

How to Mentor Someone Who Doesn't Know What Their Career Goals Should Be

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“Tell me about your career goals.” How often have you said this to a person you’re managing or mentoring, only to get a blank stare in return? Perhaps the person confides that they don’t know what their goals should be, or even whether there are opportunities to advance at your company. How do you begin to provide support?

Career dissatisfaction is a growing challenge in today's world, which is why we've decided to do things differently at Weight Watchers, with the help of LifeLabs Learning. The results of CEB's 2015 employee survey capture the problem well: 70% of employees surveyed (across many industries) reported being dissatisfied with career opportunities at their company — a disturbing figure given that it is one of the biggest drivers of engagement and retention. At the same time, 75% of organizations said they expected to face a shortage of necessary skills and knowledge among their employees. So, on the one hand, employees feel they can't advance fast enough, and on the other, companies believe employees are growing too slowly. How can such a blatant and dangerous contradiction exist? And what can we do about it?

Before offering solutions, we'd like to propose a radical diagnosis: The problem lives not in a lack of career opportunities, but rather in the very concept of a career. We are suffering from the *career myth* — a delusional belief in the outdated idea of linear career progression.

Consider the etymology of the word "career." It comes from the 16th-century word for "road." When we envision a career, we imagine a direct path with a final destination. And not long ago, this concept was useful. Career growth meant attaining incremental increases in prestige and compensation. You could look at the past and use it as a gauge of the future — taking the steps that others took to get to where they got. This vision of career growth no longer matches reality. We no longer need to be good at predicting the future; we now have to

succeed when the future is unpredictable. We have to abandon the career myth and create a new framework for personal and professional growth.

Let's return to the employee who needs direction and feels stuck and confused about their career. If you can't point them toward a reassuring career ladder, what can you do to support their growth and increase their impact on the company? Here are some of the steps we're taking at Weight Watchers to help employees move beyond the career myth:

Dispel the career myth. First, we tell employees that it is fine and even preferable not to have a concrete career path in mind. Being overly attached to a specific path can turn into a *career trap* — blinding us to nonlinear opportunities for growth. We recently launched biannual growth conversations between managers and employees. Rather than job titles, employees discuss experiences, responsibilities, and lifestyle changes they might want.

Good questions to ask: “What problems excite you?” “What strengths can you build on?” “What types of work do you want to do less of and more of?” “What would you do differently if you quit your career?”

Focus on transferable skills. We train our managers to help their direct reports develop transferable skills, not climb a ladder. These are skills that increase employability because they can be applied to a variety of roles and situations now and in the future (for example, communication, self-management, writing, public speaking). Rather than investing in one path,

we tell employees, they should diversify their career capital. To provide some direction, we also want managers to advertise the skills that are most wanted on the team.

Good questions to ask: “Of the skills we’re looking to grow on the team or in the company, which interest you most?” “What skills would help you gain more influence in your current role?” “What skill gaps are standing in your way or holding you back?”

Create milestones. One of the perks of an old-school career is the title progression that delineates advancement. As organizations become flatter, and growth nonlinear, we have to put extra effort into making milestones that mark progress. One way we’ve done this is to create badges that demarcate growth. For example, when managers receive training, they receive a certificate. To get their next badge, they must complete an advanced program. A badge system can demarcate skills, knowledge, and achievements — creating a portfolio of accomplishments rather than a traditional résumé. Another milestone solution we’ve implemented is a quarterly conversation focused on tracking goals employees set for themselves, aligned with company-wide priorities. Next, we’ll develop more visible recognition platforms so that employees can celebrate their accomplishments and share their knowledge.

Good questions to ask: “What do you want to achieve next? How will you know you’ve achieved it?” “Let’s gamify this goal. What’s level 1? How about level 2?” “What do you want to name this next milestone?” “How might you share what you’ve

learned?”

Encourage small experiments. The growing complexity and unpredictability of work means we need to run many small experiments to discover what suits us best. To fuel a spirit of experimentation, we’ve launched opportunities for employees across the world to get training in topics they are curious to explore. We’re also helping managers encourage experiments among their reports and equipping them with skills to give clear, actionable feedback on their reports’ progress.

Good questions to ask: “What areas of the business intrigue you?” “How might you design a short experiment to test your interest level?” “Who might you want to collaborate with?” “What have you discovered about yourself from your past experiments?”

The scary thing about accepting the career myth is acknowledging that you don’t know what comes next. The wonderful thing about it is realizing that every experience you’ve collected thus far has merit. Every job you’ve held and every relationship you’ve forged is a kind of key that can unlock a future opportunity. The keys don’t have to make sense together. There doesn’t need to be a clear, linear narrative to explain how you got from A to B. And if your employees still worry that they don’t have a clear path in mind, lean on the wisdom of Lewis Carroll: “If you don’t know where you are going, any road will get you there.”