

Career Pathing for Leaders: Develop Your People Without Losing Them

March 31, 2026 | Career + Leadership

Prepare career conversations and realistic development plans when promotions and budgets are limited.

March 31, 2026

With Cheryl Thompson

Who it is for

People leaders developing and retaining their teams

Inside this playbook

12 copyable prompts and practice blocks.

[Open the online playbook](#)

The recorded session

Watch the Learning Lab.

Follow the session, then use the playbook with your own work.

[Watch replay on Vimeo](#) ^[1]

What to take into your work

1. Prepare career conversations around each person's goals.
2. Identify development opportunities beyond a promotion.
3. Build a realistic plan that fits your team's constraints.

Use the learning

Your playbook

Choose a prompt, replace the bracketed inputs, and work through it in your approved AI tool. Review the result and adapt it to your situation.

This playbook accompanies the March 31, 2026 session. Tool names and setup steps reflect that session; available features may differ in your account.

Welcome to Your AI Toolkit

Your best people don't leave because of the work. They leave because they don't see a future. And the hardest part isn't that you don't care about their development - it's that you don't have time for elaborate career programs, you may not have promotions to offer, and nobody taught you how to have these conversations. This playbook gives you three AI prompts that make career development practical: brainstorm realistic growth options for any role, prepare career conversations that don't require HR involvement, and build development plans that retain people even when the org chart doesn't have room.

- You don't need to use everything at once. Start with the one prompt that solves your most immediate problem.
- These prompts work across platforms: Copilot, ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, or your company's internal AI tool.
- Each prompt includes a main version (for licensed tools with full context windows) and an alternate version (for free Copilot or tools with limited input).

How to Use This Playbook

- **Start with Prompt #1.** Describe a team member's role and aspirations (no names needed) and let AI brainstorm 3–5 realistic development moves.
- **Prepare the conversation.** Use Prompt #2 to build a career conversation script with questions, talking points, and honest answers for hard questions.
- **Build the plan.** Use Prompt #3 to create a development plan that tracks growth across multiple dimensions - not just promotions.
- **Give AI context before asking for help.** The more specific you are about your constraints (budget, org structure, industry), the more realistic the suggestions.
- **Review and refine.** AI brainstorms options. You know your people, your politics, and your possibilities.

The Growth Beyond Promotion Framework

Most leaders think career development = promotion. It doesn't. Here are five ways people grow without a title change.

Growth Type	What It Looks Like	Why It Matters	Example
Skill Expansion	Learning something new that makes them more versatile	Builds confidence. Makes them more valuable. Prevents stagnation.	An operator learns to run a different machine. A service advisor learns F&I basics.

Growth Type	What It Looks Like	Why It Matters	Example
Stretch Assignment	Leading a project, process, or initiative outside their normal scope	Tests leadership without a title. Gives visibility to senior leaders.	Lead the 5S audit for the department. Run the new hire orientation for a month.
Visibility Opportunity	Presenting, representing the team, or connecting with leaders above them	Builds their reputation. Shows them what's possible. Creates sponsors.	Present the team's metrics at the monthly review. Join a cross-functional task force.
Cross-Training	Rotating into a different area, shift, or function temporarily	Broadens perspective. Builds empathy across teams. Creates backup capability.	A quality tech spends two weeks in engineering. A sales rep shadows the service department.
Mentoring / Teaching	Becoming the person who trains others on what they know best	Deepens their own mastery. Positions them as a leader. Captures tribal knowledge.	Train new hires on the process they built. Mentor a junior team member.

Key Insight: People don't just want to move up. They want to grow, be challenged, feel valued, and see a path. If you can provide those things, you keep people — even without a promotion on the horizon. **The Retention Equation**

- **Staying = Growth + Recognition + Honest Conversations**
- **Leaving = Stagnation + Silence + "No one ever talked to me about my future"**
- **Your role:** You don't need to guarantee a promotion. You need to guarantee a conversation.

The AI Efficiency Ladder

Know where you are. Know where you're going.

Level	What It Looks Like	Time / Task
1. On-the-Fly Prompting	Opening an AI chat, typing a question, getting an answer. Starting from scratch every time.	5–10 minutes, inconsistent
2. Repeatable Prompts	Saved templates you fill in. Same quality every time because same structure.	2–3 minutes, consistent

Level	What It Looks Like	Time / Task
3. Custom AI Projects	AI pre-loaded with your context – your role, industry, frameworks. Works like a team member.	1-2 minutes, personalized
4. Automation & Agents	AI connected to your systems, triggered automatically. Runs without you.	0 minutes, scales

Your goal: Move from Level 1 to Level 2. The prompts in this playbook get you there.

The Prompt Structure

Every strategic prompt has four parts:

Part	Purpose	Example
ROLE	Who should AI pretend to be?	"You are a people-development partner in the automotive industry..."
CONTEXT	What does AI need to know about you?	"I manage a team of 8 in a Tier 1 stamping plant, limited promotion path..."
REQUEST	What specifically do you want?	"Suggest realistic development moves for this team member over 12 months..."
QUESTION	Invite the AI to get as much information from you as possible.	"Please ask me any clarifying questions."

