



# EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE CONVERSATIONS

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Greetings,

Employees are our greatest asset and retention is of paramount importance. We hope to ensure that all University of Washington employees feel like valued members of our community and have unparalleled experiences that allow them to grow and develop.

As managers and administrators, we prepare for the employee experience long before a candidate says yes to an offer. From the moment we think about recruiting talented people, we're considering what is required to retain them.

We should view the interviewing and onboarding processes as a gift. If we listen and stay engaged, open, and agile, these processes give us the opportunity to get to know new employees, tailor their initial experiences, and position them for success within the organization. As the employee settles into their position, we need to continue listening, engaging with them, and responding dynamically.

This tool is designed to help you hold open conversations around the employee experience; it accomplishes that and so much more. The best practices, conversation guides, and sample scripts in this toolkit will help you deepen your relationship with each member on your team. When employees feel like they are heard, when they know they can bring their full and true self to work, when they believe that they belong, and when they feel encouraged to stay and grow, most of the time they will do just that.

As you know, the work of a manager or administrator is never quite finished! This toolkit is part of an integrated talent management framework; as you'll see on the diagram on the last page, UWHR is here to help you every step of the way.

I hope you will embrace this toolkit as well as the opportunity to grow your relationships with your employees. I would also encourage you to consider the self-paced [Employee Experience Accelerator](#) course to develop your competency in building relationships and enhancing the employee experience.

Sincerely,

**UJIMA DONALSON, NLPP, M.ED.**

Assistant Vice President  
Total Talent Management  
University of Washington

"THE SINGLE  
MOST IMPORTANT  
FACTOR IN  
BUILDING A  
SUCCESSFUL  
TEAM IS THE  
QUALITY OF THE  
MANAGER."

– JIM CLIFTON AND  
JIM HARTER, IT'S THE  
MANAGER

# EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE CONVERSATIONS

The University of Washington is committed to being a great place to work for **all** of its employees. We live by our values and believe that results come through relationships. The great work of the University of Washington occurs with and through our people. Managers have an essential role in creating a welcoming, inclusive and engaging work environment, and this toolkit aims to encourage managers to pause, step away from their regular routine, and shift their focus on elevating and deepening their understanding of their employees' unique experiences in order to foster engagement, inclusion and retention.



## THIS TOOL GUIDES MANAGERS THROUGH HOLDING CONVERSATIONS AROUND THE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE.

### WHY

These conversations create opportunities for open dialogue, facilitate relationship-building between managers and their employees, and advance important objectives:

- > Understand what motivates each of your employees.
- > Foster a welcoming, inclusive and equitable work environment.
- > Discover how to uniquely support your employees and their development.
- > Learn what you, as a manager, can do differently to more effectively manage each person.
- > Increase workplace engagement and improve retention.

### WHEN

Employee Experience conversations can occur at any time, formally or informally. They can:

- > Be positioned well at the 6-month mark between annual review cycles.
- > Happen as part of "rounding" or informal check-ins.

### HOW

See inside:

- > Preparing for your employee experience conversations (page 4)
- > Ensuring the right approach (page 4)
- > Creating a solid start and finish (page 5)
- > Sample questions (page 6)
- > Navigating difficult and unexpected conversations (page 10)



