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Getting career progression right at small companies and startups
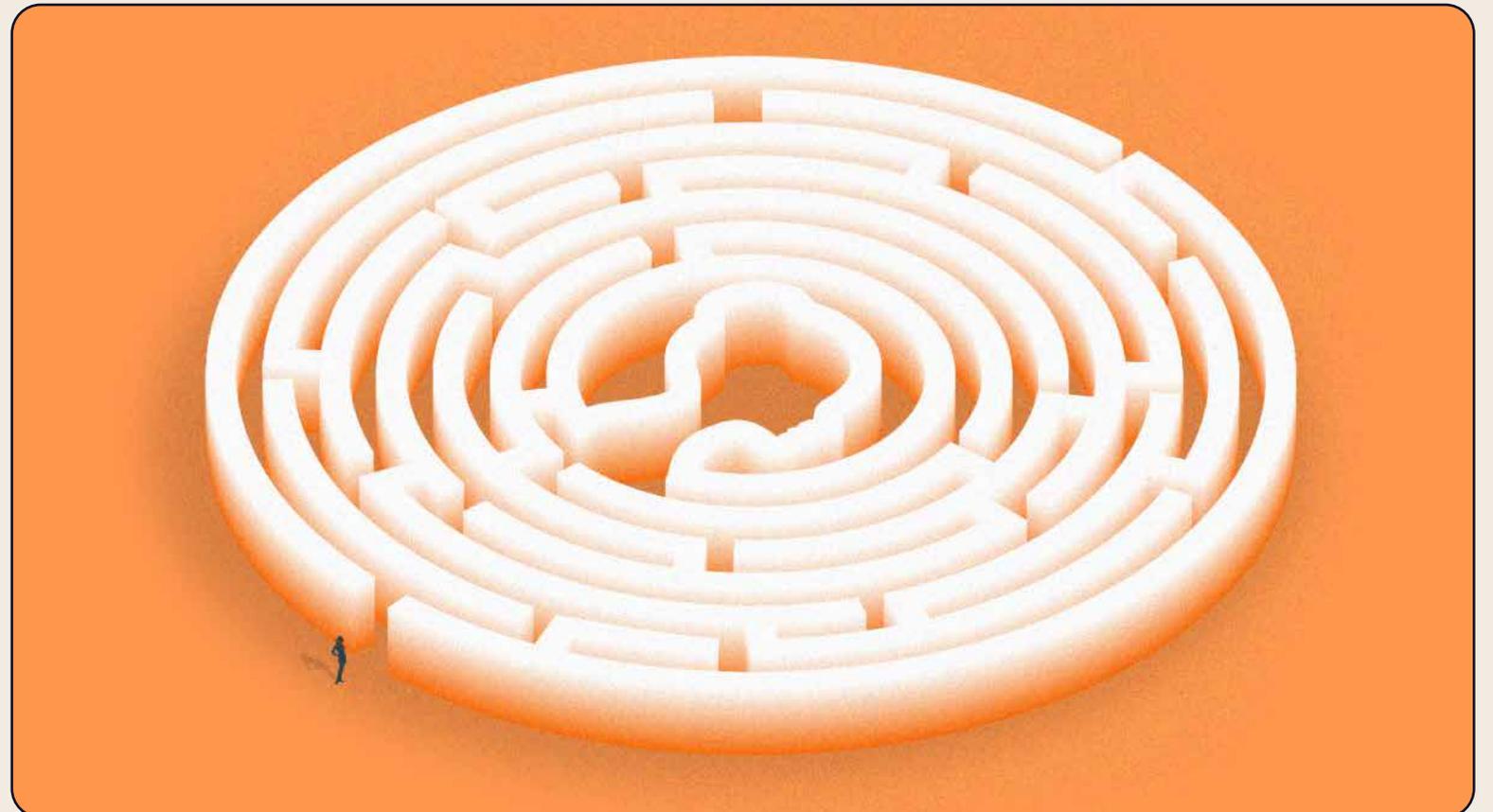
Ben Branson-Gateley
CEO of CharlieHR

If your people aren't growing, they're leaving

If I went back 20 or 30 years and asked my parents what they valued most about their jobs, I'm pretty sure I know what their answers would be. It would be their job security, the standing that career afforded them amongst their peers and the financial stability that came with it.

But today's generation of talent doesn't just want a job. These days, every team member expects to work for a company that makes their career progression and development a priority. If they don't find that at your company, then they'll find it somewhere else. This is just a fact – trust me, I've had those conversations. Over the last five years, Charlie has lost more than a few team members because we didn't give their development and progression the focus that it deserved. Losing those people damaged Charlie in a very real way.

