
Bonus Chapter: *Can We Talk: Seven Principles for Managing Difficult Conversations at Work*

How to Tell an Employee They're Not Ready for a Promotion

It's Thursday evening, and you're at your desk with a cold cup of coffee in hand. Your wife calls you for the third time. She wants to know what time you think you'll be arriving at the ball field to watch your son's team take on their biggest rival. You tell your spouse you need a few more minutes to wrap up what you're doing. You know this isn't true. She knows it too.

You can't help but think that you wouldn't be in this situation if you'd done a better job of handling a recent conversation with an employee — someone you'd considered to be a rising star. This employee caught you completely off guard. I mean, who on earth asks for a promotion when they've been in their job for only three months? Certainly no one you know!

Your mind keeps drifting back to your conversation with the employee. You keep thinking:

- If only I'd been more supportive when she told me she was ready for a promotion.
- Maybe I shouldn't have dismissed her request so readily.
- Or perhaps I should have agreed to her request, even though she's far from ready for a promotion.

If this conversation had gone differently, the project you're working on would have been delivered to the client last week as planned — and you'd be sitting in the bleachers right now, watching your child's last home game. More than likely, your employee would not have given you her notice. Instead, you're working double time until you're able to restaff her position.

It's moments like these when we all wish we had a time machine. If we did, we'd never have to think about another "should have" or "would have." We'd be able to simply pull the lever and go back in time to correct what went wrong. And if that didn't solve the problem, we could keep trying again and again, until we got it right!

Who knows, maybe time travel will be a reality during our lifetimes. I wouldn't bet on it, but hey, you never know!

A Common Tale

Think the story I just shared with you is an anomaly? Well, it's not. One of my clients recently told me about her experience interviewing a job candidate who was a recent college grad. During the interview, the candidate asked: "How long until I get promoted, so I have no one telling me what to do?" My client was taken aback by this inquiry and had no idea how to respond!

While trying to keep a straight face, my client said she did her best to deflect this question. It was all she could do not to laugh, knowing that everyone — including the CEO — has someone telling them what to do! In retrospect, my client's strategy didn't pay off, as the candidate decided to accept a job elsewhere. Unfortunately, this was a difficult position to fill, and the candidate's skills were a match. The job remained vacant for several more months, while my client scrambled to find other qualified applicants.

In general, when it comes to promotions, I've found that employees these days are a lot less patient than they've been in the past. This may be due to a strong job market where workers aren't afraid to say what's on their minds. Or this could be the new norm.

This is exactly why you need to have a response ready for the occasion when someone approaches you and asks for a promotion. Your response could mean the difference between keeping or losing a valuable employee.

Here's how to handle requests like this, so you have no regrets when responding to the words, "Hey, where's my promotion?"

Scenario: "I've been working here for several months. Where's my promotion?"

During a weekly meeting with one of your entry-level employees, she decides it's time to discuss a possible promotion — even though she's only been with the company for a couple of months. This employee has been doing a terrific job, and she shows tremendous promise. How do you deny her request, *and* still keep her motivated?

Initial Impact: First words matter

Frame the Conversation

It can be challenging to begin a conversation that you didn't know you'd be having. Since you're reading this book now, you could be ahead of the game. Maybe you've managed to escape these conversations in your time as a manager...but trust me, they're coming! If you've already been caught off guard, perhaps to an unfortunate end, then you can understand the benefit of being prepared for this conversation before it happens.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- What **outcome** am I looking to achieve?
- **What do I want this person to do** as a result of our conversation?
- **How do I want this person to feel** when they leave the discussion?

Consider the current state of your relationship with the employee in question. If an employee has an overinflated opinion of herself and is more work than she's worth, then you'd take this conversation in a completely different direction than if you wanted this person to remain in your employ. Continue reading this book for advice on how to let a team member go.

Let's assume this employee is a keeper. The end goal here would be to have her leave the meeting with the feeling that she was heard. You'd also want her to walk away with an understanding of where she currently stands, and the specifics of what she needs to do in terms of personal and skill development to move up to the next rung in the organization.

Likely, it's going to take more than one meeting to accomplish all of this. Don't hesitate to say, "Let's start the discussion and if we're unable to finish, we'll pick this up again when we get together next week."

