

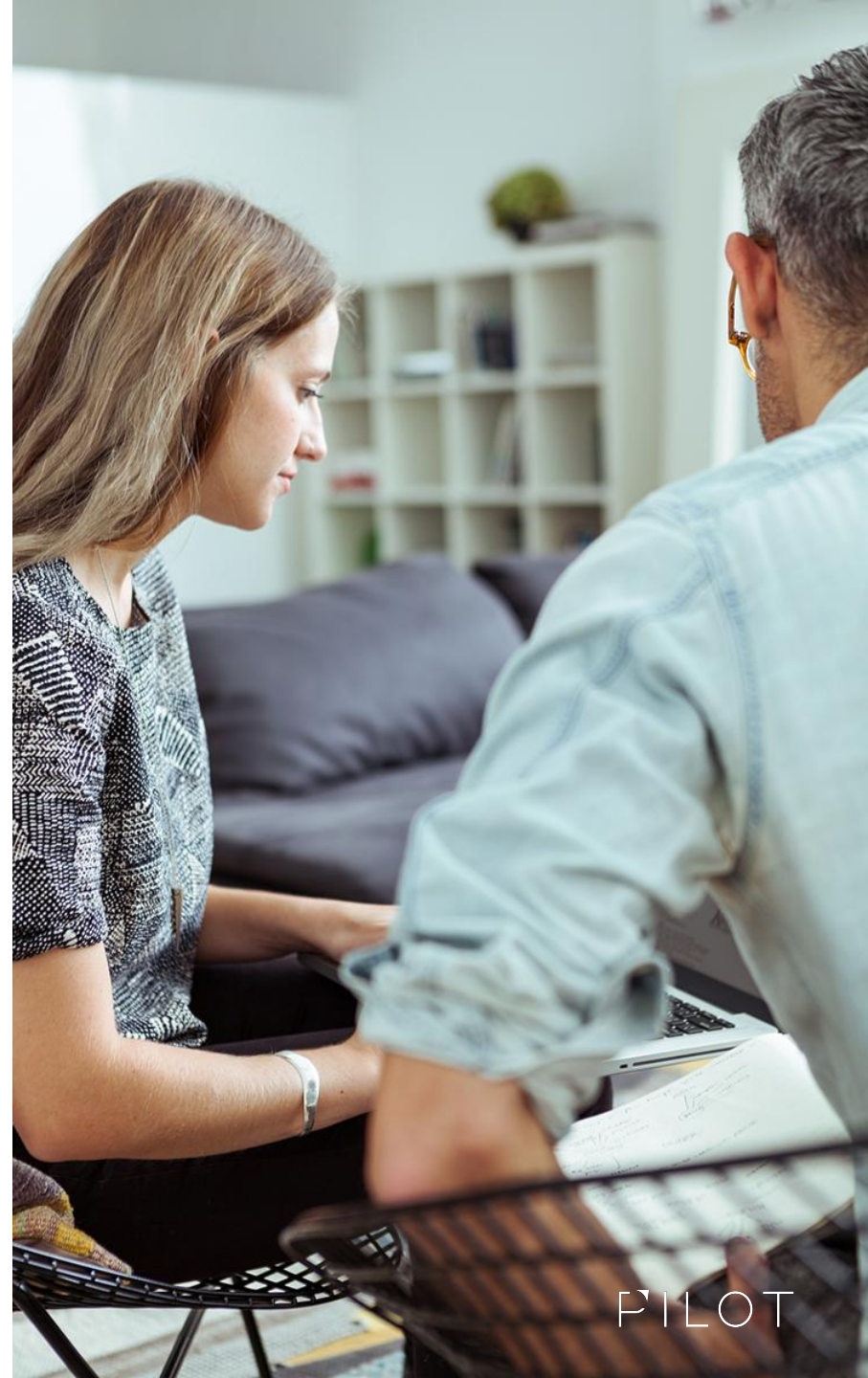
# ENABLING MANAGERS TO HOLD MORE EFFECTIVE PERFORMANCE CONVERSATIONS

BY BEN BROOKS AND AUDRA WILLIAMS

PILOT

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A photograph of a curved concrete staircase with a white handrail, set against a light-colored stone wall. The staircase is the central focus, curving from the bottom left towards the top right. The wall is made of large, light-colored stone blocks. The lighting is soft and even, highlighting the textures of the concrete and stone.