Key Prompts from This Lab

This lab teaches three prompts that work as a sequence - **Brainstorm, Prepare, Plan.**

Prompt #1: The Development Option Generator

What it's for: Taking a team member's role, aspirations, and your constraints, and generating 3-5 realistic development options - projects, stretch assignments, cross-training, visibility opportunities - that don't require promotions or big budgets. **When to use it:** Before a career conversation with a team member. When someone says they want to grow but you're not sure what to offer. When you want to develop someone but feel stuck.

Main Version (Licensed Copilot / ChatGPT / Gemini)

Use when you can provide full context about the team member, your constraints, and your organization.

Main Version (Licensed Copilot / ChatGPT / Gemini)

PROMPT TO COPY

ROLE

You are a people-development partner for leaders in the automotive industry.

You help leaders create realistic, practical development paths for their team members within manufacturing, dealership, and automotive supply chain environments.

You understand:

- Promotions are limited
- Budgets are tight
- Operations cannot be disrupted
- Leaders need options they can actually implement — not theoretical frameworks

CONTEXT

I manage a team and want to develop a specific team member.

I may not have:

- Promotions available
- Budget for formal training
- Structured development programs

I need practical, creative ways to grow this person within my current environment.

IMPORTANT:

I will describe the team member using role-based information only. Do not request or use names or personal identifying details.

PROCESS

Before generating recommendations, ask me these questions one at a time:

1. What is this person's current role?
2. What are they interested in? (what they've said or what you've observed)
3. What constraints are you working within? (budget, org structure, union rules, etc.)
4. How long have they been in their current role?
5. What is the one thing they do exceptionally well?

Wait until all answers are provided before continuing.

PROMPT TO COPY

REQUEST

Based on my inputs, generate the following:

1. DEVELOPMENT OPTIONS (3-5)

Each option must be:

- Realistic within an automotive environment
- Achievable without requiring a promotion

For each option include:

- ****What it is****
A specific project, assignment, rotation, or responsibility (be concrete)
- ****What it builds****
Skills, experience, exposure, or credibility
- ****How to set it up****
Clear, practical steps I can take as a manager
- ****Timeline****
When to start, duration, and key milestones
- ****Risk to manage****
What could go wrong and how to prevent it

2. CONVERSATION STARTER

Provide 1-2 specific ways to introduce these opportunities so they feel like:

- Growth
- Investment
- Not "extra work"

Use natural, conversational language.

3. CONSTRAINTS CHECK

For EACH option, clearly flag:

- Budget required (estimate if possible)
- Approval needed (and from whom)
- Operational disruption risk

If none apply, label:

PROMPT TO COPY

→ “Leader can implement independently”

4. GROWTH SIGNAL

Define what I should look for to determine:

- This person is ready for MORE responsibility
- vs
- This person needs more development in their current role

Make this specific and observable.

FORMAT

Start with a summary table:

| Option | What It Builds | Timeline | Cost / Approval | Ease of Implementation |

Then provide detailed breakdowns (“cards”) for each option below the table.

TONE

- Practical, grounded, and realistic
- No corporate jargon or generic advice
- Focus on what a manager can actually do THIS MONTH

Alternate Version (Copilot Free / Limited Context)

PROMPT TO COPY

I manage a team in an automotive environment.

Team member:

- Role: [ROLE]
- Interests: [WHAT THEY WANT]
- Time in role: [TIME]
- Strength: [WHAT THEY DO WELL]

Constraints:

- [LIMITATIONS]

Give me 3–5 practical development options (no promotion required).

PROMPT TO COPY

For each:

- What it is
- What it builds
- How to do it
- Any risks or approvals needed

Also:

- 1 way to introduce this as a growth opportunity (not extra work)

Keep it realistic and easy to implement.

Example

Q1 — Current role: **"Quality technician at a Tier 1 automotive stamping plant. Runs incoming inspection and in-process quality checks on the stamping line."** Q2 — What are they interested in: **"He wants to move into process engineering. He's been studying for his CQE on his own time and taking online coursework in SPC and lean manufacturing. He's mentioned it directly twice in the last year."** Q3 — Constraints: **"No process engineering openings right now. No budget for a new role or title change. Union environment so some job classification restrictions. I have flexibility on assignments and projects within the plant."** Q4 — How long in role: **"3 years."** Q5 — What they do well: **"He catches defects nobody else sees. He built an unofficial tracking spreadsheet that reduced our scrap rate by 12% last quarter. Other techs come to him for help. He's become the go-to trainer for new hires on the quality line even though that's not his job."**

Prompt #2: The Career Conversation Builder

What it's for: Preparing for a career development conversation with a specific team member - including questions to ask, how to handle hard questions ("When will I get promoted?"), and scripts for being honest without being discouraging. **When to use it:** Before a 1:1, performance review, or any conversation where a team member is likely to ask about their future. When you want to be proactive instead of reactive about development discussions.

Main Version (Licensed Copilot / ChatGPT / Gemini)

Use to build a complete career conversation script.

Main Version (Licensed Copilot / ChatGPT / Gemini)

PROMPT TO COPY

ROLE

You are a career conversation coach for leaders in the automotive industry.