Keep in mind that an honest assessment, coupled with a clear path to a promotion, can be a game changer for an employee. Just imagine where you'd be today if someone had taken the time to do this for you earlier in your career.

These kinds of conversations, while difficult, will likely result in increased loyalty from those you'd like to keep the most. After all, it's the rare boss who carves out time in his schedule to help an employee in need of career guidance. Your employees will know you're invested in their success, and they'll act accordingly.

Pull the Reins Back and Seek Common Ground

Perhaps it's been a while since you were young and ambitious. Or maybe you can't even imagine being that bold at such a young age. One thing is certain: you've got a stallion on your hands. How you handle this situation will determine if she bolts out of your stable or remains and becomes the winner you believe she can be.

Start by **acknowledging** the employee for taking the initiative. Then ask, "What made you decide that the time is right for you to be promoted?" Give the person an opportunity to present her case.

Recognize her strengths and positive contributions. Take notes so you can refer to them and respond accordingly.

Note: Approach this conversation with the mindset that you have an **opportunity** to help shape the future of one of your team members. You'll find this process much more satisfying than if you view this as one more thing to add to your long to-do list.

Action Plan: Cut to the meat of the matter

In the scenario of discussing promotions, there are two main topics you'll need to cover to have a productive conversation.

1. Discuss the Job Requirements and Traits Needed to Succeed

End your first meeting with the employee in question by outlining the next steps in the conversation:

- Let the employee know you'll be sending her the job description, so she can familiarize herself with what's expected of someone in this position.
- Ask your direct report to make a list of the job skills needed for the position she is seeking. Next to each skill, have her rate herself on a scale of 1-10 (with 10 being high). Tell her you'll be doing the same.

If you think there's another job the employee is better suited for, or a position that is an interim step, be sure to send job descriptions for these roles as well. Include a note that says, "Let's discuss." This will signal to the employee that you are engaged with her request, but that there may be more development opportunities in between where she's currently at, and the new role she's been eyeing.

Come to the next meeting prepared to compare notes. Take the time needed to reach a consensus on which areas of growth the employee will be focusing on. Then, negotiate timelines to achieve certain objectives. Be forthcoming and transparent about how long it might take before the employee is what you would consider "promotable."

2. Create a Career Development Plan

Next, you'll want to create a documented career development plan that will include agreed upon goals and deadlines. The more specific you can be, the better. Get all of this down in writing.

Set regular intervals where you'll be checking in with one another to assess progress. Keep in mind that your employee should be the one taking control of her own development plan. Your role here is to provide support and encouragement, as well as advice — when asked. You'll also want to give the employee additional responsibility, so she can demonstrate that she's ready to take on more.

Be prepared to remove any obstacles that may prevent the employee from achieving success. For example, say there's a particular course that your employee needs to advance her skills. This course is only offered locally once a year, and that date has passed. However, this class is being presented in another city next month.

Perhaps you don't have the money in your budget to cover these unanticipated travel expenses. However, you suspect that you can secure the funds by going one level up for approval. You decide to ask your boss to shift some money around. She agrees. Congratulations! You've just paved the way for the employee to learn a particular skill that will help her advance her career more rapidly.

Selective Speaking: Script for Success

Feeling stuck? Try the following scripts on for size.

Before you do this, it's important to determine what type of employee you have on your hands. There are two common types of employees that my clients find most challenging to engage with when facing requests for promotion: the "Not Quite Ready for Prime Time" employee, and the "King of the Hill" employee. Below, you will find the scripts to address promotion requests from each of these specific employee types.

Make sure you run through the relevant script a few times in front of the bathroom mirror, until the words come out sounding like your own. Modify the language where necessary, to ensure that your delivery is genuine and feels natural.

The "Not Quite Ready for Prime Time" Employee

Here's a script you can use to get this sort of conversation moving in the right direction.

Employee: "I've been thinking about my future with the company. I feel I'm ready for a promotion. Wouldn't you agree?"

Manager: "I like your initiative, and I'm glad you felt comfortable enough to bring this up. What exactly did you have in mind?"

I see a lot of potential in you. Let's talk about areas for growth that we can work on together, to ensure you're ready when a promotion becomes available."

Employee: "Are you saying I'm not ready right now?"

