

The Five Conversations Framework

An Alternative Approach to Appraisals

Imagine it's time for your team members' annual performance reviews. You're keen to use these productively and effectively, and you look forward to building stronger relationships with your people through them.

In your mind's eye, a member of your team is sitting across from you. He or she is clear on what his strengths are, and what skills he needs to develop to perform even better next year. The conversation is open and honest, and discussion flows naturally...

Now let's get back to reality. How far is this scenario from your regular appraisal meetings? If your meetings tend to be more "awkward monologue" than free-flowing conversation, don't despair. A [growing discontent](#) with the traditional appraisals system is prompting organizations, including some [big-name companies](#), to experiment with alternative approaches.

In this article, we identify the shortcomings of traditional performance reviews, and we'll explore how you can use an approach called the "Five Conversations Framework" to promote dialogue, increase [positivity](#), and build better relationships with your people.

About the Tool

[Dr Tim Baker](#) is a consultant and the managing director of Winners at Work Pty Ltd, a leadership development and change management company. He created the Five Conversations Framework and featured it in his book, [The End of the Performance Review](#).

In this book, Baker tells of how he spoke to thousands of HR professionals around the world, and discovered that many managers and employees see performance appraisals as nothing more than an empty, bureaucratic exercise imposed on them by HR.

Baker says the standard performance review can be:

- Costly to implement.
- Sometimes destructive.
- Often a monologue rather than a dialogue.
- Too formal, and likely to stifle discussion.
- Too infrequent.
- Not sufficiently meaningful to the role (an exercise in form filling).
- Rarely followed up with appropriate actions.
- Often a stressful experience for those involved.

He says that his Five Conversations Framework offers managers and organizations an alternative that identifies and builds upon people's innate talents.

How the Five Conversations Framework Works

The Five Conversations Framework is based on five themed conversations that you have with each of your people, one theme per month, for five months out of six. This means that each topic is covered twice in a year, helping you review their development easily.

A conversation with your team member should last around 15 minutes, and focus on one of the following themes:

- **Climate Review:** To measure her job satisfaction and morale.
- **Strengths and Talents:** To identify and develop her innate abilities.
- **Opportunities for Growth:** To improve her performance and standards.
- **Learning and Development:** To identify and support future learning opportunities.
- **Innovation and Continuous Improvement:** To improve her own and your team's effectiveness in line with business needs.

There are no conversations for two months of the year. Each organization has particularly busy periods, and this gap means you are free to get on with other tasks during these times.

It's important for everyone within your organization to follow the same conversation topic each month. For example, if the Climate Review conversation falls in November, all managers and supervisors across the business will have this conversation one-on-one with their team members. This will give you a clear picture of climate within your organization.

Tip:

Avoid lumping all the themes together into one single conversation – the idea is to have regular dialogue with your people. If you have conversations regularly, you will get to know them better, help them to stay motivated, and get valuable early insight into any problems that may be affecting their performance.

Tip:

If you feel that you don't have time to hold regular meetings with all your people, [decide](#) which of your routine tasks could be carried out by others and [delegate](#) them. This will give you time to develop your team members effectively.

What Are the Five Conversations?

The table below shows the objectives of each conversation, and key questions you can ask:

| Month's Topic | Content | Key Questions | Key Objectives |
|----------------|--|--|---|
| Climate Review | Job satisfaction, morale and communication | How would you rate your current job satisfaction? How would you rate morale? How would you rate communication? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• To determine your team members' views on job satisfaction, morale and communication.• To provide a snapshot of the current climate within your team.• To identify (and find solutions to) any problems your team may be facing. |

| Month's Topic | Content | Key Questions | Key Objectives |
|--------------------------|---|--|--|
| Strengths and Talents | Effectively deploying strengths and talents | <p>What are your strengths and talents?</p> <p>How can these strengths and talents be used in your current and future roles in the organization?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify each team member's strengths and innate talents. Develop their roles based on those strengths and talents. |
| Opportunities for Growth | Improving performance and standards | <p>What are some opportunities for improved performance?</p> <p>How can I help you to do this?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify current and expected standards of performance. Discuss and agree upon tangible ways to develop performance to match expectations. Align expectations with the future direction of the business. |
| Learning and Development | Support and growth | <p>What are some skills you would like to learn?</p> <p>What learning opportunities would you like to undertake?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify training methods that will build upon your team members' strengths and lift their performance in critical areas. |

| Month's Topic | Content | Key Questions | Key Objectives |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Innovation and Continuous Improvement | Ways to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the business | <p>What is one way that you could improve your own working efficiency?</p> <p>What is one way that we can improve our team's operations?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obtain insight into your team from its members' perspectives. • Identify how to help your team members improve their efficiency, both individually and as part of the team. |

Putting the Five Conversations Framework Into Practice

The following example explains how manager Sharon puts the framework into practice.

Sharon manages a staff of 10 for a medium-sized business, which manufactures barcode labels for medical research laboratories. She has diligently applied her company's performance review process for several years and meets with all her people once a quarter. She encourages them to set targets that will help them to develop new skills. However, she has come to recognize that these targets are often not met, and, instead, are repeated in subsequent review meetings.

During these quarterly meetings, Sharon struggles to get a word out of some of her people, while others air every grievance they think of and take more than their allocated time.

She notices that her team's productivity reduces as the meetings approach. Her people seem preoccupied and nervous. She resents the added pressure that these reviews place on both herself and her people. It's obvious to her that the process is not an effective way to develop her team.

As Sharon's typical review process comes to a close for the year, she decides to implement the Five Conversations Framework. She prepares her team for the new process and arranges meetings with them in 15-minute slots.

Sharon feels more positive about her review process now. It has taken some time for her people to get used to it, but she has found that the simplified format has reduced their anxiety and encouraged conversation. Those who usually "clammed up" in the old-style reviews now feel more comfortable about talking during the short one-topic conversations, and those that rambled are now more focused.

Concentrating on her people's strengths boosts their confidence and develops their skills more effectively. The regular meetings mean that she's getting to know her team and its processes better. This, in turn, has helped her to identify problems and refine department processes to prevent them from recurring.

Key Points

Dr Tim Baker developed the Five Conversations Framework after finding that the traditional annual or bi-annual performance review has significant drawbacks. Using his approach, you have one 15-minute conversation with each team member every month, based around the following themes:

- Climate Review.
- Strengths and Talents.
- Opportunities for Growth.
- Learning and Development.
- Innovation and Continuous Improvement.

These themed conversations aim to:

- Encourage effective dialogue in appraisal meetings.
- Facilitate less stressful encounters between you and your people.
- Help you to build good relationships with your team members.
- Develop people's skills based on their strengths.

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