You help managers prepare for career and development conversations that are:

- Honest
- Practical
- Focused on retention

You understand:

- Most leaders avoid these conversations because they don't have clear answers
- Promotions are limited
- Budgets are constrained
- Employees want growth, not vague reassurance

Your job is to help leaders communicate clearly, build trust, and create forward momentum — even when options are limited.

CONTEXT

I need to have a career development conversation with a team member.

My goals are to:

- Help them feel heard and understood
- Be honest about what is and isn't possible
- Offer realistic growth options
- Keep them engaged and motivated

I do NOT want:

- HR-style scripted language
- Generic advice
- Overpromising

I want real words I can actually say.

PROCESS

Before generating anything, ask me these questions one at a time:

1. What is the team member's current role and tenure?
2. What have they expressed interest in? (or what do you think they want?)
3. What is realistically possible for their growth in your organization?
4. What is the hardest question you expect them to ask?
5. What is your honest assessment of their potential? (be candid)

PROMPT TO COPY

Wait until all answers are provided before continuing.

REQUEST

Based on my inputs, generate the following:

1. CAREER CONVERSATION FLOW (not a rigid script)

Provide a natural, conversational structure with examples of what to say.

Include:

****Opening (set the tone)****

- 2–3 ways to start the conversation
- Must feel genuine, not scripted

****Discovery Questions (4–6)****

- Focus on understanding what they actually want (not surface-level answers)
- Include follow-up prompts to go deeper

****Listening Prompts****

- How to respond in the moment to:
 - Emotion
 - Frustration
 - Ambiguity
- Examples of phrases to keep the conversation open and productive

****Closing****

- How to summarize the conversation
- How to transition into action (not just “we’ll keep talking”)

2. HARD QUESTION RESPONSES

Provide grounded, realistic responses to:

- “When am I going to get promoted?”
- “I don’t see a future here.”
- “My friend at [competitor] makes more money.”
- “I’ve been in this role too long.”
- “I feel like I’m stuck.”

For each response:

- Be honest (no sugarcoating)
- Acknowledge the concern

PROMPT TO COPY

- Redirect toward what IS possible
- Use natural language (what a good leader would actually say)

3. DEVELOPMENT COMMITMENT (90-DAY PLAN)

Create a simple, usable structure:

- What they will focus on
- What I will provide (support, exposure, feedback)
- Key milestones/checkpoints
- What success looks like (observable, not vague)

Keep it lightweight and realistic.

4. FOLLOW-UP PLAN

Provide:

- When to check in (specific cadence)
- What to ask in each check-in (practical questions)
- How to make progress visible (to the employee and others)
- What to do if progress stalls or motivation drops

5. TENSION MOMENT (IMPORTANT)

Include one realistic moment where the conversation could get uncomfortable, and show:

- What the employee might say
- A strong response from the leader

This helps me prepare for real pressure — not just ideal conversations.

tone

- Warm, direct, and grounded
- Honest without being harsh
- No HR jargon or corporate clichés
- Focus on what actually works in real 1:1 conversations

Alternate Version (Copilot Free / Limited Context)

PROMPT TO COPY

I need to prepare for a career conversation.

Team member:

- Role: [ROLE]
- What they want: [ASPIRATIONS]
- What's realistic: [CONSTRAINTS]
- Hardest question: [QUESTION]

Give me:

1. Opening (2 ways to start — natural, not scripted)
2. 4–5 questions to understand what they really want
3. Responses to:
 - “When will I get promoted?”
 - “I feel stuck”
 - “I don’t see a future here”
4. A simple 90-day plan:
 - What they focus on
 - What I provide
 - What success looks like

Keep it practical and conversational.

Example

Q1 — Role and tenure: **“Quality technician, 3 years. Top performer. He's the unofficial trainer for new hires and the person everyone goes to when they can't figure out a defect.”** Q2 — What they've expressed interest in: **“Process engineering. He's said it directly twice. He's studying for his CQE and doing lean manufacturing coursework on his own time. Two competitors have reached out on LinkedIn — he hasn't accepted anything but he's listening.”** Q3 — What's realistic: **“No engineering openings for at least 6–9 months. I can offer stretch assignments: shadowing the process engineering team two days a week, joining the APQP team for our next product launch, presenting quality metrics at the monthly plant review. No budget for a title or pay change right now.”** Q4 — Hardest question you expect: **“I think he's going to say: ‘I've been here three years, I've told you what I want, and nothing has changed. I have an offer from a competitor. Why should I stay?’”** Q5 — Honest assessment of potential: **“He's one of the strongest people on my team. I genuinely believe he could be a process engineer within 18 months if we develop him right. He has the technical aptitude, the drive, and the respect of the engineering team already. If I lose him, I lose my best quality tech AND my future engineering pipeline.”**

Prompt #3: The Development Plan Builder

What it's for: Creating a structured, trackable development plan that goes beyond "attend a training" - covering skill-building, visibility, stretch assignments, and measurable milestones over 6–12 months. **When to use it:** After a career conversation, when you've agreed on a direction. When you need to document a development commitment. When HR asks for IDPs (Individual Development Plans) and you need something better than a checkbox form.

Main Version (Licensed Copilot / ChatGPT / Gemini)

Use to build a comprehensive, practical development plan.

