

# Conversation guide for Explaining ‘No Promotion’

Being turned down for an expected promotion can be a crushing experience, especially for a strong team member. While this won't be an easy conversation, the more you are ready to talk through the situation in a supportive way the more it will boost the team member's motivation and actions going forward.

## Advance preparation

- **Arrange to talk as soon as possible.** Organizational grapevines are fast and are a poor way for them to find out. Mornings are best for time and energy, though avoid creating anxiety if that means delay.
- **Understand the reason behind the decision.** Be ready to explain this in the discussion (see overleaf).
- **Consider potential development or motivational actions.** Have a few ideas for next steps to kick-start thinking once you sit down together.
- **Plan your opening words.** This will help avoid your own stress getting in the way.

## To guide the discussion

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### Deliver the message

- Open by welcoming them in your usual way but avoid too much chitchat when giving bad news.
- Deliver the message kindly and simply.
- Respond to what is likely to be their first question, ‘Why not?’. Help them understand the rationale.

## Say something like

*‘You were aiming for a promotion, but unfortunately you haven’t been successful this time. I know this will be extremely disappointing.’*

*‘The reason for this is...’*

2

### Explore their views

- If the news is unexpected, find out why. Be ready for possible shock, anger, tears.
- Their second question can often be, ‘Why didn’t you tell me sooner?’. Be prepared to take responsibility here if the news is a surprise.
- Help them to reframe. Once they are calm - possibly after a break - reinforce how they add value and build confidence in their future. Help strong performers see this as not successful yet.

(If responding strongly) *‘I’d appreciate talking through together what’s behind your reaction and how I can support you.’*

*‘I’m genuinely sorry this is a surprise for you.’*

*‘You’re a highly respected member of the team, and I want to make sure that the year ahead brings opportunities you value and give you a real sense of progress.’*

3

### Create an action plan

- Discuss the way ahead. This will depend on the reason they were not successful (see overleaf).
- If future promotion is unrealistic, explain why.
- Explore what else they might value and create a clear plan.
- If the news was a shock, agree how to provide benchmarks. The mantra is ‘no surprises’.

*‘If you’re keen to focus on promotion, let’s look at the realistic opportunities for this and what to focus on for you to be in the best possible place to be selected.’*

*‘What are other, broader opportunities that you would be interested in? Let’s look at how we can get you involved.’*

*‘How best should we make sure you have a clear picture of how you are doing going forward?’*

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### Provide support

- Implement the first step of the action plan as soon as possible. This sends a strong signal of support.
- Follow up regularly, more frequently at first.

*‘Let’s see how*

*‘When would be a good time to catch up next?’*

## Common reasons

**The person lacks the right competence.**

- Explore the promotion requirements in depth and set actions that will develop their skills, behaviors, and experience.
- Be specific and create a clear pathway.

**They're fully ready but someone else has been selected.**

- Increase their visibility e.g., by sponsoring their involvement in key initiatives, encouraging them to share information, and helping them to talk confidently about their achievements within cultural norms.
- Help them to understand the power map. Identify key players and see where there may be opportunities to connect. Encourage them to build relationships.
- Find a mentor who can help to broaden their understanding.
- Explore what will give them a sense of progress over the next year, e.g., get involved in a new area, take on a challenging project, etc.

**The business case changed.**

- Explore the implications of any strategic shifts in the organization.
- Assess where other promotion opportunities may arise and how the team member might prepare for these. As part of this, identify which skills are increasingly in demand. In larger organizations it may be useful to discuss this further with HR.
- Identify where lateral growth would add value both for the person and unit.
- Keep in mind that actions are not about closing gaps but helping good people to stay motivated. Ask what they would value.

**The next step up is blocked by the incumbent.**

- Lateral growth can be a very positive investment. Opportunities to become involved in strategic projects can boost experience, visibility, and careers.
- It may also be necessary to help the team member work towards a next step outside their current team or possibly the wider organization if promotion is blocked. It's better to have loyal alumni than resentful employees.

For more see *Now You're Talking! The managers complete handbook to leading great conversations at work – even the tough ones* by Anna Wildman.

20 conversations with step-by-step guidance.



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