

## CHAPTER 6

# CAREER DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR EMPLOYEES, MANAGERS, AND MENTORS

Hopefully by this point in the book you have a tentative career plan and mapped out a strategy to accomplish your goals. The next recommended step is to get feedback on your plan from your mentor and manager through engaging in career discussions.

What are career discussions? Career discussions are simply a series of conversations between the engineer and their manager, leader, career advisor, or mentor, about your career goals. There are multiple reasons for making it a series of conversations. First, it is a conversation to explore and discuss in an open and non-threatening fashion the engineer's career plan and goals. Second, it is an opportunity for the engineer and manager to review mutual expectations and set goals together. And third, it provides a forum for the engineer to check and validate the career goals they identified to be realistic, obtainable, and lead to future advancement. It is really the start of a journey between the manager and the engineer leading to benefits for both (Figure 6-1).

In this chapter, we first provide tips and guidance for the engineer to maximize the benefits from career discussions. This is followed by tips and guidance for the manager. The career discussion guidelines and recommended actions are provided to help both the engineer and manager be productive during the exchange. Questions are proposed that each should answer in order to stimulate forward thinking and goal setting. Preparation and homework are recommended to facilitate better career discussions.

The career discussion process is beneficial to both the engineer and the manager. For the engineer it provides meaning behind day-to-day activities and a long-range vision. It gives the engineer something to look forward to



**FIGURE 6-1** Meet with career advisors about your goals.

and aspire for. Career discussions often motivate and stimulate both the engineer and the manager to strive for better performance.

For the manager, career discussions are means of communicating the company standards, expectations, and organizational goals. It is an opportunity for the manager, in a non-threatening way, to provide input to the engineer career plan and make adjustments when needed. Engaging in career discussions is beneficial to the organization because it provides a valuable opportunity to maximize the engineer's skills and competencies while enhancing career satisfaction. Career satisfaction is a critical factor in employee retention. In addition, career discussions followed up with coaching may help attract, develop, and retain a highly skilled workforce. Career discussions have been shown to positively impact employee retention and are a "win-win" action for the organization.

I have found that as a manager, when I take the time to have career discussions with employees that it motivates them to perform at a higher level and reduces the tensions while helping eliminate misunderstandings.

## **OBJECTIVES OF CAREER DISCUSSIONS**

There are multiple key objectives of a career discussion. These include:

- Development and review of an effective career plan
- Defining short- and long-term goals
- Identifying and analyzing career choices by clarifying ideas, goals, and expectations
- Evaluating career alternatives and choices

- Review the engineer's skills to determine strong and weak areas
- Sharing resources to aid in career pursuits
- Jointly develop a realistic and meaningful learning plan
- Setting organization expectations and challenging the engineer

It is important that career discussions are open, two-way conversations with both the employee and the manager sharing and exchanging ideas. The engineer or leader can request the career discussion, which should be scheduled at a mutually convenient time and held privately without interruptions. It is equally important that both parties are committed to periodic follow-up after the initial discussions and not let the effort die out after one meeting.

## **CAREER DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR ENGINEERS**

The majority of the responsibility for making career discussions happen belongs to the engineer. Here are several items and recommended preparation actions for the engineer to consider when preparing for a career discussion:

- Have you completed a career plan?
- Have you taken advantage of the career development resources available in the company and Human Resources department? Does the company have an online career planning site or career planning tools?
- Do your career goals align with the overall company goals?
- Are your goals realistic?
- Have you shared your career goals with another business leader or mentor prior to sharing with your supervisor?
- Have you contacted and discussed career plans with someone in the company who holds a position you are interested in aspiring to reach some day?

The first step to preparing for the career discussion is to complete a career plan. If you have completed the career workbook you are in good shape. If not, this will be your first task to complete in preparation for the career discussions.

Next, stop by your supervisor's office and ask if they are open to participating in career discussion with you. If the answer is yes, then ask for a good time. I have found the best time for career discussions is later in the day and not early in the morning. Generally, most supervisors are too busy early in the day handling critical issues to suddenly stop and shift gears to do a career discussion. Their body may be in the room, but their mind is usually off solving that latest panic. The best times I have found are during lunch or later in the day when things have settled down.