Main Version (Licensed Copilot / ChatGPT / Gemini)

PROMPT TO COPY

ROLE

You are a talent development strategist for leaders in the automotive industry.

You build individual development plans (IDPs) that are:

- Practical
- Measurable
- Designed for real-world constraints (limited budget, time, and structure)

You understand:

- The best IDPs are not documents — they are clear agreements
- Development must be visible to matter
- Retention risk is real, even when a plan exists

Your job is to turn a career conversation into a clear, actionable plan that drives growth and keeps the employee engaged.

CONTEXT

I've already had a career conversation with a team member and we've aligned on a growth direction.

Now I need to:

- Translate that into a structured, realistic plan
- Create clear milestones and accountability
- Ensure the plan builds momentum over time

I want something I can actually use — not a formal HR document.

PROCESS

PROMPT TO COPY

Before creating the plan, ask me these questions one at a time:

1. What growth direction did you agree on?
2. What is the team member's current role and experience level?
3. What resources do you realistically have? (budget, time, mentors, project access)
4. What is the retention risk level? (actively looking, passively open, content)
5. What does success look like for this person in 12 months?

Wait until all answers are provided before continuing.

REQUEST

Based on my inputs, create the following:

1. INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN (OVERVIEW TABLE)

Create a structured plan across 4 quarters (or 2 if more realistic).

Quarter	Focus Area	Specific Activity	What It Builds	Success Metric	Support Needed	Visibility Opportunity

Guidelines:

- Each quarter should build on the previous one
- Mix development types:
 - Skill building
 - Stretch assignments
 - Cross-functional exposure
 - Visibility / presentation opportunities
- Keep all activities realistic within an automotive environment

2. 90-DAY KICKSTART (DETAILED)

Break down the first 90 days clearly:

****Week 1-2: Alignment & Setup****

- What to clarify, align, and prepare

****Month 1: First Development Action****

- What they start doing

****Month 2: Application & Practice****

- How they apply the skill in real work

****Month 3: Demonstration & Feedback****

PROMPT TO COPY

- How they show progress and receive feedback

Include:

- Specific actions (not vague)
- Monthly check-in questions for the leader

3. VISIBILITY PLAN (CRITICAL)

Make development visible and valuable.

Include:

- Who should be aware of their growth:
 - Skip-level leaders
 - Cross-functional partners
 - Potential sponsors
- 2–3 specific opportunities to showcase progress:
 - Presentations
 - Leading a meeting
 - Owning a problem or initiative
- How to create “sponsor moments” naturally (without forcing it)

4. RETENTION RISK MONITOR

Define early warning signs that the person may disengage even with a plan:

- What to watch for (behavioral signals)
- Questions to ask during check-ins
- When to adjust the plan vs escalate

Keep this practical and observable — not theoretical.

5. REALITY CHECK (IMPORTANT)

Call out any parts of the plan that may be:

- Too ambitious
- Dependent on factors outside the leader’s control
- At risk of not happening

Offer simple adjustments to make the plan more achievable.

PROMPT TO COPY

FORMAT

- Clear and printable
- One-page summary table + detailed sections below
- Plain language — no HR jargon
- Should feel like a shared working agreement between leader and employee

TONE

- Practical, grounded, and realistic
- Focused on execution, not documentation
- No corporate fluff

Alternate Version (Copilot Free / Limited Context)**PROMPT TO COPY**

I need a development plan for a team member.

Team member:

- Role: [ROLE]
- Growth goal: [GOAL]
- Constraints: [LIMITATIONS]
- Retention risk: [LOW/MED/HIGH]

Create:

1. A simple quarterly plan:

- Focus
- Activity
- Skill built
- Success measure

2. First 90 days:

- Month 1: start
- Month 2: practice
- Month 3: show progress

3. Visibility:

- Who should see their growth
- 2 ways to showcase it

4. Risk signals:

- What to watch for

PROMPT TO COPY

- What to ask in check-ins

Keep it simple and usable.

Example

Q1 — Growth direction agreed on: **"We agreed he'll build toward process engineering through stretch assignments and cross-training. Specifically: shadow the process engineering team two days a week, join the APQP team for the upcoming product launch, and present quality metrics at the monthly plant review to build visibility with plant leadership."** Q2 — Current role and experience: **"Quality technician, 3 years experience. Top performer. Already studying for CQE. Has strong relationships with the engineering team from quality investigations they've worked on together."** Q3 — Resources available: **"No budget for training or title change. I can adjust his schedule for the engineering shadowing. The APQP team needs members anyway so that's easy. Plant manager is open to development presentations at the monthly review. Our senior process engineer has agreed to be an informal mentor."** Q4 — Retention risk level: **"High. Two competitors have reached out. He's not actively interviewing but he's open to conversations. The next 90 days are critical — if he doesn't see real movement, he'll take the next call."** Q5 — Success in 12 months: **"He's functioning as a bridge between quality and engineering. He's completed the APQP launch. He's earned his CQE. The engineering team sees him as a peer, not a quality tech. When the next process engineering role opens, he's the obvious internal candidate and both he and plant leadership know it."**

Prompt #4: The Team Development Matrix

What it's for: Looking at your entire team and identifying development priorities, flight risks, and succession gaps - so you're developing strategically, not just reactively. **When to use it:** Quarterly, as a team-level development review. During succession planning conversations. When you want to identify who needs attention before they tell you they're leaving.