# Preparing for your employee experience conversation

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- **CONDUCT THE CONVERSATIONS INDIVIDUALLY.** Employees must feel they are the focal point. This practice enables managers to develop individualized strategies to support employee engagement.
- **START THE CONVERSATION EARLY.** Making employee experience conversations a routine part of your organizational culture will show that you are sincerely interested in creating an inclusive and positive workplace and will likely increase job satisfaction for your employees. Don't wait until there's a noticeable morale problem to launch your discussions.
- **BE INTENTIONAL AND PREPARED.** Select questions for each individual in advance, targeting 1–3 questions in each category and potential follow-up questions. You may not cover all of the questions you selected; focus on the quality of the conversation, rather than the quantity of questions you discuss.
- **PLAN AND ACCOMMODATE FOR INDIVIDUAL NEEDS.** Plan and accommodate for individual communication needs, e.g., translation services or visual and/or speech accommodations. This may include utilizing adaptive technologies.
- **PREPARING TO MEET VIRTUALLY.** Ask your employee if they would prefer to meet over video conference or over the phone. Select a mutually agreeable time and date where you can both be present and focused on the conversation. This is especially important for individuals working remotely who may be balancing work with other caregiving responsibilities.
- **SELECT THE RIGHT MEETING LOCATION.** If meeting in person, plan to hold the conversations in a neutral space. Managers may consider holding the discussion offsite to signify that this is an open conversation. A neutral space can also reduce any potential tension or hesitation an employee may feel.

## Slow down and listen to ensure the right approach

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- **LISTEN TO YOUR EMPLOYEES.** Don't guide the conversation into what you want to hear or do. Instead, pay attention to what gets the employee excited and engaged. Take notes and stay focused on the answers you receive.
- **PRACTICE ACTIVE LISTENING** by being present, minimizing any potential distractions (turn off technology notifications, etc.). Employ a sense of curiosity and inquiry to understand more about the responses that are not clear or may have more behind them. Check for understanding or paraphrase what you are hearing your employee share with you. Manage yourself thoughtfully by letting the person speak without interruptions, checking any defensiveness you may have, and employing a sense of curiosity about what they are communicating with you.
- **BE SOLUTION-FOCUSED.** Try to be creative in finding solutions that could be a win/win for the employee, you and the organization. At the same time, it is also important to be honest. If there are areas where you as a manager can't make the change possible, be clear with the employee up front.
- **BE AWARE OF YOUR BIASES.** We all have unconscious biases that affect our understanding, actions and decisions in an unconscious manner. Bias can be directed towards individuals based on race, ethnicity, age, gender, gender identity, physical ability and many other characteristics. Objectively observe your internal reactions so that you can address your biases and treat your employees fairly and equitably.
- **BE MINDFUL OF SOCIAL LOCATION.** Many employees fall into protected classes (such classes include age, race, religion, health and abilities, etc.). Managers should not pointedly ask questions pertaining to any of these protected classes. If the employee discloses information related to being in a protected class, managers are advised to acknowledge what the employee has shared and to let them know they can disclose what they are comfortable with.
- **FOLLOW UP.** If your conversation includes follow-up items (e.g., request for training, developmental opportunities, action items, etc.) budget time to follow up. Before the discussion concludes, agree to a time when action will be taken — on either the supervisor's part or the employee's.
- **SEEK COACHING SUPPORT, WHEN NEEDED.** If you feel unskilled or uncomfortable in holding an employee experience conversation, seek support from your [Human Resources Consultant](#) and/or the professional coaches and facilitators with [Professional & Organizational Development](#) ([pod@uw.edu](mailto:pod@uw.edu) or 206.543.1957).

# Creating a solid start and finish

## OPENING THE CONVERSATION: SHARE THE “WHY”

Many employees may not be familiar with the concept of employee experience conversations — also known as “stay” interviews — so it’s best to start off by explaining why you are conducting the conversation and what type of information you’ll be discussing. A sample opening may sound like:

- > For a more formal conversation, e.g., six months after annual review:

*“I am grateful that we are taking the time today to focus on you and what you value about your current role and our workplace. I am holding these conversations with each employee to understand what excites and interests them at work and to discuss your developmental goals. Let me begin by letting you know how much I appreciate your contributions to our team. I especially appreciate..... [provide recognition for a task or initiative well done]. I have a few questions to ask you, and I really want to hear your thoughts and input.”*

- > For a less formal conversation, e.g., as part of a regular one-on-one or a quick “rounding” check-in:

*“I appreciate your contributions to our team, especially how you..... [provide recognition for a task or initiative well done]. I would be curious to learn what you are most interested or excited about at work recently.”*