► **Career Tip.** Don't wait for your supervisor to initiate a career discussion; take it upon yourself to make it happen.

If the supervisor refuses the request to participate in a career discussion, you might ask why? Maybe they have never done it before, or simply do not feel they have the time. If they have never conducted a career discussion before, you may have to engage them by sharing this section of the book with him or her. Share with the supervisor the recommended actions and ask them to reconsider.

If they say they are too busy and it's not a good time, push it out. However, do not let it drop. Ask your supervisor when in the future would be a good time and get a meeting on their calendar. Let them know you are open to pushing it out to a better time and would like to reserve that time. Don't give up until you get a date.

The day of the career discussion you may be very nervous. Make sure you have a plan on how the discussion should go. Make an agenda of items to discuss and stick to it. Don't get side tracked. Start the meeting out with small talk and some socializing. These are called ice breakers for meetings and good topics might be the weather, latest sporting events, or similar other light topics. After a few minutes of socializing, it is time to get to work. Here is a recommended list of items to aid your discussions.

1. Review career plan; short-range and long-range goals, actions to reach goals
2. Your strengths
3. Your weaknesses or improvement area
4. Other people you should contact for career discussions
5. Summarize agreed upon actions

Remember this career discussion is a meeting where you are responsible for conducting. Like any meeting there is a set of actions you can take to ensure it goes smoothly. Here are some additional suggestions for conducting successful career discussions:

- Plan for your meeting a week or two ahead of time to give you time to prepare
- Keep the meeting time short, 30–60 minutes
- Know your career discussion objectives and be ready
- Bring copies of documents to share and make notes on
- Speak openly
- Schedule a follow-up time, remember this is a journey with several meetings planned along the way
- Relax and start out the meeting by making small talk

- Follow up with a “Thank You” email
- Write up meeting notes and identify agreed upon actions with a closure date. Start out the next meeting by reviewing the notes from the previous meetings; this will stop you from re-hashing previously discussed items.

► **Career Tip.** Career planning and discussions are an ongoing process that takes commitment and effort. Your career goals will change with time since career opportunities available to you are constantly changing. It is up to you to take control and determine the path of your career.

## CAREER DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MANAGERS AND MENTORS

As an engineering manager it is one of your job functions to stimulate and conduct career discussions with your employees. Are your employees asking for career discussions? If so, are you making time for them? I hope you are! Making time for employee career discussions can really benefit your organization. If your employees are not asking for career discussion, it is in your best interest to stimulate the process.

Now before you shout at me the famous “I have no time!” Think for a minute, we are talking about only about 45 minutes on a periodic basis and the benefits are substantial. In addition, the employee does the majority of the work; you provide your honest opinions and helpful guidance. This is definitely something worth doing.

Career discussions follow along much like other work directions that you give. Let’s review some basic interaction guidelines to ensure a meaningful discussion and exchange between you and the employee.

- Open the discussion with small talk and make sure the employee is at ease prior to starting heavy career discussion. Remember the employee is feeling they are bearing their soul about what they consider are their very private goals.
- Open the meeting with a small discussion of the objective and what you both expect to accomplish.
- Make sure you ask to see their career plan. Do they have something written down and does it make sense? Are their long- and short-term goals identified?
- If they do not have a career plan then educate them on what a career plan is and help them by starting a plan. Refer to Chapter 2 for help with this.
- Get agreement on actions, who will do it, and by when.
- Close by expressing your support and encouragement for the employee’s development.

- Be honest and open, point out good as well as improvement areas.
- Identify specific actions, including resources available to the engineer.
- Are company guidelines available that identify skills and criteria for various engineering positions in the company?
- Any company web sites you can direct the employee to? If not how about an engineering society web site? IEEE has an excellent one. Go to [www.IEEE.org](http://www.IEEE.org) and search on “career” for further assistance.