For small companies, this is a really tough place to be.

Anyone running a startup or small business knows that at any one moment, there are a dozen different fires to be put out. You are always stretched thin – never enough time, never enough resources, rarely having access to the expertise you need to focus on how your company handles career progression.

That's why we've put together this guide.

When we started Charlie 5 years ago, there were four of us in the room. At the time of writing, we're just coming up to the 40-person mark. Along the way, I think we've made pretty much every progression mistake in the book – but we've also learned from every one of those mistakes.

Inside this guide, we've mapped out what I believe is the ideal career progression system for every stage of a small company's lifecycle. We've broken things down by headcount into stage-appropriate steps, so you can feel confident that you're putting in the right level of process for your business.

We've written it for everyone – customers, readers and other startup founders – to help you build a company where your team can stay for the long haul.

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The foundations

The key thing at this stage is to keep things simple. When your team is just a handful of people, responsibility and ownership are shared much more freely and people tend to feel a tangible sense of progression quite naturally. At this size, company priorities can also be a little more fluid and you don't want to commit to anything too laborious.

For now, the best system is the one that is lightweight enough for your team to keep up consistently, and that gives you some foundations to build on later.

Looking back at my own experiences, for a company of this size I think there are two steps to take.

1. Define the behaviours you want to see

Every company has its own unique business context.

They work in different ways, face different challenges and must develop their own solutions to overcome them.

What this means is that every company will need its own unique culture if it's going to succeed. What works for one simply won't fit for another.

In the 'People' sphere, I regularly hear people equate 'culture' with 'values' – but this is an unhelpful way of thinking about it. The best way to think about culture is in terms of the behaviours you want to see within your company. At Charlie, we call these our High Performance Behaviours.

Defining your desired behaviours - the basics

Identifying and defining the behaviours that will make up the foundation of your company culture can feel like an intimidating project.

But I don't think this needs to be as complicated as it sounds. It can be as straightforward as stepping away from your day-to-day – whether that's as a founder or as a leadership team – and simply asking yourselves the question.
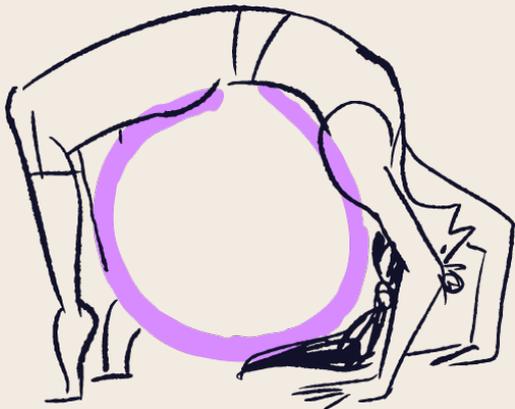
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What do you want from your team? What kind of actions and behaviours do you want to see?

Once you've sketched out a few ideas, the most important part is to codify them – write them down somewhere, set out examples of what each of these behaviours could look like and circulate them amongst your team.

All in, I think you can easily ge this done in four or five hours.

The reason defining these behaviours is so useful from a career progression point of view is that they provide the common language that our team needs to understand what 'good' looks like at your company. Once you have these behaviours defined, it allows you to have constructive conversations with your team about their strengths, weaknesses and where they need to improve in order to progress.

If you'd like to use Charlie's High Performance Behaviours as a reference point, hit the link above and you'll be able to take a look at the slide deck we used to set them out to our team.

2. Put in place a system of one-to-ones

The second thing you'll need at this company size is a system of one to ones. At this stage, these can be quite casual and unstructured – there'll be a place for a more formal review process later on.

These one-to-ones give you two things. Firstly, this is a space for you to reflect with your team member on the desired behaviours that you have defined. I think using a system like 'Stop, Start, Continue' is really useful here – it's a really basic framework for delivering feedback where you communicate three things someone should keep doing, three they should stop doing and three new things they should start doing.

Secondly, they are a chance for you to get to know your team's career aspirations. You can't do anything to help your team make progress in their professional development unless you understand the direction they want to move in. Even if that alignment isn't possible, they can at least help your team member to feel heard. For today's talent, there is nothing more demotivating than an employer that simply doesn't care about their career.

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One-to-one checklist - the basics

1. Make the time sacred

It can be tempting to postpone one-to-ones as other priorities crop up – but that's a dangerous habit to fall into.

Keep this time set aside, and you'll reap the dividends later.

2. Listen actively

There's a difference between being listened to and being heard.