Manager: "Yes. That's what I'm saying. I want to be sure you're successful in whatever role you assume here. I've identified several areas where you could use a boost. Let's start with one item, move that forward a mile, and then we'll tackle the others. Sound good?"

If the employee insists that she's ready now, then you may have to take what I call my "New York Approach." If you haven't figured it out yet, I'm from New York — where directness is one of our defining character traits, for better or worse!

Employee: “I can’t believe you don’t think I’m ready to manage. I graduated from college over a year ago, and I’ve been in this job for three months!”

Manager: “Look, what got you here won’t get you there. I’m all for putting people on the fast track, but only when I’m sure they’ll be able to stay on that track. There are a couple of areas you need to focus on to ensure you’ll be successful at the next level in this organization. With your permission, I’d like to share some feedback with you that I think you’ll find to be helpful.”

Be prepared for pushback, especially if this is the first time, you’re delivering feedback like this to the employee. Give the person time to absorb what you’re saying. If need be, schedule another time to meet to discuss how you can support your employee on her journey to becoming an effective leader. Just be sure she understands that she won’t be arriving at her next career destination anytime soon.

The “King of the Hill” Employee

Let’s run through a couple of common scenarios that you may encounter when dealing with an employee who believes he’s the King of the Hill.

The King of the Hill employees are those who are waiting in line for their successor to die or step down from their position. After all, this is how the story goes in fairy tales, with monarchs, and in some companies with strong unions.

Let’s assume for a moment that your operation doesn’t fall into any of these categories. However, there are people on your team who believe seniority, not skill or aptitude, should dictate who is granted a promotion and who is not.

One of these employees has caught wind that his supervisor is about to depart. He comes to you fully expecting to hear that he’s next in line for his boss’s job. You’re thinking, “No way can I promote this person. He doesn’t have the aptitude or personality required to lead a team. I’ll have a coup on my hands if I do this.”

The Need for Honesty and Transparency

Look, you’ve got to be completely honest here. If you simply tell this employee he’s not ready to be promoted, then how fair are you being to him? He’ll walk away from the conversation thinking it’s just a matter of time before he’s promoted to a management position. You, on the other hand, know that this is not true. He’s not entering the ranks of management as long as you’re his manager!

By not being completely transparent with this employee, you could also be tarnishing the organization’s employer brand, which is your company’s reputation as an employer. If this King of the Hill stays, and the next promotion doesn’t go to him, he might choose to battle this out in public.

Thanks to social media, there are no secrets anymore. When an employee feels they’ve been wronged, they don’t think twice about sharing their experience with others on Twitter, Glassdoor, Facebook, or

whatever platform they choose to use. A couple of less than flattering posts going viral can do great damage to a company's employer brand. In turn, this will make it that much harder for your company to attract and retain talent.

Let's circle back to the employee. It is quite possible that the King of the Hill hasn't reflected on what it takes to be a strong leader. If he had, this employee would have come to you earlier to discuss what areas he needs to develop to be considered a suitable candidate for this type of role. Nor is this employee particularly self-aware in terms of how his leadership traits stack up against his peers. In all likelihood, the King of the Hill is focused on a promotion so he can obtain a better title, a fatter paycheck, and maybe even a private office.

Here are several scripts you can adapt when faced with a similar situation.

Conversation Number One

Employee: "Mary told me that she gave you her notice earlier this week. You're probably thinking what I'm thinking. It's unfortunate that she's leaving, but at least you've got someone like me to replace her! After all, I've been in this department longer than anyone else, so I guess I'm next in line."

Manager: "Yes, it was certainly disappointing to hear that Mary has decided to leave. I'm confident that our loss will be someone else's gain."

I'm glad you came into my office to speak with me, as I was about to go find you. You're a solid employee, who gives it their all. You're great at keeping our customers happy. However, I'd be doing a disservice to you and to your co-workers if I were to give you Mary's role simply based on seniority. Besides, I don't think this is the right move for you. Tell me why you do."

Employee: "Well, I've been here longer than anyone else in our department. I make a decent wage, but I should be making more, which is why I want to get into management. You also know that our clients rely heavily on me to help them navigate through the challenges of our software updates."

Manager: "The fact that our clients rely on you to help them navigate through all of our updates tells me that you're too valuable for me to keep you for myself."