To facilitate the discussion, you as a supervisor should use your communication skills and keep in mind that your task is to ensure you are meeting the expectations and personal needs of the employee. Your employees want to feel they are valued, listened to, understood, and involved. As a result of conducting career discussion and meeting the personal needs of employees you build trust and a relationship that makes employees more dedicated to you and your organization. Here are several key meeting skills you should be utilizing during the meeting and potentially some good responses you can ask to show you are engaged in the process.

1. Listen and respond with empathy
  - Career planning and discussions are not easy.
  - This is going to take work, but you can do it.
  - It will be well worth the effort!
2. Complement and enhance self-esteem
  - Your plan has some very good points.
  - This is a “good” or “excellent” effort.
3. Promote and encourage their involvement
  - I can see you succeeding with this plan.
  - How can we make this plan even better?
  - What other things might we try?
  - What can we both do to improve this meeting?

Active listening is a great skill to utilize during career discussions. Active listening shows you are hearing what the employee is communicating and improves mutual understanding. By using active listening techniques, you clarify your understanding of employee expectations and at the same time can create a results-oriented and realistic career development plan. You might consider the following tips for active listening:

- Avoid interruption and don’t jump to conclusions.
- Don’t tell them every little thing to do. Discuss options.
- Avoid judgment responses like: “That’s a bad approach,” “Will not work,” “Unrealistic ideas and goals.”

- Restate or paraphrase what the engineer just said to check for understanding.
- Use probing open-ended questions to explore interests and desires: "Any other career actions you could possibly take?," "Do you see any issues or roadblocks to your approach?"

Holding meaningful and regular career discussions are key ingredients to a successful career development process. As the engineers' manager you will have a better understanding of where to focus developmental employee activities by conducting career discussions. You will also have insight into the future activities and opportunities that your engineers are looking for.

One of the most satisfying accomplishments in my career was to hold career discussions with engineers, identify goals, and then see engineers accomplish these goals. I truly felt that I had made a significant difference in furthering their career.