01

# FOREWORD

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## FOREWORD

Performance evaluations should be two-way conversations. We have to enable managers and employees alike to have meaningful developmental conversations that aren't awkward, don't require pages of written prep, and don't overwhelm the employee with too much feedback or information in one sitting.

Managers also need to get comfortable with doing these virtually.

Employees must see and seize performance evaluations as the opportunity to drive their own development and careers. Managers have a role in ensuring they have a defined part to play and next steps out of these conversations.

**-Ben Brooks, PILOT Founder and CEO**

A photograph of a modern, curved concrete staircase with a white handrail. The staircase is set against a light-colored, textured wall. The steps are made of a light-colored material, possibly stone or concrete, and the handrail is a simple, curved white bar. The overall aesthetic is clean and architectural.

02

## **What Performance Conversations Look Like Now**



## WHAT PERFORMANCE CONVERSATIONS LOOK LIKE NOW

Even the best students may have complicated feelings on report card day. For many of us, knowing we are about to be evaluated causes a spike in anxiety. On the one hand, we want to find out the results immediately because the uncertainty can be paralyzing. On the other, we may fear the worst and wish we could put it off forever.

Being an employee awaiting an annual performance review can evoke similar feelings. Now raises, promotions, and career paths may be at stake.

Being the evaluator in this situation is no easier. Managers have to deal with paperwork, process, and potentially painful conversations. The bureaucratic

aspect saps energy and focus away from what could be a meaningful opportunity for development. Because these structured reviews happen only once or twice a year, they are expected to cover everything from giving the employee feedback on their work, assigning ratings, and setting goals, to discussing promotions and salary bumps.

For too long, these reviews have been something that happened *to* employees rather than *with* employees. Their role in the process is to passively await feedback. This isn't a dynamic that helps anyone. In fact, it instills dependence and helplessness in our employees.



A photograph of a curved concrete staircase with a white handrail, set against a light-colored stone wall. The staircase is the central focus, curving from the bottom left towards the top right. The wall is made of large, light-colored stone blocks. The lighting is soft and even, creating a clean, modern aesthetic.

03

## How Conversations Are Going



## HOW CONVERSATIONS ARE GOING

In a recent report [More Harm Than Good: The Truth About Performance Reviews](#), Gallup research found that “only 14% of employees strongly agree their performance reviews inspire them to improve.” In fact, “traditional performance reviews and approaches to feedback are often so bad that they make performance *worse* about one-third of the time.”

But to be clear, employees want feedback. [Research by Joblist](#) found that a third of employees are left feeling insecure without feedback from their managers. And they want feedback to happen much more often than just once a year. Workers who heard from a manager less than three times a month tended

to have negative feelings towards their supervisor. But workers who received feedback from their boss three times per month or more tended to have very positive feelings about their relationship with their managers.

“Old style appraisal systems have created a very poor climate and tone for the annual review and performance management on the whole,” [explains HR For Better Workplaces Principal Frank Scott-Lennon](#). “Now, with the additional pressure of a global pandemic and remote working the challenge becomes huge.”



A photograph of a curved concrete staircase with a white handrail, set against a light-colored wall. The staircase is the central focus, curving from the bottom left towards the top right. The wall is made of large, light-colored rectangular panels. The lighting is soft and even, creating a clean, modern aesthetic.

04

## **The Remote Work Context**



## THE REMOTE WORK CONTEXT

That's right. As if this process weren't broken enough, issues are now being compounded by the rapid transition to remote work. If our traditional manager/employee feedback processes were already ineffective, doing them virtually has been a stress test that makes their inadequacy all the more obvious.

