

## CONVERSATIONS TOOLKIT

The Conversations Toolkit is for leaders who manage people.

It's simple, easy to use and will help you to do the small stuff brilliantly.

### The Conversations Toolkit works:

- For first-time leaders
- For leaders who want a refresh
- For both virtual or face to face conversations.

The conversations toolkit gives you tips and the latest leadership practices, ideas on the right questions to ask, or conversation starters to help it go smoothly. Just try one or two out in your regular check-ins.

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# 1. ONBOARDING

Here are a few tips to create a great onboarding experience:

## 1. Start before they start

What can you get out of the way between the signing of the contract and their first day? Admin? Compliance training? Try and get your new hire actively contributing to their role asap - it's one of the things new starters feel good about.

## 2. Make it social

We all remember that horrible feeling of being the new boy/girl. Helping your new hire feel they belong and to make connections, is a huge contributor to being effective. Make sure they have a buddy and everything set up for their first day. Use the local onboarding checklist to shape and plan their onboarding experience.

## 3. Let them manage it themselves

Instead of sitting them down with a PowerPoint deck, set them some challenges around people to meet, places to visit, things to discover and let them get on with it. Check in to ensure they've done it, but treat them like a grown up from day one.

## 4. Use onboarding to find out about THEM

Those first few weeks are a great time to get some insights into what makes this new person tick. The more you can discover about their motivations, their preferences, their needs, etc, the better leader you can be for them.

**And don't forget to book in a few informal check-ins during those first few weeks. Time with you is THE most critical thing you can do to help them succeed.**

Here are some things you can do:

## Drop them an email before they start saying ...

'Can't wait to have you as part of the team! I'll get some regular check-ins with you. I also want to introduce you to XXX who will be your 'buddy' for the first couple of months. She/he is there for the questions you feel silly asking!

## Set them some challenges such as:

'I'd like you to contact XX and YY and have a chat with them in your first couple of weeks. They're expecting you to reach out to them.'  
Can you have a look at XX and YY and give me your thoughts on how we do things currently compared to your last place?

## Find out about them:

- How are you settling in? How has your first week?
- What else would help you settle in?
- What was it about our company that made you want to apply?
- How are we living up to your expectations?
- If you were managing you, how would you get the best out of you?
- What's the best reward or recognition that you have had at work?
- How would those that know you best describe you?
- How do you like to solve problems? Just be left to get on with it, or lots of check-ins?

## 2. PROBATION

A probation review is an important part of the onboarding process. This will determine if the person has successfully completed their probation or needs to demonstrate further improvements.

**Here are a few tips to create a great probation experience:**

### 1. Welcoming

The first few weeks in a new job can be overwhelming, however, it is also an exciting time where you are eager to get stuck in. The first probation meeting is crucial so you can ensure the person is clear on expectations whilst feeling safe and supported.

### 2. Be clear and focused

Focus on what you want them to achieve rather than simply giving a long list of tasks. Ensure probation priorities / objectives are written using the acronym SMART and check in for understanding.

### 3. Check in

Once the initial probation conversation has occurred, it is important to check in regularly to monitor progress. Its also an opportunity to realign priorities, give feedback on performance and establish rapport. This will ensure issues or dips in performance are rectified quickly.

### 4. Encourage an open dialogue

A probationary period is more likely to be successful if the employee has been given plenty of opportunity to raise issues and ask questions about the working environment. Often, the employee may be nervous about asking for help, particularly if it is about something they have already been shown. Therefore, clear that the meeting is a two-way process to raise issues and for them to work together to find ways to ensure that the employee will be happy and successful in the role.

**Here are a few questions you can ask in a 1-2-1 meeting or check in:**

- What are you looking forward to achieving in your first 6 / 12 months?
- What areas of the role do you feel less confident about and why?
- What development do you need to exceed in your role?
- What support do you need so you are up and running quickly?
- What questions do you have for me?
- How are you enjoying the role?
- How do you think you are doing?
- What is preventing you from achieving your probation priorities?
- What have you learned in the past 6 months?