## CLOSING THE CONVERSATION: BE INTENTIONAL & POSITIVE

Conclude the meeting on a positive note by paraphrasing or restating the overall conversation and your gratitude for their time and commitment. Suggestions for how to close the conversation follow:

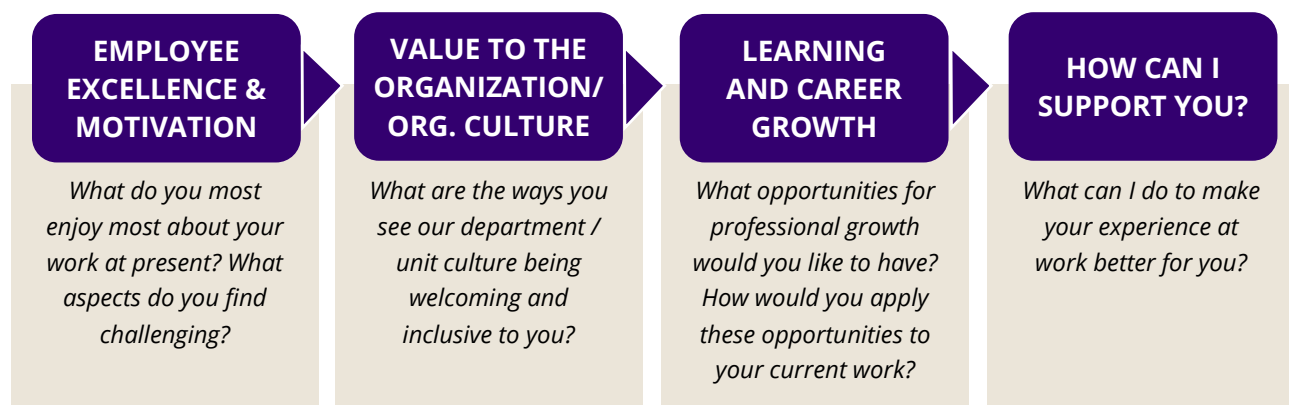
*“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. I have found our conversation to be valuable and insightful. I heard your interests/needs [summarizing a few key points] and I will work to support you on your professional development journey in the ways that I am able [suggesting what you can do].”*

*“You are a valued member of our team and I appreciate the insights you shared with me. I am here to support you with these [specific] resources. Let’s plan to follow-up on some of these issues in a [month/quarter].”*

# Sample employee experience questions

These questions are a guide for managers to use as part of their continuous performance management with their direct reports. It is recommended that managers be selective in choosing the questions they ask, as not all are appropriate for every employee and not ALL should be asked in one conversation. Managers are encouraged to track notes from the conversation so they can appropriately follow up at a later point.

**SAMPLE CONVERSATION FLOW** Ask 1-2 questions from some or all categories.



## EMPLOYEE EXCELLENCE AND MOTIVATION

Commitment to UW values: Integrity, Excellence and Innovation

1. *As you prepare for your work day, what do you most look forward to? What makes a great day for you?*
2. *What motivates you in your current role? What would you like more of?*
3. *What do you least enjoy? What parts of your position challenge you more than others?*
4. *Describe any frustration factors that “keep you up at night” or that cause you concerns about your work, team or organization.*
5. *Describe other factors that support your satisfaction with your current role (e.g., mission, customers, rewards/benefits, coworkers, management etc.).*
6. *What accomplishment(s) are you most proud of?*

## VALUE TO THE ORGANIZATION

### Commitment to UW values: Diversity, Collaboration, and Respect

- 1. In what ways does your work support the University of Washington in its mission, vision and values?*
- 2. In what ways does your work make a difference in our organization and/or within the UW community?*
- 3. What is working well in our relationship (as your manager)?*
- 4. Can you highlight any recent recognition and acknowledgment that you have received that increased your commitment to our team (or organization)? In what ways do you like to be recognized?*

## ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

### Commitment to UW values: Diversity, Collaboration, and Respect

- 1. What are the ways you see our department/unit culture being welcoming and inclusive to you? And to others?*
- 2. Having a diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace is a key value for our department as well as for the UW. From your perspective, what can we do to be more inclusive?*
- 3. Have you had any experiences where you have felt excluded or marginalized in our workplace? If so, in what ways can I support you? And/or what can I do to help prevent or change this from occurring again?*
- 4. How do you see our organization (or team) demonstrating support for a diverse workforce?*
- 5. What does our team do well to foster a sense of teamwork and collaboration?*
- 6. From your perspective, what could we do to be more collaborative as a department or unit?*
- 7. Do you feel connected to, and have positive working relationships with, your colleagues? Provide a recent example of something positive or collaborative that occurred between you and a colleague.*
- 8. Having positive working relationships is important to our team and organization. These include relationships that can extend from the workplace to friendships. Are there people on our team you feel comfortable having a non-work related conversation with?*



## LEARNING/CAREER GROWTH

Commitment to UW values: Excellence, Integrity and Collaboration

- 1. What opportunities for professional growth would you like to have? How would you apply these opportunities to your current work?*
- 2. How do you learn best? By doing (i.e., on-the-job)? By observing (i.e., job shadowing)? By attending training?*
- 3. Do you believe your talents, skills and interests are “fully utilized” in your current role? What factors contribute to this feeling of engagement?*
- 4. What are ways we can more fully engage your talents, skills and interests?*
- 5. What career opportunities would you like to pursue within the University of Washington?*
- 6. Do you have a desire to move into a leadership role, and if so, what are your hopes, expectations, and goals?*
- 7. What actions can we take to further challenge you and support you on your growth and development journey?*

## OPPORTUNITIES TO INCREASE ENGAGEMENT

Commitment to UW values: Excellence, Integrity and Collaboration

- 1. What did you love most in your previous positions that you are not doing now?*
- 2. Over the past year, have you had days when your frustration level was high enough that you considered leaving? What kind of “triggers” or negative factors led to that frustration? (Are you still experiencing these triggers?)*
  - Can you help me understand what eventually happened to lower that frustration level?*
  - What's the single most meaningful action I could take (or we could take together) to address this issue?*

## HOW CAN I SUPPORT YOU?

Commitment to UW values: Excellence, Integrity and Collaboration

- 1. What can I do to make your experience at work better for you?*
  - *Are there things I could do more of?*
  - *If you “managed yourself,” what would you do differently that I, as your current supervisor, don’t currently do?*
- 2. Autonomy, or the ability to manage your own work and tasks as you see fit, is a key aspect of being motivated and engaged at work. In what ways do you experience autonomy in your position? In what ways could this be increased?*
- 3. What kinds of flexibility would be helpful to you in balancing/integrating your work and home life?*
  - *Are you experiencing any challenges or barriers in regards to your work/life balance? If so, what would be important for me to be aware of? In what ways can I support you in this situation?*
- 4. If you had a magic wand, what is one thing you would change about your work or our team/organization?*
- 5. Do you have the necessary tools, equipment, and/or resources you need to effectively do your job? If not, what would you like or do you need?*
- 6. Do you have any safety concerns? If so, would you be willing to share them with me so I can address them proactively?*

# Navigating difficult or unexpected conversations

When holding employee experience conversations, managers may find themselves in a position where they are surprised by what an employee shares. Difficult or unexpected conversations may seem challenging as managers can feel unprepared. Remember the key to managing a difficult conversation is to respond with empathy, trying to view the situation from the perspective of the other person. The following are potential scenarios and “scripts” that managers could use should these situations occur.

## SLOW DOWN AND START WITH THE ABCS

– Adapted from *“The Empathy Effect”* by Helen Riess, MD

Managers can respond by practicing the **ABC’s** — **acknowledging** the person and issue, **breathing** to remain calm and focused on the individual, and employing **curiosity** to learn more about the other person’s point of view.