What if I could help you secure a spot on the product launch team? There, you'd be directly involved in ensuring that our updates work seamlessly for clients.

You'd have considerably more upside in that department than if you were to receive a promotion here. Would you like me to speak with the director of the product development team on your behalf?"

In a perfect world, the employee would say, "Absolutely!" However, more often than not, things don't go the way we hope they will. You are bound to encounter employees who will continue to insist the promotion should go to them. If you suspect this might happen, read on.

Let's say the employee tells you he's not interested in changing departments. He wants to be considered for the role you're discussing right now. Here's a suggestion on how to handle this scenario.

Conversation Number Two

Manager: "John, I have something to say that may be difficult for you to hear. There are certain qualities that we look for when hiring leaders. In particular, we look for people who are highly persuasive. These individuals have an uncanny ability to convince people to move in a particular direction.

We've worked together for some time now, and persuasion doesn't seem to be an area of strength for you. You shine best when given a task to do, which has served our team very well. However, you would need to show strength in additional areas for me to award you this job.

I've learned the hard way that not everyone is cut out for management. I'd be doing you a disservice by putting you into a situation where in all likelihood, you would not succeed. I'd like you to stay on the team. However, I would certainly understand if you made the decision to consider other options."

Note: Some of you may choose to go directly to conversation number two. This will depend on your communication style preference, and the details of the specific situation you're addressing.

Timing is Everything

Let's say you don't have time to address this request at this very moment. And of course, you don't want to signal to the employee that you've got more important matters to handle than the issue that's on his mind. Here's how to handle this, so you don't come across as flippant or dismissive.

Try:

- "I wish I could address this right now. However, this conversation is too important to rush through. Let's set aside time next week to chat about this."
- "Let me look into your request, as I need to research the company policy and if there's any flexibility regarding promotions. Let me get back to you on [whatever date you can commit to]."
- "Let me think about this, and we'll talk again in [a few days or in a couple of weeks]."

Be sure to jot a note on your calendar and follow up as promised, even if it's to let the employee know that you've got to postpone the conversation a bit longer.

Case studies from the trenches

You've had time to familiarize yourself with the scenario of discussing promotions, and with the skills and actions you'll need to focus on for this conversation to go well. You've read through the scripts, and maybe even had a chance to practice one of them out in the field!

Or maybe you're still a little nervous and wondering how this really works. Just in case (pun intended!) you learn best through real world examples, here are a couple of case studies from clients and colleagues who've dealt with this situation before. In case study #1, you'll see what a leader wishes he'd done differently if he'd had the tools in this book when the conversation arose. In case study #2, you'll see what a successful resolution to the dialogue can look like, if you employ the approach I've outlined.

Case Study 1 — Coulda, woulda, shoulda

Scenario:

"This exact thing happened to me about five years ago, and it totally blew up on me because I was not prepared for it at all. The person in my office that asked for the promotion threw me for a loop. She was not at all ready to take on the job she had asked for, and then she fought me tooth and nail on every reason I gave to try to explain why she wasn't ready."

Outcome:

"The employee ended up crying and calling her dad immediately after our "meeting" to discuss her progress with my company. If the same thing happened today, I would slow way down and talk in a more gentle and conversational manner than I did last time. In the moment, I was too direct; as a result, it became confrontational. I should have talked more slowly, and let it happen more naturally. If I could do this conversation over again, I would have focused more on the employee's areas for growth instead of why she wasn't ready yet. I would have laid out a plan for how she could eventually become ready, letting her know I'm on her side and want to see her succeed in her career development."

Benjamin K. Walker, CEO, Transcription Outsourcing, LLC

Case Study 2 — No time machine needed!

Scenario:

"I had a very motivated employee who felt she was ready to graduate from her first role to a more senior position. I knew she'd be fantastic in the more advanced role with time, but she needed to master a few more essential skills to be successful. That said, the employee was no longer interested in doing the job she had, so it was tricky to keep her engaged in mundane work while also delaying her promotion."

