



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H031XS
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
AUGUST 08, 2016

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One-on-one meetings with direct reports often feel more hurried and disorganized than they need to be. It's important to check in regularly with each of your employees, but how can you make the best use of the time? How can you make the meetings more productive and collaborative? What do you need to change as the manager and what do you need to ask your direct report to do differently as well?

What the Experts Say

In the digital age, we tend to communicate with direct reports via email, IM, phone, and text. But nothing quite beats a face-to-face, one-on-one meeting, says Elizabeth Grace Saunders, the author of *How to Invest Your Time Like Money*, and the founder of *Real Life E Time Coaching & Training*. “One-on-ones are one of the most important productivity tools you have as a manager,” she says. “They are where you can ask strategic questions such as, are we focused on the right things? And from a rapport point of view, they are how you show employees that you value them and care about them.” In light of this dual purpose, running an effective one-on-one meeting “requires real cognitive agility,” says Margaret Moore, CEO of Wellcoaches Corporation and co-author of *Organize Your Emotions, Optimize Your Life*. Your goal is to show your “commitment to helping your colleague develop and grow,” but also to “step back, remember the organizational mandate, and think about how best you can work side-by-side with this person to get things done.” Here are some tips to get the most out of these meetings.

Block regular time in your schedules

The frequency with which you have one-on-ones will vary depending on the size of your team, how big or small your organization is, how high-maintenance or experienced your employees are, and where you happen to sit in the org chart, says Saunders. It doesn’t necessarily matter how often they occur, but it is important “that you schedule them on your calendar as a repeating event,” she adds. This is for your own good — when employees know they have a standing meeting, they are less likely to barrage you with a “constant stream of interruptions.” Experiment with frequency until you find the right rhythm. A few other logistical matters: one, show up on time. “If you arrive 10 minutes late to a 20-minute meeting, that’s frustrating to your employee,” says Saunders. Two, **don’t cancel** at the last minute. “That sends the exact opposite of the message that you’re trying to communicate.”

Prepare discussion points

“In an ideal world, you and your colleague would **collaborate on an agenda ahead of time**,” says Saunders. But workday pressures and time constraints often get the better of us. A more realistic goal may be to jot down a list of bullet points that you’d like to discuss. Ask your direct report to do the same. Once you’re face-to-face, Saunders recommends comparing lists and doing some “loose **timeboxing**” to make sure you have time to cover the most pressing points. “You need to set expectations around what’s most important and create an incentive to focus,” she says. “If the conversation diverges, it’s your responsibility to get it back on track.” That said, it’s also important to be flexible, says Moore. In other words, you need some structure but not too much. These meetings are best when you and your colleague are in “co-creative mode,” she says. Decide together what you’ll reasonably accomplish in the time allotted: Are there items that can be tabled for another time?

Be fully present

When it’s time for the one-on-one, you need to “shift gears and get out of autopilot,” says Moore. Don’t think of the meeting as just another item on your to-do list; instead, consider it a “precious moment of connection. Think, ‘I’m here to make a difference in the life of this person.’” Devote your full attention to your employee. Turn off your phone, and mute your computer so as not to risk being

distracted by pings or rings. “It’s so easy to send a message inadvertently that you don’t care about the other person and that whatever is on your phone is more important,” says Moore.

Start positive

Saunders suggests beginning the meeting “by [sharing a win](#).” You might, for instance, compliment your colleague on a presentation she gave. “Say, ‘I know you worked hard on and that, and I think it went very well.’ It’s a great way to start a one-on-one because it creates positive energy.”

Problem solve

One-on-one meetings are good venues to take on big strategic questions and problem solve. It’s important that you “strike a balance” between asking questions and [listening](#) to what your colleague has to say,” says Moore. Remember, “You are there to learn.” Some managers ask employees to build a template listing the challenges they’re facing along with potential solutions in advance of their meetings, says Saunders. “This forces the employee to go through the problem-solving process ahead of time,” she adds. “Then you, as the manager, can offer constructive feedback.”

Ask questions about career plans

Although you should prioritize pressing issues and those of strategic importance, don’t neglect the personal. One-on-ones can be a good opportunity to help your team members be more thoughtful about their careers and lives. “You need to take in your colleague as a whole human being,” says Moore. “Be curious.” While some managers like to [talk about professional development](#) at every meeting, “others like to do it at every other,” says Saunders. It’s up to you, but if you plan to touch on career plans, it’s prudent to give your employee a heads up because those conversations “require reflection and thought,” she says. “Give employees the time and space to think about what they want to express” before you broach the subject. Once you’re face-to-face, Saunders recommends asking direct but open-ended questions about your report’s goals. “This is helpful for keeping people motivated and on track,” she says.