Main Version**PROMPT TO COPY**

ROLE

You are a talent strategy consultant for leaders in the automotive industry.

You help leaders assess their entire team from a strategic perspective — identifying:

- Who is growing vs. stagnating
- Who is at risk of leaving
- Where critical knowledge gaps exist

PROMPT TO COPY

- Where to focus limited development time and energy

You think like a business leader, not HR. You are direct, practical, and focused on action.

CONTEXT

I want to evaluate my full team so I can make better decisions about:

- Where to invest development effort
- Who to prioritize
- Where I have risk (retention, succession, capability)

I will describe each team member by role only (no names), including:

- Performance
- Potential
- Engagement
- Any concerns

PROCESS

Ask me to describe each team member using:

- Role
- Performance level (high / solid / inconsistent / low)
- Growth potential (high / moderate / limited)
- Engagement level (engaged / neutral / disengaged)
- Aspirations (if known)
- Any concerns

Wait until I've provided the full team before analyzing.

REQUEST

Based on my inputs, generate:

1. TEAM DEVELOPMENT MATRIX

Create a table:

Role	Performance	Growth Potential	Flight Risk	Category	Development Priority	Recommended Action
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Categorize each person into ONE of the following:

- Stars → High performance, high potential

PROMPT TO COPY

- Focus: stretch, retain, increase visibility
- Solid Contributors → High performance, moderate potential
- Focus: deepen expertise, recognize, stabilize
- Growth Candidates → Moderate performance, high potential
- Focus: targeted development, skill building
- Attention Needed → Declining performance and/or engagement
- Focus: diagnose root cause and act quickly

Also include:

- Flight Risk level (Low / Medium / High)
- Development Priority (High / Medium / Low)

2. SUCCESSION & KNOWLEDGE RISK

Identify:

- Roles with no backup if the person leaves
- Critical knowledge concentrated in one individual
- Areas where the team is over-dependent on specific people

Provide:

- 2-3 clear cross-training or redundancy recommendations

3. DEVELOPMENT INVESTMENT PRIORITIES

If time and resources are limited, rank:

1. Where to invest FIRST
2. Where to invest SECOND
3. Where to invest THIRD

For each:

- Explain why it matters
- What the impact will be if addressed vs ignored

4. 90-DAY TEAM DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Provide the 3 highest-impact actions I should take in the next 90 days.

Each action should:

- Be realistic for a busy leader
- Address multiple team members where possible

PROMPT TO COPY

- Improve both capability AND retention

5. HARD TRUTHS (IMPORTANT)

Call out anything I may be overlooking, such as:

- Over-investing in the wrong people
- Ignoring high performers at risk
- Avoiding difficult performance issues
- Misalignment between potential and expectations

Be direct but constructive.

TONE

- Clear, decisive, and practical
- No generic HR language
- Focus on what a leader should actually DO next

ROLE
You are a talent strategy consultant for automotive organizations. You help leaders assess their team's development landscape — identifying who's growing, who's stagnating, who's at risk of leaving, and where the critical knowledge gaps are.

CONTEXT

I want to look at my entire team and make strategic decisions about where to invest my development energy. I'll describe each team member by role (no names) with brief notes on performance, potential, and engagement.

REQUEST

Based on my team descriptions, create:

1. TEAM DEVELOPMENT MATRIX

| Role | Performance | Growth Potential | Flight Risk | Development Priority |

Recommended Action |

Categorize each person:

- Stars: High performance, high potential → Stretch and retain
- Solid Contributors: High performance, moderate potential → Deepen expertise and recognize
- Growth Candidates: Moderate performance, high potential → Develop skills and invest
- Attention Needed: Declining performance or engagement → Diagnose and act

2. SUCCESSION GAPS

- Which roles have no backup if the person leaves?
- Which critical knowledge is held by one person?
- Recommended cross-training priorities

PROMPT TO COPY**3. DEVELOPMENT BUDGET ALLOCATION**

If you had limited time and resources, rank where to invest development energy first, second, third — and why.

4. 90-DAY TEAM DEVELOPMENT FOCUS

The three most impactful things you can do for your team's development in the next 90 days.

QUESTION

Ask me to describe each team member by role, with brief notes on how they're performing, what they want, and what concerns me about each one.

Alternate Version (Copilot Free)**PROMPT TO COPY**

Here is my team (by role, no names):

[For each person include:

- Role
- Performance level
- Growth potential
- Engagement level
- Aspirations (if known)
- Concerns]

Create:

1. A team development matrix:

- Categorize each as Star, Solid Contributor, Growth Candidate, or Attention Needed
- Include flight risk and development priority

2. Succession risks:

- Which roles have no backup?
- Where is knowledge concentrated?

3. Development priorities:

- Where I should invest FIRST, SECOND, THIRD (and why)

4. 90-day focus:

- 3 specific actions to improve team performance and retention

5. Hard truths:

- What I might be missing or avoiding

PROMPT TO COPY

Be direct and practical. Tell me where the real risks are.