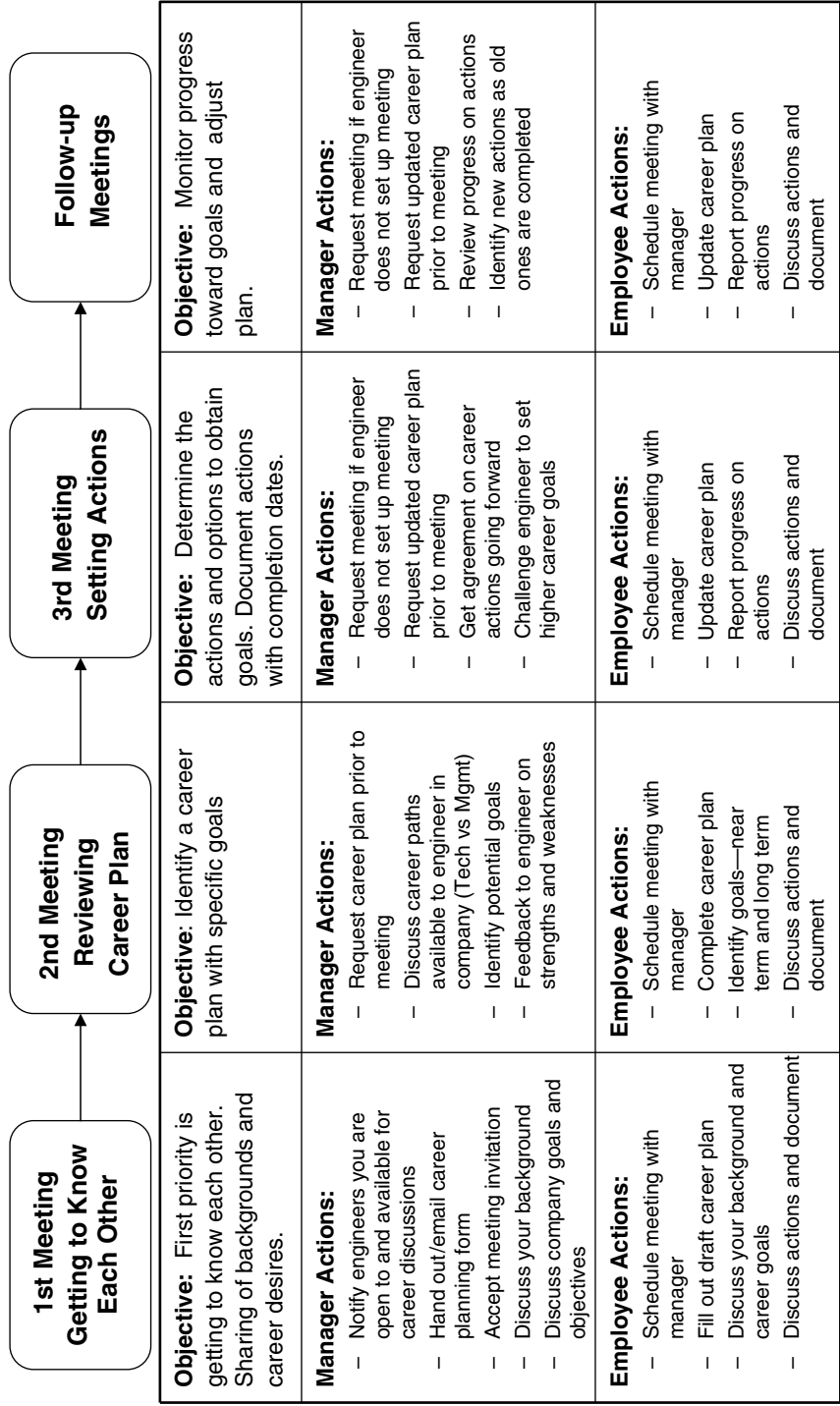
## **SIMPLE STEP-BY-STEP PLAN FOR CONDUCTING CAREER DISCUSSIONS**

In the previous sections of this chapter, we discussed guidelines for the engineer and manager to follow in preparing for the career discussions but not an actual step-by-step plan. In this section, we identify a simple step-by-step plan to guide the engineer and manager through the career discussion process.

The career discussion process is simply a series of conversations between the engineer and manager to help guide the engineer in a meaningful way to set career goals and establish a career development plan. This series of conversations can follow a simple process. This process is shown in Figure 6-2. A recommended list of actions for the manager and engineer is shown for each meeting.

In the first meeting the primary objective is simply to get to know one another. Oftentimes, a manager may work daily with an engineer and assign work but never really have the time to get to know the engineer's hopes, desires, and career plans. The first meeting is planned to be an ice breaker where both the engineer and manager share their backgrounds, work experience, and career aspirations. In preparation for this first meeting the manager may notify engineers they are open to, and available for career discussions. A good tool to facilitate the start of the process is to hand out or email career planning forms and solicit the engineers to request a career discussion meeting. Naturally, the manager should accept meeting invitation.

As part of the first meeting, the manager is encouraged to discuss their background as well as the company goals and objectives. This gives the engineer a better understanding of the manager's perspective.



**FIGURE 6-2** Recommended career discussion process.



As part of the first meeting, the engineer has the responsibility of doing most of the effort. This includes scheduling a time with the manager, filling out a draft career plan, and coming prepared to discuss their background and career goals. The engineer has the responsibility to document the agreed upon actions and set up the second meeting.

The objectives for the second meeting are to further refine the engineer's career plan by coming up with specific actions and completion dates for each action. The employee can simply declare "I'm returning to the university to get my Master's degree." Declaring a career goal in this manner is too nebulous. The manager should help the employee break down the goal into obtainable steps with a completion date for each. For instance, the steps leading to a Master's degree would be selection of a university program, application, acceptance, course planning, tuition reimbursement planning, and finally registering for the first class. The manager's responsibility in employee discussions is to help the employee discover the steps leading to the goal, guiding the employee through the steps, and helping them set realistic dates to achieve these tasks. If the manager does this, they are truly having productive career discussions.

Also at the second meeting, the manager should identify the career paths within the company available to the engineer and especially the choices of staying technical or moving into management. The manager might want to identify some specific goals the engineer needs to set and accomplish. This second meeting is also an excellent time for the manager to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the engineer. The manager should be recommending other people in the organization that the engineer should also have discussions with; preferably people in the organization who presently hold the position the engineer hopes to aspire to obtain one day.

