Sample Conversation Starters

Giving developmental feedback using positive language...
You are so good at gathering information from a variety of sources. We need to find a way to improve your ability to synthesize and make recommendations based on the information up to the same level. Can you think of ways we could do this?

You are exceptional at face-to-face customer service. We need to figure out how to get your management of my calendar up to the same level of excellence. How might we do this?

Making a statement to the employee inviting developmental self-appraisal...
How might you improve your performance in ________________ (telephone customer service, meeting deadlines, eliminating mistakes from documents, etc.)?
Can you think of ways you might get better at ________________ (specific area needing improvement?)
What might help increase your effectiveness at ________________?
When you consider your performance at (specific area needing improvement), what skills might you improve?

When you want someone to talk about why they did something...
Help me understand your decision making process...
Help me understand your reasons for approaching the situation in that way...
Can you say some more about that?
Can you say more about your reasons for approaching it that way?

How can you create more active participation and involvement in the review? Ask questions to encourage employees to “self evaluate”.
Overall, how do you feel your performance has been?
Can you identify one or two areas you feel you have excelled at, or projects you’ve been involved in that have been great successes?
Are there any areas where you feel you could improve?
What would help you improve in those areas?
What things do you feel have gotten in the way of improving performance?
What do you need from me?

It is important for managers to remain curious and ask well-phrased questions which guide employees to look at their own performance and work behavior. Here are a few guidelines regarding the use of questions:

Don’t ask questions when you are not prepared to hear the answers: Sometimes people ask questions but are willing to accept only a specific answer. When you ask a question, you have to be willing to consider whatever responses you get and not overreact.
Sample Conversation Starters

Questions that start with “why” tend to make people feel defensive: You can replace why questions with phrasing that tends not to cause that reaction. For example, rather than asking, “Why are you late so often?” try, “Are there any particular things that are getting in the way of arriving at work on time?” Notice the difference in feel?

Don’t use questions to say things indirectly: For example, “Don’t you think you should be more diligent in completing your work?” isn’t really a legitimate question. It’s a rhetorical question or your opinion dressed up as a question. It will be heard as “I want you to be more diligent in completing your work.” Questions used to mask statements, opinions or requests create mistrust.

Avoid compound questions: A compound question consists of several parts: it’s actually several questions in one. Compound questions are confusing and tend to result in low-quality responses. Here’s an example: “Is there some reason why you have been late on many Fridays and why you tend to leave early on Wednesdays? That’s two questions and you’re not likely to get good answers to both. Separate the issues and make your questions simpler and more specific.