In hundreds of live coaching sessions over the last year, PILOT has seen a real resistance to having performance conversations virtually. This means many workplaces are actually having performance

conversations less often than the typical annual or biannual cadence. As a result, employees are feeling more adrift and disconnected from their managers at a time when they need their support most. Employees have never had to be as self-directed as remote work requires, which adds additional stress and fatigue. A [study by the Society for Human Resource Management](#) found that 45% of employees feel emotionally drained by their work as a result of the impact of COVID-19.



A photograph of a curved concrete staircase with a white handrail, set against a light-colored stone wall. The staircase is the central focus, curving away from the viewer. The wall is made of large, light-colored stone blocks. The lighting is soft and even, highlighting the textures of the concrete and stone.

05

## **The Opportunity Inside the Crisis**



## THE OPPORTUNITY INSIDE THE CRISIS

While COVID has presented a slew of headaches for HR, it can also present the opportunity to build something better. PILOT Founder and CEO Ben Brooks wants to make sure organizations use the opportunity to improve. Given how many aspects of managing and organizing work have changed over the last year, it is an opportune time to tackle the beast that is performance management.

“Unwillingness to change has historically been HR’s number one roadblock to improving the employee experience,” Brooks explains. “Now is the time to act! Leverage this window of opportunity to push through the changes we have wanted for a long time.”

Some HR leaders are doing exactly that.

Many companies have begun to schedule performance reviews quarterly instead of annually. Others are adopting new technologies that make it easier to give (or request) feedback, help employees assess themselves, and enable effective one-to-one supervision meetings. New collaboration tools have made measuring employee performance a more embedded part of the weekly workflow, providing more real-time assessment and feedback.

Brooks cautiously celebrates when he sees these sorts of changes.

“This is a good start,” he says. “But in order to adopt big changes in a sustainable way, we need to right-size these conversations to be less taxing on managers before, during, and after they occur. And we must ensure employees identify and follow up on their part to play.”



06

**Pilot Can Help  
— Use Your Ears**

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## PILOT CAN HELP — USE YOUR EARS

You don't need to figure this out on your own. A great foundation for overhauling these conversations is the EARS Framework that PILOT has developed. It's a simple, easy-to-remember, and effective framework for managers to turn to when having performance conversations.

The EARS framework helps managers have more frequent developmental conversations making these conversations easier and more effective. By leveraging EARS, managers can quickly anchor conversations that are focused, action oriented, and create deeper connection with employees. Here are the four key elements:

**(E)STABLISH** that you are having the conversation at the right time, with clear positive intentions.

**(A)SSESS** by giving specific employee feedback that focuses on a particular area of opportunity.

**(R)EVIEW** multiple potential ways to support the employee's growth and select desired next steps.

**(S)HAKE** hands on who is doing what, by when, and what the employee has taken away from the conversation.

This is a model that Brooks not only believes in, but relies on himself.

***“PILOT’s EARS model takes something that’s often tedious or difficult and instead offers managers an easy and effective way to have future-focused developmental conversations,” he says. “I use this with my own direct reports and the structure makes all the difference.”***





07

## **The Dos and Don'ts of Developmental Conversations**

# THE DOS AND DON'TS OF DEVELOPMENTAL CONVERSATIONS

## FOR HR

- ✗ **DON'T:** Cascade responsibility to the manager alone.
- ✓ **DO:** Bring together both parties with a shared responsibility to prepare, engage, and act.
- ✗ **DON'T:** Allow managers to simply give employees critical feedback and a list of performance goals.
- ✓ **DO:** Have managers offer concrete ways they will help employees address developmental feedback and gaps.
- ✗ **DON'T:** Just reward managers who squeeze out results from their team, without developing their employees.
- ✓ **DO:** Reward managers who improve organizational and individual capacity by investing in the growth of their teams.

## FOR MANAGERS

- ✗ **DON'T:** Let employees feel that you are only concerned with deliverables, delegated assignments, and due dates.
- ✓ **DO:** Have an employee's development as the top item of the agenda when you have a one-on-one, and regularly inquire about their growth.