**A – ACKNOWLEDGE** that this is a difficult conversation and that it may require more time and thought. Acknowledge what the person has shared or disclosed to you and the importance of what they are saying. Acknowledge that you may need more time to think to prepare an appropriate response (this could be for a few moments, to collect your thoughts; or it could be a few days, as you gather more information).

**B – BREATHING** is a central practice to *choosing* your response in difficult conversations. By taking one (intentional) breath, managers can maintain (or regain) a sense of calm and focus. Breathing allows the brain to slow down the fight-flight-freeze response that can occur in difficult conversations, letting managers maintain a sense of control in their response and helping to put the other person in a position of ease.

**C – CURIOSITY** is essential for managers to employ during difficult conversations. Ask questions such as *“Help me to understand...”* or *“I’d like to know more about your perspective, can you share more about...”* Being curious demonstrates caring, trust and empathy as you work to learn more about the person and their views. Hand-in-hand with curiosity is a need for active listening. Be sure to truly listen to what the other person is saying. Try paraphrasing what you heard them share to check for understanding.

## UW RESOURCES

- > HUMAN RESOURCES
  - EMPLOYEE RELATIONS
  - DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION
- > CARELINK
- > SAFECAMPUS
- > THE WHOLE U
- > OFFICE OF THE OMBUD

“ENGAGEMENT IS NOT SOMETHING YOU CAN DO TO PEOPLE. IT’S A CONTEXT THAT YOU CREATE IN WHICH PEOPLE ARE INSPIRED TO BRING THEIR BEST AND FULL SELVES TO WORK.”

– SUSAN DAVID, HBR GUIDE TO MOTIVATING PEOPLE

## DIFFICULT CONVERSATION EXAMPLES

### **AN EMPLOYEE SHARES WITH YOU THAT THEY ARE FEELING UNMOTIVATED AT WORK DUE TO PERSONAL ISSUES, OR SUGGESTS THEY MAY BE EXPERIENCING ANXIETY OR DEPRESSION.**

*“Thank you for letting me know this is something you are currently experiencing. I am here to support you. I’d like to provide you with a reference to the services available to employees at the UW (Carelink, SafeCampus, etc.; see UW Resources on page 10). I would like to know what I can do to assist you during this time (e.g., potentially modify work schedules, provide additional resources, etc.). Let’s set a check-in meeting (in a few days or a week) so we can follow-up on this together.”*

### **AN EMPLOYEE SHARES THAT THEY ARE UNMOTIVATED AT WORK BECAUSE THEY ARE NOT ENJOYING THEIR JOB NOR FINDING THEIR WORK FULFILLING.**

*“I appreciate your bringing this to my attention. I’d like to understand more about what may have changed or shifted to contribute to this current experience you are having. What are the aspects of your role that you DO enjoy and find meaningful? What do you find most valuable at work? What suggestions do you have so you could do more of this type of work?”*

#### **> Opportunities to enhance engagement and motivation**

Employees who express a change or lack of motivation may be interested in new professional development or growth opportunities. For both Professional and Classified staff, training and continued education can be viable options to reengage the employee; establishing job shadowing and mentoring relationships can also provide a perspective on new opportunities for career pathing.

#### **> Note for managers of Classified Staff**

Classified staff operate under agreements negotiated between the UW and one of the 12 unions represented on campus. Managers (who may be Professional Staff) can have open-ended discussions with their Classified staff members (per sample above). Most Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs) support employee training and development. Managers are advised to be familiar with the Collective Bargaining Agreement for the Union(s) that their staff are a part of.

