

The Ultimate Guide to One-on-One Conversations



THE WHY

Over the past few years, the benefits of having people-centric conversations have become increasingly clear. We need to talk to each other more often and more effectively. We need to ensure that employees' objectives are clear, appropriately challenging and aligned with business goals. We need to understand what motivates our people - their aspirations and passions - and we want to improve their wellbeing.

If we can help employees to understand and navigate their work objectives and personal drivers, we can have a real impact on productivity, performance, wellbeing, engagement and retention.

Creating a regular cadence of conversations (even on hybrid teams) allowing time to discuss motivation and wellbeing, include some feedback as well as objective-setting and performance, enables a culture of performance development.

There are no shortcuts to trust and collaboration. However shiny the tools are that we buy to communicate and share, they're still reliant on the motivation, engagement and wellbeing of the people using them.

An app like Slack (or Hubspot, or Salesforce, or whatever) may have transformed the way you communicate, measure or convert, but if you never take the time to tell your people that they're doing a great job, those productivity gains will be blunted by their lassitude and disengagement.

And let's not forget that it's a job-hunter's market out there, and it's not so very hard to find a new employer with exactly the same tools you're using AND a manager who might, once in a while, remember to offer some positive feedback and encouragement.

One-on-ones are focused on a simple but powerful approach to performance management. Take a little time to get to know someone. Use what you know to enrich their working life. Tell them they're doing a good job. Help them find ways to do their job better.



“ I'm having trouble balancing my responsibilities at work with my personal life. ”

THE WHEN, WHERE AND HOW

Ongoing performance management starts with the employee taking responsibility for their own performance. This is their chance to discuss the great stuff they're doing and to flag potential roadblocks; to share what really drives them.

This is their moment to tap into their manager's knowledge, experience and (for want of a better word) connectivity. Who in the business could I collaborate with to get this project over the line? Who can spend half an hour to bring me up to speed on this issue?

This is why these meetings need to happen with a reasonable frequency. Are we aligned? Are we on track? What's getting in the way?

Remember that one-on-ones are NOT annual performance reviews. You might find that you and your team can open up more at a coffee shop or over lunch instead of a meeting room at the office.

We need to recognize that many factors contribute to high performance. Our personal lives have a bearing on our professional lives. Our aspirations, hobbies and interests influence the way we learn, develop and grow. The more we understand this, the better we can craft these conversations to tailor solutions for everyone's benefit.



“

My workload has felt a little overwhelming lately.

”

THE WHO

Just as we've all had a bad manager at some point in our career, we've probably all had a fantastic one. The kind of manager who has time to listen. The kind of manager that responds in the moment, guides you when you come unstuck, sends you in the right direction and shows their appreciation when you reach your destination.

It starts with setting aside time regularly for honest 1:1 conversations. Availability is tough, we're all busy. But if you're always cancelling or rescheduling the conversations, it shows that the individual in question is not as important as you say.

If the manager can do these things — if they can set these meetings, do the prep, and stick to them — they'll send off a clear signal: the employee's performance, welfare and engagement are important to them.

Regular meetings means team members can get timely, focused feedback. The situation in today's workplace can change on a dime. Meanwhile, a team member's personal life can also change dramatically over the course of a year. These one-on-one conversations are your opportunity to coach team members, offer honest feedback, and learn how you can support them through personal and professional challenges alike. People improve incrementally, making it important to have conversations on a day-by-day basis rather than once a year.

Getting to know your teams better — their strengths, their development areas and what motivates them. These are “soft” qualities broken down into hard data. If people are truly your most valuable assets, as so many businesses say they are, this is your chance to really understand their value.

THE WHAT

A key part of effective one-on-one conversations is letting employees set the agenda. Let them identify the things that are most important to them and turn them into agenda points for each session. As a result, you can both focus this valuable time on topics that best meet their current needs.

As a leader, you can review this agenda ahead of time to prepare for the conversation and coach accordingly. A coaching approach is what elevates the one-to-one from a coffee room chat to an effective conversation. Remember to take accountability for actions, sign off tasks, review wins, set timescales for tasks, and schedule the next session.

Leverage the GROW model for these conversations:

- **Goal:** Where do you want to be?
- **Reality:** Where are you right now?
- **Options:** What can we do?
- **Way forward:** What are we going to do?

You don't have to have all the answers. You just have to listen, provide honest feedback, guide team members to solutions, and brainstorm productive ideas for moving forward.



“ I've been feeling disconnected from my team since we went remote. ”



“ I want to advance my career, but I'm not sure how. ”

IN REVIEW

We need space to be ourselves in the workplace

A one-to-one conversation is about people as well as objectives. The more people-centric you can make these meetings — the more you can address personal motivations, wellbeing and engagement — the more you'll address the needs of the whole person and create a stronger, more effective and more trusting relationship.

Managers need time to manage

Leaders should send a clear signal: managers need to take these meetings. If you want this to work, people need to talk to each other. It may be only 30 mins per employee, but if these are consistently skipped then it sends a message to both employees and other managers: leaders aren't taking this seriously.

People tend to leave managers, not jobs

This is such a well-known piece of wisdom but it's worth repeating. An employee's relationship with their manager defines their relationship with their job. If that relationship can move to a closer, more open one, that's going to do wonders for retention.

The war for talent is real

Arguably, this was true before the pandemic, but it's even truer now. High-quality people have never been in such demand. A robust performance management process and tool will support your employer brand... think better comments on Glassdoor and LinkedIn just for starters.

Purpose, not paychecks

Actually, of course we want paychecks... it's still the number one reason people go to work. But we also want to work in a place where we feel part of something, where we're aligned with what the business is doing. Clearer goal-setting, clearer communication and prompt feedback on results will all contribute to this.

People hate the alternative

Normally we wouldn't try to draw a positive from a negative. But it's true. If you're still doing performance appraisal annually, you'll know what a colossal drain on time and resources it can be. Breaking up those hours into small chunks spread over the year is surely preferable to forcing down one huge indigestible chunk before April.



What is my goal and how will my progress be measured?



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