## 3. THE CHECK-IN

Great people leaders do one thing regularly - they check-in with their people. It's not a big formal meeting but an informal opportunity to catch up, show appreciation, agree or adjust priorities, discuss recent work outcomes and provide coaching.

**Here are a few tips for a great check-in:**

### **1. Do it often.**

A check-in doesn't need to be long - little and often check-ins are often much better, and can happen anywhere, including Zoom.

### **2. Keep it informal.**

You don't keep a record of a check-in unless you want to (or you've got problems with them) but your team members can keep their own record if they wish.

### **3. Put them in control.**

It's their career and their performance so encourage them to own it. That means your team members setting the agenda for what they want to discuss and encouraging them to ask you for feedback.

### **4. Everyone will need a different level of support from you.**

After the person is settled into their role, why don't you ask each member in your team how often they would like to meet? Let them know each week when's a good time to book a check-in with you.

**Here are a few conversation starters to help you have a great check-in:**

- What are you working on and how can I help?
- How happy do you feel about things right now in general?
- Let's chat about your progress against the outcomes we agreed on last time we met
- What goals/outcomes are you going to focus on over the next few weeks?
- Do we need to adjust anything you're working on?
- What type of feedback would be helpful?
- Let me tell you what I thought you did really well last week and the impact it had
- Is there anything else you want to discuss?
- What made you proud this week?
- Is there anything preventing you from doing your best work?

## 4. THE CAREERS CHAT

Today's flatter structures mean it's not always possible to move up the career ladder, but that doesn't mean everyone needs to stay in the same place. Career development today is about making the most of your team members' strengths, giving them the chance to get even better at what they do now, to learn new skills and opening doors for them.

**Here are a few tips for a great careers check-in:**

### 1. Get to know your people really well

What are their aspirations, their strengths, their development needs, their motivations? When you know these things, you can help identify the best way to lead, coach and train them.

### 2. Get creative

We all learn in different ways so, whilst a training programme might be ok for some of your team, you might find that others respond better to being given a project to work on or a shadowing opportunity,

### 3. Create movement

Encourage your good people to take on new challenges. Let your colleagues know who's great in your team and who might be ready for a move.

### 4. Do it often

Meet with your team members regularly to discuss their career and development but encourage them to take ownership of their careers and to come to you with ideas and suggestions.

**Here are some conversation starters to help you:**

- How do you feel about your role right now?
- What do you like most about your role? How could we help you get even better at those aspects?
- What would you like to be really good at?
- How have you grown in the last few months?
- What additional responsibilities would you be willing to take on?
- Where would you like to take your career in the future?
- How can we get you even better at what you do now?
- I think a sideways move to ... would be great for you right now.
- What do you think?
- What are you going to do to reach your future aspirations?
- Would this project give you a chance to develop that skill?
- Have you got any ideas about how you might get that development?
- Is there anyone I can introduce you to who could help you?
- And you can open up discussions about their future – and whether you might be at risk of losing them - by asking:
- What makes you want to stay here and what would make you want to leave?

## 5. WELLBEING

Caring about your people's health and wellbeing is key to high performing teams. This can be achieved by making sure you create an inclusive environment where they feel they can bring their whole selves to work and feel supported to manage their own health and wellbeing.

**Here are some tips to help you:**

### 1. Trust is everything

Trust your team to work in ways and at times that they can balance effectively with the other demands in their life. Let them know that if they need time off or to take their foot off the gas, that they will be supported.

### 2. We're all unique

Adapting your leadership style to accommodate the needs and wants of each of your team members will create a more supportive and fulfilling work environment. When we talk about a 'duty of care' that's about treating them decently, not just looking after them when things are not going well.

### 3. Creating a feeling of belonging

Our wellbeing often comes from that sense that you belong, that you are accepted for who you are, that you matter, that your ideas and views are wanted and that you are valued. It's your role to help create that.

### 4. Remove the hassle

If you can reduce some of those daily frustrations, those small irritations and barriers to your team just getting their work done, it will help them feel less stressed.