**AN EMPLOYEE INDICATES THAT THEY ARE READY TO MOVE ON, OR READY FOR NEW CHALLENGES. THE POSITION THEY ARE IN DOES NOT SEEM TO ALLOW FOR FURTHER GROWTH.**

*"It is helpful for me to know that you are considering other opportunities or are looking for ways to grow in your current role. I'd like to explore that topic (now, or at a future meeting) and discuss the kinds of opportunities you are looking for and brainstorm ways we could continue developing your skills, talents and interests."*

**AN EMPLOYEE SHARES THAT THEY ARE HAVING A DIFFICULT TIME MANAGING THEIR WORK.**

*"Thank you for sharing this challenge you are experiencing in managing your workload. Do you perceive this to be a temporary situation or a long-term situation? What ideas or solutions to this situation have you already considered? What are ways that I can best support you or work with you to determine a viable solution(s)?"*

## PRACTICE THE ABC'S OF EMPATHY

Managers can use the ABCs of empathy in all of their employee experience conversations. Practicing empathy is especially important in the following two scenarios.

**AN EMPLOYEE DISCLOSES THAT THEY HAVE FELT EXCLUDED OR MARGINALIZED IN THE WORKPLACE.** In this situation, practice the ABCs of empathy:

- **Acknowledge:** "Thank you for letting me know ....."
- **Pause and check for your own defensiveness:** Acknowledge and validate your employee's experience. This is their truth — even if your perspective may be different — it is important to let them know you have heard them.
- **Curiosity:** "Please help me understand how this is impacting you at work...." Managers should paraphrase and check for understanding to ensure they have clearly heard the message the employee is trying to convey. This may require asking additional follow-up questions.
- **Curiosity:** Managers should not assume that the employee wants/needs their assistance. Inquire: "How would you like to address this issue?"
- **Acknowledge:** "Know that I am here to support you. Please let me know what would be most helpful to you...."
- **Follow-up:** "Let's discuss when would be the best time to follow-up on this issues. Here's what I'll do before our next meeting..... I ask that you do.....before then." "I would be glad to share with you some resources that may be helpful to you." (See UW Resources on page 10).



## **AN EMPLOYEE DISCLOSES THAT THEY WOULD LIKE OR NEED A WORKPLACE ACCOMMODATION (E.G., FOR A DISABILITY), THAT THEY FEEL UNSAFE, OR THAT THEY MAY BE EXPERIENCING DISCRIMINATION OR HARASSMENT.**

These can be particularly challenging conversations requiring thoughtfulness and empathy on behalf of the managers. Although each conversation will be unique based on the needs and concerns of the individual, a good general “script” to demonstrate empathy is:

- **Acknowledge:** “Thank you for letting me know ....”
- **Curiosity:** “Please help me understand how this is impacting you at work....” Managers should paraphrase and check for understanding to ensure they have clearly heard the message the employee is trying to convey. This may require asking additional follow-up questions.
- **Acknowledge:** “Know that I am here to support you. Please let me know what would be most helpful to you....”
- **Follow-up:** “Let’s discuss when would be the best time to follow-up on this issues. Here’s what I’ll do before our next meeting..... I ask that you do.....before then.”
- **Closure:** “Thank you again for sharing this issue/your perspective with me. You are a valued member of our team and I want to be sure you have a positive work experience/environment.”

