength that isn’t being named, the capability the person is underselling, the contribution that is genuinely exceptional and has never been acknowledged with

anything approaching the specificity it deserves. These observations exist in the manager’s head too but aren’t being communicated either.

What stops both? For constructive criticism, it’s the anticipated reaction. The defensiveness. The upset. The fear of damaging the relationship or triggering something overly-negative. For positive praise: the operational pace that crowds out the moment, the assumption that people know when they’re performing well, the vague feeling that enthusiasm is somehow unprofessional.

In both cases, the manager has confused silence with kindness. But they’ve not been kind. They have been conflict-averse in one direction and neglectful in the other. And in both circumstances, the person in front of them is the poorer for it: operating from a distorted picture of themselves that the manager could correct but hasn’t.

People cannot develop an accurate picture of themselves without honest input from those who observe them most. The manager who sees clearly and says nothing is complicit in that distortion.

The Candour Conversation, held with skill, is one of the highest-value acts a manager can perform.

Candour that is specific, grounded in observable behaviour and delivered from a genuine place of care builds trust rather than erodes it. People who

receive this kind of honest, caring challenge from a manager don’t resent it. They appreciate it because they know that the conversation has just offered something real, actionable and difference-making.

CONVERSATION 3 OF 6

The Accountability Conversation

Building genuine ownership so follow-through doesn't depend on the manager.

“This is yours to own. I’m here to support but not rescue.”

Ask any senior leader what they want more of from their management tier and the answer is nearly always some version of more ownership.

More initiative. More follow-through. Less escalation. Less dependency. Less of the sense that nothing quite happens unless someone at the top is pushing it along.

What they rarely examine is the management behaviour that’s generating exactly the dynamic they’re frustrated by.

The most common management style – directive, answer-giving, solution-providing – feels efficient and helpful. In the short term, it might be. But long term, it’s the most expensive habit a manager can have. When a manager consistently solves the problem that a team member brings them, they have just bought back a problem they gave away. When they do it repeatedly, they have trained their team to bring problems upward rather than solve them. The manager who wonders why they’re constantly firefighting would do well to look at whether their own management style is generating the dependency they’re frustrated by.

This is not a criticism of those managers. It is a description of a very human default: the desire to be helpful, demonstrate expertise and keep things moving. But that has profoundly limiting consequences at scale. It’s also a default that conventional management training rarely touches, because it sits in conversational habits and skills, rather than structural processes.

The Accountability Conversation is the moment that transfers not the appearance of ownership, but the genuine article.

It does this not by assigning tasks but by creating the conditions in which the other person thinks the problem through themselves, names their own commitment, and articulates what success looks like in their own words. That is a coaching conversation. It takes no more time than the directive alternative yet produces a categorically different outcome: someone who owns the result because they shaped the solution and made a powerful self-commitment.

The question isn’t whether our managers are delegating. It’s whether the conversations they’re having are creating real and committed ownership, or just the appearance of it.

The Stretch Conversation

Challenging others to believe in and lean into their next level.

“I see more in you. Let’s work out how you step into it.”

Most people are operating well within the boundaries of what they’re actually capable of.

Not because they’re disengaged or underperforming in any obvious sense, but because nobody has ever seriously challenged the story they’re telling themselves. The all-too-familiar quiet and persistent internal narratives: “I’m not quite ready” or “that’s not really for someone like me” or “I’d love to, but I don’t think I can.”

Left unchallenged, these stories become self-fulfilling. Our person calibrates their ambition downward, delivers to the level they believe is credible for them, and the organisation never sees the potential that was there to be realised.

Two things prevent this conversation from happening. The first is the manager’s own operational pressure: they rely on this person and are, often unconsciously, reluctant to stretch them into unfamiliar territory because it temporarily reduces their output in the current role. Stretching someone is a short-term performance cost for a long-term capability gain: a trade-off that is very

hard to make when delivery is relentless and the next deadline is looming.

The second is more subtle: many managers feel unqualified to develop someone who is already performing well, particularly if that person is more technically expert than they are. So the conversation doesn’t happen. The person’s ceiling stays where it is. And the manager loses the most valuable thing they have in their team: an up-and-comer.

The Stretch Conversation is not about telling someone what to do next. **It’s about naming what you’re seeing in them, evidentially and with conviction, and creating the conditions in which they can challenge the story that’s been holding them back.**

A manager who can do this is doing something that no performance framework, development plan or training programme will do for that person. They are changing what someone believes is possible for them. This is the most significant impact a manager can have.