- ✗ **DON'T:** Make performance reviews all about evaluating the employee based only on what they have done in the past.
- ✓ **DO:** Celebrate past accomplishments, but focus on the future. Work with your employee to co-create the next version of themselves.
- ✗ **DON'T:** Wait until something is a big issue before addressing it with your employee.
- ✓ **DO:** Focus your coaching on small tweaks, with the intent on constantly helping them to improve. We know that incremental consistent change is the most effective.
- ✗ **DON'T:** Only have performance review conversations once or twice a year.
- ✓ **DO:** Meet with your employee monthly or every other month, outside of regular supervision. Focus on one piece of feedback at a time.
- ✗ **DON'T:** Create a large to-do list of your own next steps to develop your employee, walking away with all of the actions.
- ✓ **DO:** Help your employee make their own to-do list during the meeting, define your way to support them, and hold them accountable to specific follow ups.





08

## **Transform Your Managers Into Net Talent Exporters**





## TRANSFORM YOUR MANAGERS INTO NET TALENT EXPORTERS

While this approach requires managers to break some habits and try out new ways of doing things, the payoff makes it worthwhile for the managers, the employees, and the organization at large. A better process means better employee satisfaction and retention, and more employee development lowers the need for supervision. Being free of the need to supervise gives managers more chances to do strategic planning and other career-enhancing work.

A manager's goal should be to become a Net Talent Exporter, someone whose team gets deployed, promoted, or otherwise utilized beyond the manager's own portfolio. Being a talent builder within an organization should be what helps a

manager stand out, and open up future opportunities for them. Reframing employee development as a direct benefit to managers is likely to help it rise in priority for individuals across your organization.

“Some managers view employee development as a generous act that benefits only the employee, when nothing could be farther from the truth,” explains Brooks. “More capable employees deliver measurable benefits to us as managers. We need to realize this, and reframe employee development as a way to support our own success and improve our lives.”



09

## **Why This Approach Is Better for Employees**



## WHY THIS APPROACH IS BETTER FOR EMPLOYEES


That said, employee development *is* a noble pursuit. We want people on our teams to have the chance to take control of their lives and careers and really thrive. That is not happening with the current approach to performance conversations.

Even worse, [recent research from McKinsey and Company](#) shows that existing models can also run counter to an organization's Diversity and Inclusion goals. For example, survey respondents who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or gender nonbinary (LGBTQ+) reported more stress over performance reviews than their straight and cisgender peers.

We can build a new system that is better for everyone. Just imagine replacing employee anxiety and dread with excitement and appreciation as they approach these conversations.

Remember: a “bad grade” is reflective of something the employee did in the past, which makes it feel impossible to fix. Focusing on what an employee can do in the future creates excitement rather than shame.





10  
**Conclusion**

## CLOSING THOUGHTS FROM BEN BROOKS

“Following the tips outlined in this ebook gives performance reviews an entirely different emotional experience. Our managers can focus conversation on the future rather than on the past. Our managers can provide employees with the chance to get actionable feedback rather than a list of impossible goals. Our managers can give employees the chance to focus on one or two things at once. And finally, our managers can provide a reliable opportunity for employees to remind their manager of their notable achievements.

HR leaders have told us that developing managers so they can develop employees is a key part of the value PILOT provides. The PILOT program equips participants to become the kind of managers who earn high engagement scores and who have high team retention. Plus, we instill a sense of responsibility in employees to do their part to meet their managers half way in advancing their professional growth.”

To find out more about how PILOT can help you upgrade your manager/employee developmental conversations, [book a demo](#) today.

***“We’ve had really excellent experiences providing PILOT to members of our workforce. They’ve helped us to thoughtfully, affordably, and consistently support our employees in focusing on their own growth, advocating for themselves, and creating positive change to advance their careers. It was quick to implement, didn’t require much management time, and sparked great conversations and real-world changes. The PILOT team are great partners and we have had the benefit of seeing how their product continues to evolve as they closely listen to customer feedback.”***

Naseema Shafi Chief Executive Officer,  
Whitman-Walker Health



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To learn more about PILOT

[BOOK A DEMO](#)