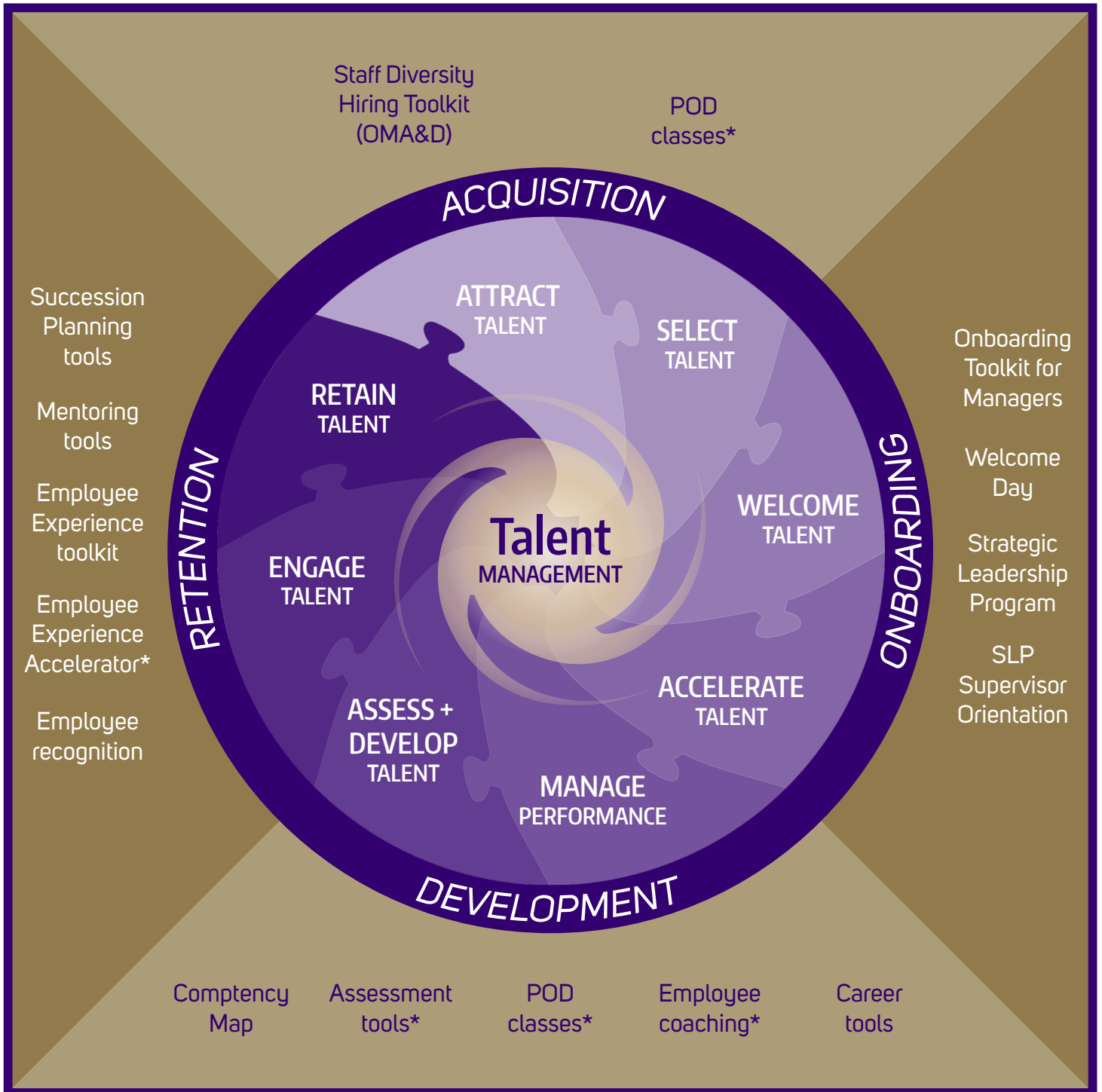
## **PRO TIPS FOR MANAGERS**

You’ve got this! Pause and remember these tips for success:

- Set an open and warm tone.
- Minimize potential distractions for you and your employee.
- Slow down and listen to the employee's perspective; check to be sure you clearly understood what they have shared with you.
- Trust that the employee is a creative professional with viable solutions.
- Offer suggestions when appropriate; build on the employee's ideas when possible.
- Identify mutually agreed upon actions or solutions.
- Schedule follow-up meeting(s) to ensure accountability.

# INTEGRATED TALENT MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

The wheel below shows the framework that Total Talent Management uses as a strategic guide. The resources surrounding the wheel are provided by UW Human Resources unless otherwise noted and include both free and fee-based offerings from Professional & Organizational Development.



\* Fee-based offering