Make sure you're actively seeking to understand what the team member is saying (or not saying) during their one-to-one.

3. Be vulnerable

The absolute key ingredient in any good relationship is trust. By allowing yourself to be vulnerable with team members, you make it easier for them to do the same.

4. Know your goal

It's important to let the team member guide this conversation, but it's worth bearing in mind what you're trying to achieve as well.

This helps keep the conversation focused and productive.

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Levelling up

It's around this size that the organic, 'learning by doing' sense of progression of a small company begins to wear off.

By now, people's job roles tend to have become a little more defined and rigid, giving them fewer opportunities to pick up new skills and responsibilities.

As a result, you need to develop your company's processes for supporting your team's career development.

As your company moves above the 10-person mark, I believe there are two steps that you'll need to take.

1. Roll out Personal Development Plans (PDPs)

A Personal Development Plan (PDP) is a document outlining how a team member wants to grow and develop.

In their most basic form, PDPs set out:

- Where that person is now

- Where that person mis going

- A plan of how they are going to get there

There should already be a pretty good understanding of this built up from your one-to-ones – but a written PDP brings a whole new level of clarity to these aspirations.

They're also a great way to empower team members to take ownership of their career progression and to make them accountable to this development.

2. It's time to bring in a proper review process

This is also the right time to put in place a proper performance review process.

There's no single 'right way' of running reviews – what works well for one company might not necessarily fit for another. The best process to use is the one that fits the context of your company and what you'd like your process to achieve.

You'll need to think about questions like:

- What type of feedback do we want to prioritise?

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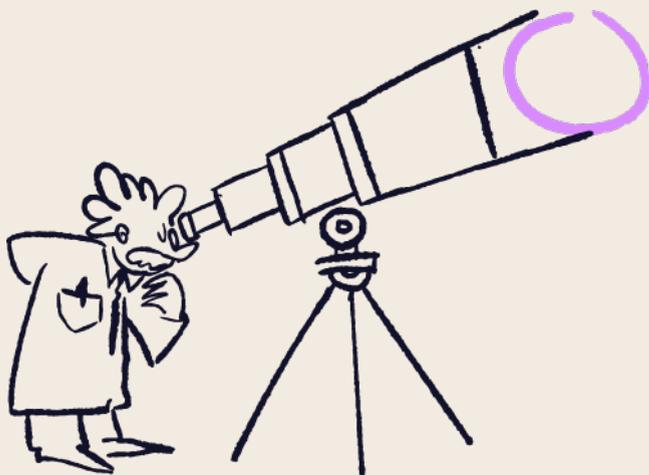
- How often can my team devote their time to running these reviews?

- What level of documentation do we want to commit to?

- How much extra work can I ask for my managers to take on?

These are important considerations – your answers to these will significantly dictate the shape of the right review process for your company.

You might decide, for example, that peer-to-peer, '360-degree' feedback is the way you want to go, and ask your team members to appraise each other on the behaviours they exhibit at work. Or you might decide that your team would benefit more from skill-specific feedback that is highly relevant to their individual roles – in which case a review process built around a manager-team member feedback would be more effective.
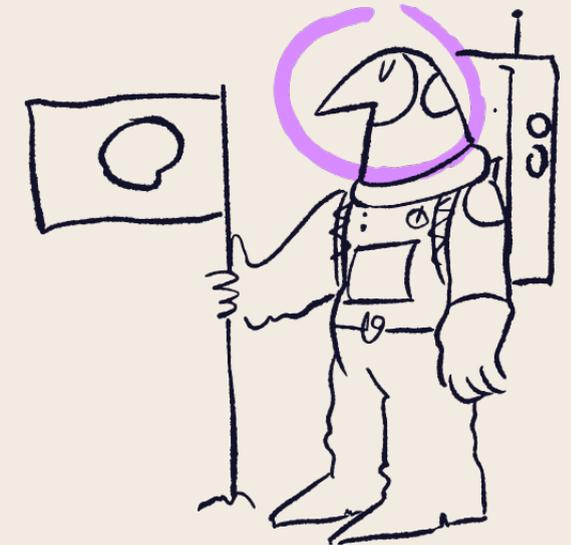
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The review process we use at CharlieHR

At Charlie, we believe the most crucial part of any review process is the conversation between manager and team member – that conversation is the single greatest factor in deciding whether a review process is useful and productive.

That's why we've built Charlie's review process in a way that prioritises meaningful conversations (and designed our Reviews software to help make that happen). Here's the review process we use at Charlie:

2. Their line manager shares their feedback

Next, the line manager will assess their self-feedback.