Example

“Here’s my team — quality department at a Tier 1 stamping plant, 8 people (reminder, do not use real names): **1. Quality Tech, 3 years.** Top performer. Wants process engineering. Flight risk — competitors reaching out on LinkedIn. Studying for CQE on his own time. Strongest technical skills on the team. **2. Quality Tech, 7 years.** Solid and reliable. Never misses a shift. Doesn’t want to move up — happy in role. Concerned he’s getting bored and going through the motions. Zero flight risk but engagement is dropping. **3. Quality Tech, 1 year.** New hire. Eager, asks lots of questions. Making mistakes typical for experience level. Shows leadership potential — other new hires already look to her for guidance. Needs skill development before anything else. **4. Quality Supervisor, 5 years (promoted from tech 2 years ago).** Good technical skills but struggles with conflict. Avoids difficult conversations with underperformers. Team respects his knowledge but not his authority. Needs leadership development but hasn’t asked for it. **5. Quality Tech, 4 years.** Average performer. Does the minimum. Has mentioned wanting more money but hasn’t tied it to wanting more responsibility. Union steward so he has influence on the floor. Not a flight risk but not growing. **6. Lab Technician, 2 years.** Quiet, does excellent detail work. Has a chemistry degree. Overqualified for the role. Hasn’t said anything about career goals but I suspect she’ll leave for a better opportunity if I don’t engage her soon. **7. Quality Tech, 6 years.** Was a top performer 2 years ago. Performance declining since person #4 got promoted over him. He wanted that job. Still bitter. Skills are strong when he’s engaged but he’s checked out. Moderate retention risk — vested in pension but emotionally gone. **8. Document Control Specialist, 3 years.** Organized, detail-oriented. Has expressed interest in quality systems and ISO audit work. Small budget available for auditor certification. Low flight risk, high potential if given direction.”

Prompt #5: The "No Promotion Available" Script Builder

What it's for: Preparing for the specific conversation where you need to tell a team member that a promotion isn't available right now - and redirect toward what IS available without losing them. **When to use it:** When someone asks for a promotion you can't give. When the org chart is flat. When budget doesn't allow a role change. When you need to say no without losing them.

Main Version

PROMPT TO COPY

ROLE

You are a leadership communication coach specializing in retention conversations in the automotive industry.

You help leaders deliver difficult messages about career limitations in ways that are:

- Honest
- Clear
- Empathetic
- Focused on retaining the employee

You understand:

- “Not right now” conversations are high-risk moments
- Poor delivery leads directly to disengagement or job searching
- Leaders must balance truth with forward momentum

Your job is to help the leader handle this conversation in a way that preserves trust and keeps the employee engaged.

CONTEXT

A team member wants a promotion that I cannot provide right now.

I need to:

- Acknowledge their value and ambition
- Clearly explain the reality (without excuses or vagueness)
- Redirect toward meaningful growth opportunities
- End with a clear, credible path forward

I do NOT want:

- HR-style language
- Empty reassurance
- Overpromising

I want real language I can actually say.

PROCESS

Before generating anything, ask me:

1. What is this person’s current role?
2. What promotion are they asking for?
3. Why is it not available right now? (be specific)
4. What can you realistically offer instead?
5. How strong of a performer are they? (high / solid / inconsistent)

PROMPT TO COPY

Wait for all answers before continuing.

REQUEST

Based on my inputs, generate:

1. THE HONEST OPENING

Provide 2–3 versions of how to start the conversation.

Each should:

- Acknowledge their contribution and aspiration
- Set a respectful, direct tone
- Avoid sounding scripted or overly polished

2. THE REALITY (CLEAR + DIRECT)

Provide 3 tailored versions of how to explain why the promotion is not available:

- Budget / headcount constraint
- Organizational structure (no role available)
- Readiness (they are not quite there yet)

Each version should:

- Be specific and understandable
- Avoid blame or deflection
- Sound like a confident, accountable leader

3. THE REDIRECT (THIS IS CRITICAL)

Show how to pivot from:

“No promotion” → “Here’s what IS possible”

Include:

- 2–3 specific development opportunities
- Why these matter and how they build toward promotion
- How to position this as genuine investment (not consolation)

Also include:

- A clear timeline for when the promotion conversation will be revisited

PROMPT TO COPY

4. THE COMMITMENT

End the conversation with a concrete agreement:

- What the employee will work on
- What I will provide (support, visibility, feedback)
- When we will check in again

This must feel credible and specific — not vague.

5. HOW THIS LANDS (IMPORTANT)

Briefly describe:

- How a strong version of this conversation feels to the employee
- What signals they walk away with (hopeful, respected, clear path)

6. DANGER PHRASES TO AVOID

List 5 phrases that trigger disengagement or job searching.

For each:

- Why it backfires
- What to say instead

TONE

- Direct, grounded, and human
- Honest without being harsh
- No corporate clichés or HR language
- Focus on what actually keeps people engaged after a tough conversation

Alternate Version (Copilot Free)

PROMPT TO COPY

A team member wants a promotion I can't give.

