

# APPRENTICESHIP WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

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## Learning Conversations

### Introduction

This resource focuses attention on a planned and systematic approach to professional dialogue that supports the apprentice to reflect on their practice. It is a guide to the conditions needed to support them and to create a framework for apprentices to learn, develop, reflect and review.

### Purpose

This resource is designed to complement the content of the AWD course 'Integration of on-the-job and off-the-job learning/training', 'Planning the integration of on and off-the-job training', 'Improving curriculum design for apprentice success', 'Planning Effective Curriculum Design' and 'Planning and maintaining high quality and effective teaching and training'. It can, however, also be used as a stand-alone resource if you haven't yet attended the courses.

### How to use

As learning conversations use empathic, active, listening this resource provides practical examples to help inform teaching and the tri-partite meetings.

### Definition

A learning conversation is a discussion that helps the learner to learn, whether that's from a work episode or from a designed learning experience. It isn't just a discussion or conversation about learning, nor is it teaching or instruction. Reflective conversations, incident reviews and action learning dialogues are all **learning conversations**.

Learning conversations are typically held between one or two learners and a tutor or mentor, but there are other possibilities such as three-way conversations (learner, tutor and mentor or work supervisor) and group discussions, for instance among a group of learners or between learners and co-workers.

Learning conversations can be face-to-face, live online, or sometimes asynchronous (e.g. through an online discussion group).

Good starting-points for learning conversations include specific incidents and episodes, learning logs, and reviews, appraisals and assessments. The aims can be any or all of the following:

1. Focussing on specific learning points (knowledge, techniques etc.) relating to the episode
2. Drawing out principles that are more general or connect episodes – for instance themes such as working with colleagues, preparing for work tasks, professionalism, information literacy etc.
3. Encouraging the learner to become more effective at learning, for instance looking at planning, reflection, evaluation, questioning assumptions etc.
4. Building confidence and self-efficacy – helping the learner to see what they have done, and can do, that is effective (and if necessary, helping them to identify overconfidence).

Learning conversations are not about teaching, judging or even coaching, and while the tutor or mentor can guide the direction of the conversation and ask probing questions, the learner should come away ‘owning’ the learning points.

The following are some extracts from learning conversations.

#### **Tutor/learner conversation: Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship**

In this conversation two police degree apprentices (A1 & A2) are reviewing an episode with a university tutor (T) about their experience of applying some new regulations/laws.

T. You mentioned that you had some fines overturned in court, can you talk about that a little?

A1. Yes, they were fixed penalty notices...

A2. It was quite embarrassing, they were challenged... all of them were thrown out.

T. Why was that?

A1. The court said they weren't valid.

A2. We had interpreted the law wrongly.

T. What did you think, do you agree?

A2. Looking back, yes, we got it wrong, but that was what we were told to do. One or two should have been upheld in my view, but the court threw them all out. It wasn't just us. I wasn't there, but apparently, we got a sort of reprimand, 'over-zealous'.

T. How did that make you feel?

A2. Not good, it's like we were trying to do our job and got knocked back. Let down a bit.

A1. It had just come in. M... (the inspector) briefed everyone and explained how it worked... how we had to apply it.

T. He got it wrong?

A1. Yes, it all came in quickly... M... was doing what HQ had said, but some more guidance, national guidance, came out a month, six weeks later that was different.

A2. But we didn't have that at the time. You don't really question the boss when he says that's how we need to do it.

T. Did you read the legal document, the actual statute?

A2. No, it's about 200 pages. It's also quite hard to understand, there are lots of grey areas. It's in lawyer-speak.

T. What could you have done differently?

A1. We could have discussed it more with C... (supervisor), at the time I thought it wasn't quite right.

A2. Yes, and got someone to explain the law a bit more. The culture isn't to question so much, particularly if you're fairly new.

T. How does that relate to the idea of professionalism?

A2. Difficult, it's... command and control, hierarchy.

A1. I suppose we could have approached it a bit differently, about wanting to learn more, not questioning the boss. Used our status as apprentices.

A2. The trouble is everyone's busy. There's not much time to pull someone aside.

T. Well, it didn't look good for anyone. Have you talked to C... about it?

A1. Only quickly, not about any of the details. He was a bit... resigned I suppose, but he did say we, the whole station, should have looked into it a bit more before we started to hand out the tickets.

T. What is the overall learning-point for you from this episode?

A1. I think, don't just take the boss's word for everything, check the facts. Make more of an effort to understand what the law's actually saying, the legal language.

A2. I think this was a bit of a one-off, but I agree. It's about the professionalism thing. We're coming in when it's new, what did F... (lecturer) call it, a paradigm shift, culture shift? We can't do it all at once, but we can question a bit more.

### **Tutor discussion on the learning log: Ground Maintenance Apprenticeship**

A college tutor (T) is having a one-to-one discussion with a grounds maintenance apprentice (A), based on his learning log.