The engineer should come prepared for the second meeting with a fairly complete draft of a career plan with goals identified and potential completion dates. These goals should address immediate and long-term desires. The engineer has the responsibility to document the agreed upon actions and set up the third meeting.

The objective for the third meeting is to break down the career goals into specific smaller actions and options leading to the ultimate goal. Then document these actions with completion dates. The manager should encourage the engineer to set goals that will test/challenge the engineer. Some goals may be easily obtainable while others may significantly challenge the engineer. The engineer should come to the third meeting with an updated career plan from the second meeting and be prepared to discuss progress on any actions. Naturally, all agreed upon actions at the third meeting should be recorded for future meeting.

By the fourth meeting the engineer and manager will probably have a well-established routine if they follow this process. The purpose of further meetings is to track progress on the goals identified in the career plan and create new goals as the older ones are accomplished.

Do career discussions go as smoothly as the process seems to indicate? They may not. Many things may interfere with this process, namely, work deadlines, unplanned setbacks, and simply daily work assignments. However, if the engineer and manager can stick to some type of routine and continue to hold meetings on a regular basis, both are going to benefit. It may take several meetings just to establish a plan versus the two meetings suggested in the process. It may take more meetings, but the important part is getting the engineer to develop their career plan, not the number of meetings it takes to do it.

Once the engineers have established some type of plan, they are going to be asking, “Is this a good career plan? Will it lead me to be successful? Simply put, is this a guaranteed formula for success?” The manager is very prudent if they stress during the career discussions that just having a plan does not guarantee you will be successful. However, with a career plan, the outcome is more likely to be successful.

Next, the manager might want to discuss options for going around roadblocks to career goals and help the engineer think about alternate methods for reaching goals. Exploring other options opens the engineer to the realization that there may be several means of obtaining the engineer’s goals. The manager can emphasize to the engineer not to stop at the first failure or setback; there is always another means to accomplish your goals.

► **Career Tip.** There are multiple ways around every career roadblock; you have to be open to alternative methods.

The final challenge faced by the manager and engineer is what happens when career plans do not result in advancement. Do they change plans completely, abandon the process, or even go so far as to throw everything out and start over? To these questions I respond with: use your engineering analytical skills and apply them to your career planning. Should the plan or process not work out as planned, identify disconnects, analyze the actions planned, results obtained, and finally determine why the desired objectives were not accomplished. The next section is dedicated to helping the engineer identify and overcome career disconnects and barriers.

A final note to the managers remember when you developed your career plans and how much they changed? Make sure you share this with your engineers so they do not become discouraged with the constant changing and updating they will be doing. Here is a saying I would like to share with managers and hopefully they will share it their engineers.

First you dreamed it  
Then you believed it  
Next you worked at it  
Lastly you achieved it

## SUMMARY

Career discussions are simply a series of conversations between the engineer and their manager, leader, career advisor, or mentor about your career goals. It is a conversation to explore and discuss in an open and non-threatening fashion the engineer's career plan and goals. Career discussions provide a forum for the engineer to check and validate career goals. It is really the start of a journey between the manager and engineer leading to benefits for both.

The key objectives of a career discussion include the development of a career plan, defining short- and long-term goals, identifying and analyzing career choices, reviewing the engineer's skills to determine strengths, weaknesses and set expectations on job performance. The majority of the responsibility for making career discussions happen belongs to the engineer. One of the engineering supervisor's job functions is to stimulate and conduct career discussions with employees. Career discussions do not happen in one meeting but with a series of three to four meetings and good career plans evolve and change over time.

Have you identified any career actions you want to take as a result of reading this chapter? If so, please make sure to capture these ideas before you forget by recording them in the notes section at the back of the book.

## ASSIGNMENTS AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

- 1 Name three objectives of career discussions.
- 2 When was the last time you had a career discussion with your supervisor?
- 3 What resources are available to you from the Human Resources department?
- 4 Are career discussions valuable to the manager? The company?
- 5 Describe the steps in the process of making career discussions.