Team member:

- Role: [ROLE]
- What they want: [PROMOTION]

PROMPT TO COPY

- Why not available: [REASON]
- What I CAN offer: [ALTERNATIVES]

Help me:

1. Opening (2 ways — honest and respectful)
2. Explain why it's not available (clear, no excuses)
3. Redirect:
 - 2 growth options
 - How to position them positively
 - When we revisit promotion
4. Commitment:
 - What we agree on next
5. What to avoid:
 - 3 phrases that cause disengagement

Make it sound real, not corporate. Here is my team (by role):

[For each: role, performance, potential, engagement, concerns]

Create:

1. Team categories:
 - Star / Solid / Growth / Needs Attention
2. Risks:
 - Who might leave?
 - Where do we have no backup?
3. Priorities:
 - Where I should invest FIRST, SECOND, THIRD
4. Next 90 days:
 - 3 actions to improve team performance and retention

Be direct and practical.

Example

My best team lead has been with us for 4 years. She started as a quality tech, became the informal leader of second shift, and I promoted her to team lead 2 years ago. She’s asked about the supervisor role three times this year. She’s ready — I’d promote her tomorrow if I could. But I don’t have the headcount. Budget was frozen after Q2. The supervisor above her isn’t going anywhere. There’s genuinely no role to promote her into right now, and I probably won’t have one for at least 12 months. She’s getting frustrated. Her engagement scores dropped last quarter. She’s stopped volunteering for extra projects, which is not like her at all. I think she’s starting to disengage. The hardest part is I can’t promise her anything with a timeline. I can offer her a stretch assignment leading a plant-wide quality initiative, visibility with the plant manager, and potentially a lateral move to lead the new product launch quality team. But none of that comes with a title change or a pay increase right now.

Prompt #6: The Career Conversation Simulator

What it’s for: Practicing a career development conversation with AI playing the role of your team member - complete with realistic pushback, emotions, and hard questions - so you walk into the real conversation confident, not rehearsing in your head on the drive to work. **When to use it:** After you've run Prompt #1 (development options) and Prompt #2 (conversation script). Before the actual 1:1. When you're nervous about a specific person's reaction. When you want to test your responses to hard questions out loud instead of just reading them on paper.

Main Version

PROMPT TO COPY
ROLE You are a career conversation simulator for leaders in the automotive industry. You play the role of a real team member in a 1:1 career development conversation. You are not artificially difficult, but you are realistic — with genuine thoughts, emotions, and reactions. After the roleplay ends, you switch into coaching mode and provide direct, practical feedback to help the leader improve. --- CONTEXT I am a leader preparing for a career development conversation with a specific team member. My goal is to: - Retain and develop this employee - Handle the conversation effectively, even if it becomes difficult

PROMPT TO COPY

- Practice before having the real conversation

I want to test my approach, build confidence, and improve how I show up as a leader.

SETUP (Ask me these before starting)

Ask me the following questions one at a time:

1. What is the team member's role and how long have they been in it?
2. What is their personality in conversations? (direct, quiet, emotional, skeptical, eager, etc.)
3. What do they want right now? (promotion, more money, new challenge, recognition, unclear)
4. What can I realistically offer? (development, visibility, stretch work — but maybe not promotion)
5. What is the hardest moment I'm expecting in this conversation?

Do not begin the roleplay until I answer all questions.

ROLEPLAY RULES

Once setup is complete:

- You ARE the team member. Speak in first person.
- Use natural, conversational language (no corporate jargon).
- Match the personality I described.
- Show realistic emotions where appropriate (frustration, hesitation, disappointment, excitement).
- Do not make the conversation artificially easy or overly difficult — make it real.

IMPORTANT:

At least once during the conversation, introduce a moment of tension, doubt, or pushback that I must navigate.

Examples:

- Questioning growth opportunities
- Expressing frustration about lack of advancement
- Considering leaving
- Doubting leadership support

Stay in character until I say: "End roleplay"

COACHING MODE (after roleplay ends)

PROMPT TO COPY

When I say "End roleplay", switch roles and provide structured feedback:

1. What I did well
 - Be specific (not generic praise)
2. Where I lost or weakened the employee
 - Call out exact moments and why they mattered
3. What I should say differently
 - Give rewritten examples of stronger responses
4. Missed opportunities
 - What I could have explored or asked that I didn't
5. One next-level move
 - The single highest-impact thing I can improve for next time

Tone:

- Direct, honest, and practical
- No fluff, no generic leadership advice
- Focus on what actually works in real conversations

Alternate Version (Copilot Free)

PROMPT TO COPY

You are a team member in a career development conversation.

Ask me:

- Role + tenure
- Personality
- What they want
- What I can offer

Then roleplay the conversation realistically (including some tension).

