

The Secret To Effective One-On-One Meetings With Direct Reports

By Kristi Hedges, November 11, 2013

It's a fundamental rule of management that to lead others you need to practice frequent and open communication. The general wisdom is that managers can best accomplish this by holding regular one-on-one meetings with direct reports, usually weekly or close to it. It's certainly a simple idea that sounds good, but yet so many managers and direct reports alike complain that these meetings are unhelpful — or worse, don't actually happen at all.

Why is having a one-hour meeting once a week so hard?

First, we know we're supposed to have them, but aren't always sure what makes them productive. We may err on the side of being too unstructured and loose, or have so much on our own plates that it's a one-way delegation session. We may find that they unearth some simmering conflict or complaints, and prefer to avoid the sensitive topics, or blow off the meeting entirely.

So, in the spirit of bettering these less-than-satisfying conversations that do take up quite a bit of real estate on our calendars, here are some ways to be sure that you and your direct reports are getting the most out of them:

1. Have a schedule and stick to it.

Although it's a nice idea to think you can catch up with your direct reports on the fly, that's harder to do in reality. By making a commitment to a schedule, whether once a week or once a month, both parties will better prepare and take the meeting more seriously. This is often the prime time for work to be discussed and advanced, so this time on the front end saves you dearly on the back end.

It's natural that other work may come up that causes you to reschedule, but beware. I can't count the number of complaints I've heard from employees that their managers never stick to their one-on-ones — sending the message that the employee is the most expendable action item on the schedule. Try to stick with the meetings and have cancellations be the exception.

2. Share the air.

Structure your meetings so it's partly about what you need to discuss, and also about what your direct report needs to raise. It shouldn't be just a one-way delegation of tasks.

Good one-on-ones are a conversation, and for that to be successful you need to be receptive, as this article in Harvard Business Review points out. I suggest starting with what the direct report needs to discuss, and then moving to your own list (which you've prepared ahead of time). Your employee will take your lead — so if you come with thoughts ready to go, they will as well.

It's also important to leave time to discuss open issues. This is a great chance to cover those less urgent items, like a promotion path or difficulty with a colleague, that get in the way of productivity and retention. Better to know early, as it may be a problem that's easily resolved, and can give you insight into ways to keep your team more productive.

3. Be present.

Clearly, presence is a concept that fascinates me since I wrote a book about it. So many of us struggle with how to get it, and keep it, amidst so much distraction. Giving someone our full, uninterrupted presence is a gift that makes a big impact. It's so rare, and I believe is a large part of what people mean when they say someone has "presence."

The one-on-one meeting is a perfect time to practice being present and free from distraction. It's not easy, but it is possible with intention. Come to the meeting focused and committed — don't schedule between back-to-back meetings so you come late and have to cut out on the dot. (One trick: schedule

meetings for 45 minutes rather than an hour.) Keep off your phone and email, and close your door to limit interruptions.

When you're truly engaging with a co-worker or direct report, you're not only showing them respect; you're also able to really take in what they're saying and use everyone's valuable time wisely.

4. Manage accountabilities.

As with any good meeting, it should wrap with accountabilities and a path for follow up. We all know it's easy to listen and absorb ideas when you're in the moment, and then to forget them when your attention is inevitably diverted.

Make sure to schedule the last few minutes of the meeting for each of you to go through and say what you're committing to and by when. For best results this should also be followed up with an email from your direct to you, restating what's supposed to happen. Depending on the project, it also may be useful to set up a milestone to update each other.

5. Manage to a structure.

Of course all meetings are different, and you need to work with a style that's doable for you. That said, if you can find a structure and manage to it, you'll find that the conversations will naturally fit into those expectations. It's your job as the manager to honor the time and facilitate the discussion.

Following all of the above, a good structure for a 45-minute, weekly one-on-one meeting is:

- 15 Mins: What your direct report needs to raise with you, get approved, etc.
- 15 Mins: What you need to raise with your direct, delegate, provide feedback on, etc.
- 10 Mins: Free time to air any long-term concerns, progress toward development goals, etc.
- 5 Mins: State accountabilities and make a plan for follow up

As a side benefit, you'll find that when you follow this type of format, it becomes easier to provide constructive feedback and to address issues before they become big problems as there's a space set aside for it. It also supports proactivity and strategic thinking because everyone knows that they are expected to come to the table ready to share.

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