The Trajectory Conversation

Turning top performer restlessness into momentum and growth.

“You need more than this. Let’s work out what that looks like.”

High performers are your most valuable but most fragile asset.

Valuable because they disproportionately drive results, carrying more than their fair share of output, setting an informal standard for those around them, and modelling the kind of ownership and initiative that every leader wants to see more of. Fragile because they are the most likely to leave when they stop growing – and they almost never announce it until it’s too late.

There are signals, of course. A subtle change in energy. A slight withdrawal from the conversations where they used to be most present. A question about what’s next that gets asked once, met with a vague and non-committal response, and never asked again. That silence is the beginning of their decision to move on.

The Trajectory Conversation is uncomfortable for a manager in a way that the other conversations are not.

The honest answer to “what’s next for me?” is frequently complicated. It might involve a promotion that isn’t currently available. A role that doesn’t yet exist. A direction that takes the person out of the team. Or a conversation about expectations that the manager doesn’t quite know how to navigate. So managers deflect. They offer flattery and vague encouragement, saying “let’s pick this up at your next review” – by which time the person has already drawn their conclusions.

Alternatively, they escalate, passing the conversation upward to a more senior leader. Which is hardly management.

Every high performer who has left citing “I wasn’t growing here” had a manager who could have had this conversation but didn’t.

The Trajectory Conversation, done with skill, doesn’t require the manager to have all the answers.

It requires them to take the person’s ambition seriously enough to explore it honestly, and to be a thinking partner who helps them map what they

actually want, identify what needs to develop to get there, and co-create a credible path forward.

That is a coaching conversation. And it is, in many cases, the primary reason a high performer ends up committing to the team and the organisation.

The Reorientation Conversation

Supporting the team to navigate and capitalise on change.

“Let’s define the possibilities from this.”

Change initiatives can succeed or fail at the manager layer.

Strategy is set at the top. Results are delivered at the front line. But between the two sits the management tier. And it is here that every restructure, every new strategic direction, every OKR cycle and every transformation programme either becomes real for the people doing the work or remains an irrelevant abstraction.

When change lands on a team, the experience is not, primarily, one of resistance or cynicism. It’s disorientation.

The map people have been navigating by – the one that tells them what success looks like, what their role means, what skills matter, where they stand – has shifted. And what follows is a very human cascade: anxiety about the unknown, worry about whether they’ll succeed in the new world and, in

some cases, something approaching grief for the thing they helped build. Defensiveness kicks in about a past they contributed to and are now being asked to leave behind.

These are not irrational responses, but entirely normal human reactions to change. **They need to be met, not dismissed. And certainly not papered over with an enthusiastic all-hands presentation about the exciting opportunities ahead with no substance beneath the surface.**

What many managers end up delivering is a relay.

They pass on the message from above, with varying degrees of conviction, and move on. The team that was uncertain before the conversation is uncertain after it, with the added worry that their manager doesn’t seem to know much more than they do and seems equally incapable of rolling with the change.

A different approach starts not with the organisation’s rationale for the change, but with the team member’s experience of it.

What has shifted for you? What are you worried about? What feels most uncertain? And from there, not bypassing the difficulty, but moving through it: what becomes possible for us that wasn’t possible before?

The manager who can lead this kind of conversation, hold the space for their person’s anxiety without amplifying it, surface the unspoken resistance and genuinely help the person find their own orientation

toward the new landscape is doing something that no change management process, however well designed, can do.

They are making change real at the only level where it can actually take hold: in the lived experience of the person doing the work.

DISPELLING COACHING MYTHS

Coaching skills are not what you think they are.

The objections that arise most frequently when coaching skills are proposed as the answer to a performance and management problem tend to take one of several forms:

Our managers don't have time to coach.

Coaching is for people who are struggling.

Our managers need to be decisive, not questioning.

We've tried coach training, and it didn't stick.

Each of these objections is based on a misunderstanding of what coaching skills for managers actually means. None of them, when examined, hold up.

On time: Coaching doesn't require more time. It requires the same time – but a different intention. The check-in that currently produces a status update and no changed behaviour can, with a coaching approach, produce genuine insight, renewed ownership and a clear commitment in the same 30 minutes. The question is not whether there's time to coach. The question is whether the time already being spent on management conversations is producing outcomes worth the investment.

