

The Virtual One-to-One: Our Top Tips

Talking to our clients, it seems as if one-to-one meetings between manager and direct report can be added to the growing list of conversational touch points which have suffered during the pandemic. In some cases, these conversations, which are primarily designed for the benefit of the direct report, are not happening at all. Or, they may be happening but instead of being focused upon the individual's agenda and concerns or questions around growth and career development, the meetings have become much more task-focused and transactional with many managers and teams still in 'crisis mode'.

Avoiding the more personal and exploratory one-to-one discussion is nothing new. Talking about 'The Work' is inherently easier than the less clear-cut discussion of performance, development, aspirations or, scariest of all, "Feelings"! It is natural for managers to feel less comfortable in a conversational domain where they may not have all the answers.

However, it has perhaps never been as important for managers to make the time for their staff. We live in uncertain and unsettling times with employees operating under considerable pressure, often juggling the competing demands of working remotely with childcare, home schooling, and caring for sick or elderly relatives. Work has never been busier, home has never been busier, and now, work *is* home!

In addition, working apart from one another can naturally degrade our sense of connection and purpose with our work. Losing that connection can in turn result in misunderstanding of priorities, a lack of motivation and paranoia about "what is really going on here?"

We would suggest that those leaders who give the time, space and consideration to their employees and *their* agendas, priorities and questions will reap the rewards of stronger working relationships, respect and trust in the long term.

Our Top Tips:

1. One-to-Ones conducted from home can be a good thing!

This is one conversation where being forced to have them at home may actually be a good thing! A personal one-to-one from home may offer individuals greater psychological safety vs. the artificial formality of the

office. It humanizes both participants when you can see into each other's homes and potentially catch glimpses of partners and children! We, in turn, may feel less stiff and awkward when it comes to talking about more personal issues.

2. Always deal with your direct report's agenda first

Be clear from the outset that this time is dedicated to your member of staff. It's their time with you to use in whatever way they feel is most helpful to them. You may well have items which you would like to raise with them too, but these should wait until they have had their opportunity to direct the conversation. It is probably sensible to make this clear in advance of your meeting so they have had a chance to think about what they want to bring to the conversation.

3. Ask what sort of conversation they would like to have

In addition to the above, you may want to open your meeting by asking what sort of conversation they would like to have. What will help them most? To use you as a sounding board for an idea? To ask for your advice? To raise an issue? To problem-solve? Establishing what they are looking for from you in that conversation from the outset enables you to make sure you are responding appropriately.

4. Be patient and be generous with your time

Don't rush these conversations. Or, frankly, if you have no choice but to rush, better to postpone to when you have more time. Whizzing through can leave the impression of a lack of genuine care or interest. As such, try to avoid scheduling these meetings at a very busy time when you may need to cut an important or sensitive conversation short.

5. Listen hard, listen well, and check your understanding

Your primary role in these interactions is not, as many presume, to talk and to lead, but to listen. Resist the temptation to interrupt or to begin to plan what you might say next while the other person is still talking. Sometimes what an individual may value most of all is the opportunity to be heard. Moreover, giving somebody your undivided attention is one of the simplest ways to convey your respect and care.

Check your understanding by 'playing back' what you believe you have heard. This provides the other party the opportunity to clarify or refine their thoughts and gives you confidence that you have understood their view / problem / idea properly.

6. You are not an oracle – it's ok not to have all the answers!

Managers can often be made to feel like they need to have all the answers. And will, therefore, avoid conversations where it is possible they may not have them!

Having management responsibilities does not make you an oracle! It is perfectly acceptable to say you don't know something. If it is something you can find out, let them know when you will get back to them. Often though, there will be no clear answer or solution – and that is perhaps not even what is required.

7. Resist the temptation to gloss over or minimise fears and concerns

The urge to reassure or to make people 'feel better' can be strong. Of course, sometimes we find ourselves in a strong position to be able to do just that, usually as a result of providing clarity around a problem or situation, or by endorsing a proposed approach. However, sometimes, we cannot provide comfort, particularly when the future looks uncertain. Resist the temptation to provide reassurance when it may only be artificial. This can leave employees feeling patronised or, worse still, misled.

Focus instead on being very clear on the things you are able to be clear about, honest about where there are unknowns, transparent about what you plan to do with an individual's concerns and always deliver, without having to be reminded, on any commitments that you make.

Communication in 2020 and beyond - let's make it better

Feel free to share these thoughts as widely as you like

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