**Here are some questions you could ask. Why not try out a couple of these in your next check-in:**

- Do you feel you have the freedom to adjust your work schedule to fit with your personal life? What stops you?
- Is there anything that I am doing/the team is doing that prevents you from doing your best work? What would you change?
- Do you feel the demands of your workload are manageable?
- Do you feel that you can live a physically healthy lifestyle? What would help?
- When you feel stressed, what happens and how do you deal with it/ how can I help?
- When's your next holiday/time off - how could we help to make it stress free?
- Do you prefer to completely switch off in your own time? How can I/the team support that?
- Does your physical work environment help contribute positively to your work? What could make it better?
- What frustrates you at work/makes you stressed? What could we do to prevent that?
- Do you feel as a team we welcome different views and opinions? What could we do differently?

**Signpost them to the [Wellbeing intranet page](#) and or the [Inclusive Aston intranet page](#) for information and support available.**

## 6. SHOWING APPRECIATION

We know that being appreciated at work matters. Not only does it improve satisfaction and boost retention rates, but according to studies, 75% of employees surveyed agreed that motivation and company morale would improve if leaders simply thanked their people in real-time for a job well done.

**Here are some tips to help you show your team your appreciation:**

### 1. Ask them

Everyone wants recognition for their contributions, but not everyone feels recognised in the same way. Get some insight by asking them how they prefer to be appreciated.


### 2. Surprise and delight

Showing appreciation doesn't have to cost money. The future of rewards is all about the personal, the timely, the unexpected.

### 3. Just say thank you

It might seem obvious but saying 'thank you' is the simplest gesture and the one we often forget.

**Here are some other ways to show your appreciation:**

- I just want you to know that your commitment to this team and your willingness to step up and do what needs to be done, even if it falls outside of your job description, doesn't go unnoticed.
- Thanks for your contribution today. You really went above and beyond!
- You did such a great job, I want to give you this small token to say thank you.
- To say thanks, I'd like you to attend that development/training you identified.
- I've called this impromptu team meeting so I could just say thank you to you all.
- I've got you this book as I know how interested you are in ...
- Let me treat you to a coffee to say thanks.
- Use the  icon on Teams or Yammer to say thanks, job well done!

Showing your appreciation always works best when you can describe the positive impact the actions and / or behaviours have had.

**For times when a member of staff has gone above and beyond, you could consider a on the spot recognition voucher.**

## 7. THE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

A difficult conversation is probably one of the hardest things you have to do as a leader. It's no fun for the person on the receiving end either.

**Here are some tips to help it go more smoothly:**

### 1. Don't wait

Every leader who finally deals with an issue – even if that means the person ends up leaving – always says, 'I wish I'd dealt with it earlier!'. Leaving things to fester will only make the problem worse. Be known as the leader that nips issues in the bud.

### 2. Forget the feedback sandwich

Be kind but straightforward. Don't try and soften the blow, as anything negative might get buried and they might leave the meeting thinking there's no problem.

### 3. Be specific

Have examples to hand that demonstrate the issue. It's not fair, for example, to say you're always late for meetings. Instead be specific about which meetings they were late for and the impact that it has had on how it makes you/the team feel.

### 4. Always follow up

Be really clear about what you want to see changing e.g. "We've agreed that next week you're going to ... and I'm going to help you by ... and we're going to meet up again in a week to see how it's going. I'll send you a note after this meeting to confirm what we've agreed".

**Here are some conversation starters you can try:**

- This conversation might be challenging for us both, but I'm looking forward to resolving this situation together.
- You seem unhappy at work to me (give examples) so I wanted to have a chat and see if we can work through it together?
- This is my perception of the impact you had in our team meeting today... Do you think that's fair? Tell me what you think?
- You've had three lots of absences in the last month, so I wanted to have a chat. Is there anything you want to tell me or can I help in any way?
- How do you think work is going at the moment? ... I see, so you're struggling with ...?
- Your behaviour (give example) is having (share impact) on me/the team. I'd like to understand more about why it's happening.
- You're falling behind on delivering the outcomes we had agreed, so I want to talk about why and what we can do about it?
- This is the change we need to see. Let's meet up again in a week to see how you're getting on.