On whom coaching is for: Coaching is not a remedial intervention. It is a performance accelerant. The world's highest-performing athletes, executives and professionals work with coaches not because

they are struggling but because they understand that the gap between good and exceptional is almost never closed by more information or harder work. It is closed by the quality of the thinking, the clarity of the challenge, and the honesty of the feedback. And that requires a thinking partner.

On decisiveness: A coaching style of management does not mean abdicating direction or avoiding decisions. It means knowing when to tell and when to ask – and having the skill to do both well. The manager who only tells creates dependency. The manager who only asks creates confusion. The manager with a genuine coaching capability knows how to direct with clarity when direction is needed, and how to develop with curiosity when development is what the moment calls for. That range is not softness, but sophisticated human-centred leadership.

On programmes that don't stick: If a previous coaching skills programme didn't produce lasting change, the question worth asking is what kind of programme it was. A workshop that teaches a coaching model and sends managers back to the same environment, the same pressures and the same performance expectations will produce only a temporary lift, at best. Lasting change requires a distinctive design: one that builds skill progressively, creates practice in real work, and installs the habits and mindsets that make coaching the default rather than the exception.

When conversations start happening.

The outcomes of investing in coaching skills for managers are not speculative. They are observable, measurable and consistently replicated across the organisations where this work has been done well.

Performance conversations happen earlier and more consistently, which means performance problems are addressed at the stage where they're still recoverable. Standards are clearer, gaps are named sooner and the culture of what's acceptable shifts incrementally but definitively.

Feedback becomes a continuous habit rather than an event. Not just for reviews, but in the corridor, during a check-in, in the moment after a meeting when something happened that's worth highlighting. The organisation that has this kind of continuous feedback loop from its managers learns faster and improves more consistently.

Ownership deepens. Escalations reduce. Senior leaders are pulled into fewer decisions that the management tier should be making for themselves. The conversations that used to produce dependency

now produce commitment. And the manager who used to be the bottleneck becomes the enabler, freeing their time for the work that actually requires their seniority.

High performers stay. Not all of them, and not forever. But the ones who were leaving because nobody was taking their ambition seriously enough to engage with it find a reason to stay. And the organisation retains their significant contribution.

Change lands. Not just at the top, but at the team level where it has to, if the results the strategy promises are to be achieved. Managers who can help their people to navigate the anxiety and find the possibility become the engine room for strategic intent. Without them, even the best-designed transformation will stall.

None of this requires wildly new processes or overhauled structures. It requires managers who can lead differently in these pivotal management conversations.

CONCLUSION

The investment you haven't made yet.

The organisations that will outperform over the next five years are not necessarily those with the best strategy, the largest headcount or the most sophisticated adoption of new technology.

The organisations that will outperform are the ones that figure out how to unlock the performance and potential that already exists in their people; and deploy it consistently, under pressure, through change and growth.

That unlock happens in conversations.

In the check-in that is not just a bland update, but a genuine offer of challenge and stretch. In the feedback moment that names what everyone else has been thinking but dared not say. In the moment where a manager looks at a team member and says: you are more capable than you know, and I'm not going to let that capability go unrealised.

These conversations are happening in some teams with some managers. **The organisations that will outperform the competition will be those where these conversations are happening consistently and expertly, simply as a matter of how things work here**, rather than by exceptional practice by the exceptional individual.

Becoming this kind of organisation is easier than you might imagine. It doesn't require an expensive overhaul of your management frameworks and systems. It requires a focused and diligent effort to equip your managers to lead differently in these conversational moments that determine all else.

This is the investment many organisations haven't yet made. And the one I invite you to make today.

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BIOGRAPHY

About Dan Beverly

Dan Beverly is an executive coach who, for over 15 years, has been coaching leaders and managers through complex change and rapid growth.

Working across fintech, biopharma, professional services and expertise-led businesses, Dan coaches managers to lead differently in the moments that matter most, building the conversational skill and coaching mindset that unlocks performance, deepens engagement and delivers measurable results.

His approach is not a set of off-the-shelf frameworks, but systemic, commercially grounded and built around the specific challenges of the organisation. Each engagement is designed around the business context, the cultural dynamics and the organisation's priority commercial outcomes, ensuring the work delivers meaningful change.

If you'd like to discuss what this could look like for your organisation's management tier, get in touch at <https://danbeverly.com/contact>.