After I say "End roleplay", give me:

- What I did well
- What I should do differently
- 1 key improvement

Example

Q1 — Role + tenure: **"He's been a quality technician at our Tier 1 stamping plant for 3 years. Consistently our top performer. He catches defects other people miss and he's become the unofficial trainer for new hires on the quality line."** Q2 — Personality: **"Direct but respectful. He won't yell or get emotional, but he won't let you off the hook either. If you give him a vague answer, he'll push back with a specific follow-up. He's not rude — he just doesn't accept corporate non-answers."** Q3 — What they want: **"He wants to move into process engineering. He's told me twice. He's been studying for his CQE and taking online coursework in SPC and lean manufacturing on his own time. Two competitors have reached out on LinkedIn. He hasn't accepted anything yet, but he's listening."** Q4 — What I can offer: **"No process engineering openings right now. But I can offer him a stretch assignment shadowing our process engineering team two days a week. I can get him on the APQP team for our next product launch. I can also give him visibility by having him present quality metrics at the monthly plant review. No budget for a title change or raise right now, but I have flexibility on assignments."** Q5 — Hardest moment: **"I'm expecting him to say something like 'I've been patient for three years and nothing has changed. I have an offer that pays more and has engineering in the title. Why should I stay?' That's the moment I'm afraid I'll freeze and just say something generic like 'we really value you.'"**

Quality Check - Before Using AI-Generated Development Content

- [] **Did you remove all identifying information?** Never paste employee names, IDs, or personal details into AI. Describe people by role and situation only.
- [] **Are the suggestions realistic for your environment?** AI doesn't know your union rules, budget cycle, or political dynamics. Filter every suggestion through your reality.
- [] **Does this feel genuine?** Career conversations must feel authentic. If AI gave you a script that sounds corporate, rewrite it in your own words.
- [] **Are you committing to follow through?** A development plan you don't revisit is worse than no plan. Only commit to what you'll actually do.
- [] **Would YOU want to hear this?** Before delivering hard news about promotions, read your script out loud. If it would frustrate you, rewrite it.

Copilot Basics (If You Use Microsoft 365)

- **Work Mode vs. Web Mode:** Work mode searches your company's Microsoft 365 data (emails, files, Teams). Web mode uses the open internet. For career development, Web mode is recommended since you should NOT be pasting employee personal information into AI tools. Describe roles and situations generically.

- **When to use each:** Use Web mode for all the prompts in this playbook. Use Work mode only if you want AI to reference your company's published career frameworks, job descriptions, or competency models stored in SharePoint.
- **How to save prompts:** Copy any prompt from this playbook into a Word document, OneNote, or Notion page. Save the Career Conversation Builder where you can access it before every 1:1.
- **Reminder:** Never paste employee names, performance ratings, or personal information into AI tools. Describe team members by role and situation only.

What to Try This Week

- [] **Pick one team member.** The one you know needs a development conversation. The one you've been putting off talking to.
- [] **Run Prompt #1.** Describe their role and interests. Get 3–5 development ideas you hadn't considered.
- [] **Prepare the conversation.** Use Prompt #2 to build your talking points and prepare for hard questions.
- [] **Have the conversation.** This week. Not next month. Not during annual reviews. Now.
- [] **Make one commitment.** Even if it's small - one stretch assignment, one visibility opportunity, one cross-training rotation. Something real that starts this month.

Resources & Next Steps

Key Frameworks from This Lab

- **Growth Beyond Promotion** identifies five ways people develop without a title change: skill expansion, stretch assignments, visibility, cross-training, and mentoring/teaching.
- **The Retention Equation:** Staying = Growth + Recognition + Honest Conversations. Leaving = Stagnation + Silence.
- **Career conversations don't require HR involvement.** You can have a meaningful development discussion with a 20-minute 1:1 and one good question: "What would make you feel like you're growing?"
- **AI helps you brainstorm options and prepare conversations.** But the conversation itself - that's you showing up for your people.

What We Didn't Cover (Yet)

- Building a formal mentorship matching program across the organization.
- Using AI to analyze job descriptions and identify lateral move opportunities.
- Creating career path visualizations for roles with non-linear trajectories.

- Integrating development plans into performance management systems.

Next Steps

- Have one career conversation this week. Use the prompts to prepare.
- Build one development plan using Prompt #3. Keep it to one page.
- Run Prompt #4 (Team Development Matrix) quarterly to stay ahead of retention risks.

The Mental Model - Brainstorm, Prepare, Plan

Today's session was built on one idea: people don't leave jobs. They leave leaders who never talked to them about their future. AI can't replace that conversation — but it can help you show up prepared, creative, and ready to invest in the people who show up for you every day.

Step	Prompt	What It Does
Brainstorm	**Prompt 1 ** - Development Option Generator	Generates realistic development options for any team member without requiring promotions or big budgets.
Prepare	Prompt 2 - Career Conversation Builder	Builds a conversation script with discovery questions, hard-question responses, and honest talking points.
Plan	Prompt 3 - Development Plan Builder	Creates a structured, trackable plan with quarterly milestones, visibility opportunities, and retention monitoring.
Practice	Prompt 6 - Career Conversation Simulator	Roleplay the conversation with AI playing your team member — complete with realistic pushback — then get coaching feedback on what worked and what to adjust.

The promotion was never the only answer. The conversation was always the first step. Now you're ready for it.

Your people don't need a title change. They need to know you see them:

- Pick one person. Have the conversation.
- Make one commitment this week.

- You now have the tools to develop your people — even when the org chart says there's nowhere to go.

Related resources

Keep working with the material.

The prompts and exercises are included above. Save a useful prompt and return to it with your next task.

Links and resources

These links are clickable in the PDF. For a paper copy, use the numbered references below.

[1] <https://vimeo.com/1178954927/050cffd8e3>