Express gratitude

Close the meeting as you began it — with positivity. Moore recommends, “ending with a note of appreciation and [gratitude](#).” She’s not suggesting a drawn-out syrupy Oscar speech. Just “slow down and say ‘Thank you.’ It’s five seconds. It’s a moment of pause.” Saunders agrees that “words of affirmation” mean a lot to employees. “Don’t say something if it’s not genuine or doesn’t feel authentic to you, but if you can talk about something they’re doing well or say something like, ‘I appreciate and value what you’re doing,’” it’s powerful.

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Begin each meeting by sharing a win. It creates positive energy.

- Notify your employee in advance if you plan to touch on professional development — those conversations require reflection and thought.
- Be curious. Listen to your colleague’s concerns and provide feedback and ideas on how she might solve problems.

Don’t:

- Cancel. Demonstrate to your employee that he takes priority by arriving on time.
- Be rigid. While it’s wise to have an agenda, it’s also important to be flexible.
- Forget to say “thank you.” It’s important to show your colleague that you value him.

Case Study #1: Keep the conversation going by asking open-ended questions

Anand Sanwal, the CEO and founder of CB Insights, a company that provides predictive intelligence on the health of private companies, admits that he wasn’t always good at running one-on-one meetings with his team members. “I made a series of bad assumptions,” says Anand, who has standing one-on-one meetings with his team members every two weeks.

“I used to open with a generic, ‘How’s it going?’ But often the answers were terse and not very substantive.” Anand realized that he needed to get more from these meetings — both for his sake and the sake of his six direct reports. So now before each one-on-one, Anand inserts a series of questions into the meeting calendar invites. The questions — for example, Who do you admire in the organization and why? What is the biggest opportunity we’re missing out on? What don’t you like about our product? — are meant to help “get the conversation going,” he says.

Recently, he had a one-on-one with one of his star performers — we’ll call him Sam. “He is a rock star,” says Anand. “We throw a lot at him and everything he does, he does well.”

After Anand and Sam had discussed tactical issues, Anand turned to the questions. He asked Sam, “What’s your favorite part about what you do?”

Sam’s answer was telling. It turns out that Sam was overwhelmed and felt he was being pulled in too many directions. Sam was also concerned that he wasn’t getting the skills he needed to progress in his career.

Based on that one-on-one, Anand realized that he needed to do a better job defining Sam’s role. “We didn’t get that done in the 45-minute meeting, but it started a conversation about how to get stuff off of his plate, whether we need to hire other people, or whether we need to stop doing certain things,” he says. “It was a good talk and something actionable came out of it.”

Case Study #2: Share discussion points ahead of time, but be flexible

Ray Bixler, president and CEO of SkillSurvey, the Berwyn, Pennsylvania-based reference checking

technology company that help organizations make better hiring decisions, aims to meet with each of his direct reports on a weekly basis.

“I can’t say I’m perfect but I try hard never to cancel,” he says. “And if I do need to cancel, I make sure I reschedule the meeting for sometime during the same week. I want to demonstrate the meeting’s importance.”

Ray says he uses “a methodical, structured process” for his one-on-ones. For example, in his meetings with SkillSurvey’s chief marketing officer, Michelle Reed, “there are certain recurring themes.” Each week, they talk about regional strategies and programs, and recent marketing successes and frustrations.

Ray also keeps a running list of other issues he wants to discuss that change on a weekly basis. These include things like a particular hiring decision or personnel issue. He sends his list of bullet points to Michelle a day in advance and she does the same.

Ray also understands the necessity of staying flexible. At his most recent meeting with Michelle, the typical agenda was pushed to the side. “We recently had our client advisory meeting, followed by our quarterly executive off-site so we spent the first 30 minutes debriefing,” he says. “I wanted to hear the feedback from clients, get her input on what we could do differently, and learn what she thought about the product roadmap strategy that emerged.”

Michelle had also recently been given the new responsibility of overseeing the lead generation team and she wanted to talk with me about how she should create compensation plans for that team.” Ray helped her problem-solve.

He ended the meeting as he always does, however — by connecting with Michelle on a personal level and asking about her plans for the weekend. “I care about my employees as individuals. I want them to know that I appreciate them and what they do.”

Rebecca Knight is a freelance journalist in Boston and a lecturer at Wesleyan University. Her work has been published in The New York Times, USA Today, and The Financial Times.