Outcome:

"I created a comprehensive training plan for the employee that included a timeline for her promotion. The training plan allowed the employee the time she needed to master key competencies, while working toward the promotion she wanted. Transparency and accountability was critical, as the employee knew she would need to reach certain metrics and milestones within the allotted time frame, or it would delay promotion further. This approach worked, and the employee is super successful in an even more senior role now!" - Jenna Richardson, Founding Partner of Career Cooperative

Following Up: Keeping the dialogue open

Just when you think your work here is done, there's always a bit more to say. Here are some possible outcomes you may need to talk through with your employee — along with the toolkit to do so.

Promotion Granted

You've told the employee the promotion they requested has been granted. You're done, right? Not so fast!

It's important to discuss how expectations may have changed, as a result of moving into this new role.

Try:

- "Now that you're in this new position, I expect that when you come to me with problems, you will also come prepared to present your recommendation."
- "In this new role, you'll be expected to present in front of the senior management team. Let's schedule time to discuss what skills you'll need to strengthen, so you'll be able to successfully influence this new group of stakeholders."

Promotion Postponed

You tried your best to get HR to agree to make an exception to their policy, in terms of time spent in the current role prior to being eligible for promotion. Alas, you did not succeed. You have to communicate this information to the employee in a way that doesn't have them believing that HR is the enemy.

Try:

- "I tried my best to work around the company policy that states employees must remain in their current role for at least six months before being eligible for a promotion. This policy was put into place to prevent managers from poaching talent from other departments. Neither you nor I can change the policy. However, here's what we can do..."

Then, go on to explain how you're willing to give the employee some additional responsibilities that will make their current job more stimulating. Emphasize that these new responsibilities will better prepare the employee for their future role.

- "I get that you're feeling a bit stagnant in this role. Let's talk about some ways we can enrich your job while you're still in this position and make your work more interesting."
- "I'm committed to giving you opportunities to shine. Let's work together to raise your company profile."

Promotion Denied

You took your employee's case to your boss, who didn't agree with your recommendation to promote this employee. You're this person's manager, which means the buck stops with you. Focus the discussion on what the employee can do to help to ensure her next promotion request is met with a yes.

Try:

- "These are areas you need to work on."
- "Let's discuss the goals you need to work toward in the next three months, to ensure that you are a top-choice candidate the next time a promotion becomes available."
- "I'd like you to consider working with a coach to help you..."

Note: There's nothing wrong with letting the employee know that you're not in complete alignment with your boss's assessment of the employee's management readiness. When doing so, choose your words carefully. The last thing you want to do is set up a contentious relationship between your employee and your boss.

Try:

"I had a lengthy conversation with our boss about your desire to move to the next level. He thinks you have potential but doesn't believe you're quite ready for promotion. He's specifically concerned with your problem-solving skills, as he has not had the opportunity to see you shine in this area yet.

I may be at fault here, as I probably haven't done the best job at keeping our boss informed when you've taken the lead on challenging projects. You and I are going to work together to change his perception. At the end of each week, send me an email highlighting an issue you've resolved on behalf of the company. I'll be sure to share some of this information with our boss when he and I meet monthly. Sound good?"

Helping employees attain better outcomes and achieve their career goals is part of the job when you're in management. Those who do this well are highly regarded and are considered great leaders.

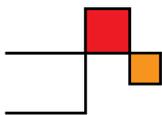
Welcome to the club!

Key Learning Points:

- At some point in your career, you'll be faced with having to tell someone they aren't going to get the promotion they think they deserve. Preparation is key. Get your ducks in a row, even if that means delaying the conversation by a day or a week. Your response could mean the difference between keeping or losing a valuable employee.

Roberta Matuson

THE TALENT MAXIMIZER®



- Mindset matters. You can choose to look at conversations like these in one of two ways. You can view this as an uncomfortable situation, or you can embrace this conversation and see it as an opportunity to provide direct feedback and growth opportunities for those you supervise.
- In conversations like these, it's usually best to get to the point. However, there may be situations where you'll need to slow things down a bit so the employee can catch up to you in terms of what you're thinking.
- Let employees know exactly where they stand and what they need to do to move forward.
- Honesty and transparency at all costs, even if that means you may lose a valuable employee.
- The conversation doesn't end after the first meeting. In fact, it's the beginning of your journey with your employee, to help them achieve their hopes and dreams. Schedule regular follow ups to ensure your employee remains on track.
- Your job as a manager is to help employees attain better outcomes and achieve their career goals.