T. I've read your log and just want to ask you a few things about what you have been doing.

A. Fine.

T. So, since we last met you have been doing all the usual stuff, but you have also learned how to use the hedge cutter, and you've been doing a tree survey and recording it on the laptop?

A. That's right. V... (supervisor) got me putting the cutter on the tractor and practising on a couple of old hedges, and we had this big tree survey to do.

T. Let's start with the hedges. How did that go?

A. I'm not that great at driving the tractor anyway, and it was a bit wobbly... wavy. Not my favourite job.

T. It's something you need to do though. Have you asked V... if you can have another go at it?

A. Not really. I'd rather not do it. But I suppose I will have to. I could have a go at the hedge on Mill Lane on the field side, you can't see the back of it. I'm still a bit nervous after I wrapped the gangmower around that tree.

T. What would make you more confident? Is there anything you could ask V... to let you practise on, or give you some instruction?

A. I suppose some more time just using the tractor, doing manoeuvres with it, that sort of thing. I'll ask him when I see him on Monday.

T. OK. The tree survey sounds interesting. What was that about?

A. Well, after the storms there are a lot of broken branches and trees hung up and that sort of thing. M... the ranger put all the trees on the computer a couple of years ago, and we have these tablets that we can use to record them. We went round in two pairs, and you can click on the tree and put the information in about it. M... checked a few of them to make sure we were doing it right, then he approves them, and they go on the record for him to do the work plan.

T. What have you learned from doing that?

A. Well, I'm better at identifying trees when they haven't got leaves on, from the bark and the twigs.

T. There's a good web site for that, I'll send you the link if you like.

A. Thanks. The other thing is using the computer. M... is into computers and he has made or got this program that lets you enter the information outside, then you can read it on the plan, or it comes out as a spreadsheet. He's taught me how to use it. He wants to get some metal labels printed with QR codes on, then he can put them on the trees, and they link you to the information. Not just for us, but for the public to find out more about the tree.

T. Is that something you can get involved in?

A. I hope so. I've asked M... about it and he said fine as long as V... can spare me.

### **Three-way discussion on running a meeting: Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship**

A recently promoted manager (A) on the chartered manager degree apprenticeship is having a conversation with her mentor (M) and university tutor (T) about her experience of running a management team meeting.

T. This was your first time chairing the department meeting?

A. Yes, only the third time I had actually been to it.

T. How did it go? How did you feel about it?

A. It all seemed to go off very well. I suppose I'm used to setting out tasks and keeping to an agenda from when I was team leader, but this has to be a bit more... democratic, let people discuss things. I had a chat with K... (department head) about how he approached it, and more or less followed that. Maybe more directive in places, but that's my style and I think it worked.

T. (Mentor), you were in the meeting, what did you think?

M. I think it all went smoothly, (A) handled it well and was accepted by the rest of the team.

A. Well except for B... (another participant in the meeting). We can come to that later.

T. Can you explain what you did that made it work?

A. I was just fairly clear about the agenda, what we had to cover, the decisions we needed to make. I think I let everyone have their say, checked no-one was being left out, reined in digressions when they looked like becoming too long, and asked a few pointed questions. I also checked everyone was ok with decisions before we moved on to the next point.

T. That sounds pretty effective! What would you say your chairing style is?

A. Oh, going back to the pdf that J... (lecturer) pointed us to. I'm fairly action-oriented, good with people, communicating, but want to get things done. I've never seen myself as a chair, the idea of formal meetings with chairs and minutes seemed a bit, don't know, bureaucratic, time-wasting. I appreciate now that for that group it needs to be a bit more of a facilitator as well, so if I do it again, I would back off a bit. Only a little bit though.

M. You have seen K... chairing the group, what would you say about his style?

A. He is definitely more democratic, more low-key, but still manages to move it along. He isn't so clear, in the first meeting; I wasn't clear about some of the decisions until I saw them in the minutes. I think I can learn from him, being a bit more of a facilitator, but there are some things I definitely won't be doing.

T. You mentioned someone you had a problem with?

A. Yes, B... I'm now on the same grade as him but he definitely sees me as the junior, newbie, which he won't say out straight but it's pretty obvious by the little remarks he makes. It wasn't a problem, just something I had to work around. Not get wound up and treat him the same as everyone else. I did ask for his views a few times and he didn't have much to say. Eventually he shut up and stopped the comments.

M. He's well-known for that. I think you handled him brilliantly. He saw K... afterwards and said in a grudging sort of way, you had done a good job.

T. Going back to the meeting, what would you say you have learned more generally?

A. Well, a bit about more formal meetings, how they work, maybe what I can do differently from how I used to work with the small team. It wasn't a particularly difficult meeting, so I didn't really have to get in and be a mediator or peacekeeper or anything. There was just F..., who I hadn't really met before, who's very quiet and private and I had to ask for her input a couple of times.

A. One thing I'd like to do is for everyone to be better prepared before the meeting, have some short papers or links for people to look at as well as the agenda. It would save time in the meeting.