



The One Secret Really Good Managers Know

A Guide for Conducting One-on-One Employee Meetings

Are you providing the right amount of direction, guidance and support for your employees? One of the most meaningful management practices you can adopt is having regular occurring one-on-one check-ins with each of your employees. Many managers dread the thought of more meetings. Some managers even view meetings as not being “real work.”

These types of meetings are different. They are a chance to set expectations, follow-up on projects and goals, learn how you can be of support to your employee and in general create space to talk about the work. Maybe more important though is the opportunity to build trust and cultivate a relationship with the employee. These types of meetings are different because they demonstrate to employees that you care about them and appreciate and value the work they do.

Tips for One-one-One Check-ins

- Before you begin talk to your employees about these meetings. Explain why you’re doing them. Emphasize that no one is in trouble (some will think this) and what they can expect—you want to discuss their work, where they are with different projects and goals, what help or assistance they need from you, issues preoccupying them, anything getting in the way of their work, development opportunities, etc.
- Meet weekly, bi-weekly or monthly (don’t go longer than a month between meetings). Typically an hour is needed to cover everything. Keep in mind that the more frequent you meet the shorter these meetings could potentially be. Once you decide on the frequency, set these as a reoccurring meeting on both of your calendars. Routine is an important part of the structure of these check-ins.
- Reschedule whenever possible. Don’t cancel. Things will come up and you’ll need to adjust from time to time. Canceling (without rescheduling) signals that this isn’t really that important to you. When you do need to postpone propose another time to meet.
- This is not optional—meaning you meet with some but not others. It’s important to meet with everyone individually. Chatting briefly in the hallway or breakroom about what’s going on also doesn’t count.

Why it matters?

In addition to keeping you connected to the work that each employee is doing, one-on-ones build strong, trusting relationships with employees. We all get busy and focused on other things. When we carve out the time to meet individually with employees, we signal to them that we care about them and we care about the work they do.

- Have your employee create your agenda for the meeting (to bring with them or send in advance, your choice). You may want to give some parameters to assist people. One option is asking for the “big rocks”—what are the two to three most important or pressing items for your employee currently. Or, you may wish to focus on some or all of these areas: where they are with different projects and goals, help or assistance they need from you, issues preoccupying them, anything getting in the way of their work, development opportunities. No need to be a stickler on the format. A word document or excel spreadsheet works fine—whatever they are most comfortable with.
- Meet in private. Your office, the employees office, a conference room, going for a walk, or going to lunch or to a coffee shop are all options. Decide what both of you are comfortable with.
- In person meetings are preferred, but when an employee works remotely or proximity is a challenge, you’ll have to get creative. Luckily technological advances have made this easier. Utilize Skype or the telephone to connect. Avoid trying to conduct these type of meetings through email—it’s not what the medium is intended for and can open the door for a miscommunication.
- Know that in the beginning these meetings might feel a bit awkward for you both. Be prepared to do more of the talking initially as you build rapport (and a relationship).
- These meetings are in addition to team meetings. As important as it is to meet individually, it’s also important to bring the entire team together as well.

Common Concerns

One-on-one check-ins may be easier said than done. Most leaders understand the benefit and agree with their importance but other “stuff” gets in the way. Here are some common barriers we’ve heard from leaders:

“I’m too busy!”

This is true for many; however, you cannot afford not to make these meetings a priority. This is a part of everyday management. In fact, the time you devote to these meetings will keep an ongoing conversation about the work going and this may save you time in the end. Being able to learn about a small issue before it becomes a major problem is huge! Learning that an employee is struggling with a project and seeks out your advice early on will surely prevent this project from ending poorly.

“I have way too many employees to make this work!”

Do the best you can. That might mean meeting with each employee for only 15 minutes once a month. We’ve worked with many leaders who managed 20+ employees at one time and they have found a way to schedule regular ongoing check-ins with them. When asked how they do it, they just do—they recognize the importance of these meetings and make it a priority over other things. They also know it’s too important not to do them.

“I’ve done these types of meetings before and all the employee wants to talk about is his or her personal life.”

Be clear early on about the purpose of these meetings. Plan ahead—create an agenda and stick to it. Do know though that from time to time it is appropriate for an employee to share details about his or her personal life. And, it’s actually a good thing! This is especially true if those personal details are impacting or could impact the employee’s work in some way.

I don’t know what to say in these types of meetings.

Whether you’re unsure of what to say or how to get and keep the discussion going consider these questions to get the most of your one-on-ones:

- Tell me about your week?

- What are your “big rocks” for the upcoming week?
- What’s causing you frustration?
- How is the project going?
- What questions do you have about this project or area of responsibility?
- Are you on track to meet the deadline?
- How are you going to approach this project/challenge?
- Is there anything getting in the way of you getting your work done or completed on time?
- How can I better support you?
- Is there anything you need from me?
- How is everything going?
- What was your high and low of the past week?

Don’t forget to use some clarifying questions when you get short responses or aren’t getting enough information:

- Tell me more...
- Why?
- When you say _____ what does that mean?
- Could you describe _____ in a little more detail for me?

Conclusion

One-on-ones are vital for your success as a manager well as the success of your employees. They provide an opportunity to build a relationship, set and follow-up on expectations, provide support and keep an ongoing conversation about the work going. Sometimes the hardest part is to simply start doing them, but you’ll soon reap the benefits of increased trust, accountability and engagement.

References:

- Tulgan, Bruce. 2007. It’s Okay to be the Boss. New York, NY. Harper Collins Publishers
- Lighthouse. The One on One Meeting Template Great Leaders Use. <https://getlighthouse.com/blog/one-on-one-meeting-template-great-leaders/>