Then, they'll reply with their own feedback and share it with the team member via Charlie.

1. Team member completes their own self-feedback

First, we ask our team to reflect on the progress they've made towards their development goals, and then share these thoughts with their manager via Charlie's Reviews feature.

3. Now that it's been prepared for, the review meeting can take place

Asking the team member to reflect on their own development and sharing those thoughts with their manager helps to make this conversation as meaningful and productive as possible.

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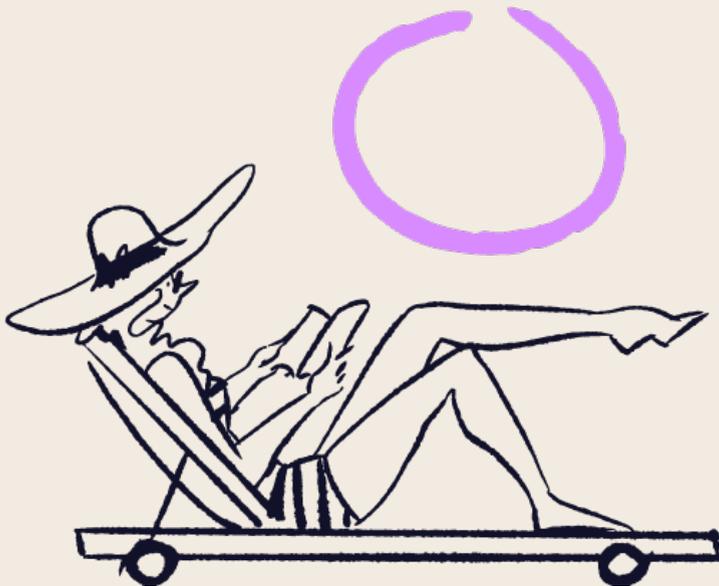
Scaling up

Below the 30-person headcount, I think you can get away with a fairly informal approach to career progression.

At that size, team members tend to pick up new roles and responsibilities as and when they appear – and for a while, that works just fine.

Your team will always have questions about their career progression – questions like:

- What do I need to do in order to progress?

- Do I have to become a manager in order to get a promotion?

- When will I be considered for promotion?

- When do I talk about progression?

- Where can progression lead me?

- What roles and responsibilities can I grow into?

When you've got a small team, you're able to hold these questions in your head and keep on top of each team member's individual progression. But when you're talking about 30 team members, all at different stages of their career and with different aspirations, that just isn't possible anymore.

This is when it becomes essential to put in place a career progression framework.

With a career progression framework, you're able to:

- Give managers the guidelines they need to answer key questions about career progression

- Define a tangible path forward for every person at the company

- Provide objective standards to measure when someone is ready for promotion or pay rise

- Give your team clarity and consistency on exactly how they can make progress professionally
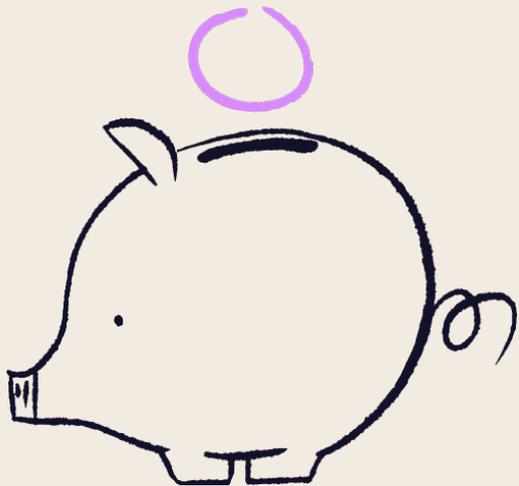
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When people talk about a progression framework, they are really talking about three elements:

1. The career progression framework itself

The first of these is the framework itself – this lists out the different behaviours and competencies attached to each level, and defines exactly what a team member needs to do in order to progress from one level to the next. It also sets out how your company intends to deal with the difference between managers and individual contributors.

Click here to download the Progression Framework we use internally at Charlie.

2. The career pathways

The second part of the framework is an overview of the career pathways – or the potential routes for promotion that are available across different job functions.

Click here to download the career pathways that we use internally at Charlie.

3. The roll out

The final (and most important) piece of this puzzle is putting all this theory into practice and rolling the framework out to our team.It doesn't matter how much time, money or effort you pour into a progression framework – if that framework only exists on paper, then it might as well not exist at all. For it to be considered a success, you need to take your new framework off the page and make it a living, breathing part of your company's day-to-day.

Click here to download the slide we used to roll out our framework internally at Charlie

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