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Leadership

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8 Ways to Ruin Your One-on-Ones

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Jason Wick has more than a decade of experience as an engineering manager, QA manager, team lead, automation engineer, audio tester, and manual tester. After working in a variety of fields from video games to music software, Jason has dramatically shifted his perspective on the role of testing and QA inside a team over the past few years. Jason currently lives in Colorado with his wife, two children, and guinea pig while working at MakeMusic in Boulder.

8 Ways to Ruin Your One-on-Ones

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Introduction

- Who** Me, my reports, my peers, & **YOU**
- What** Best (or worst) practices for 1-on-1s
- When** Previous 2+ years and ongoing
- Where** MakeMusic in Boulder, Colorado
- Why** Share what I've learned and help you have better 1-on-1s



The 1-on-1: Defined

(AKA “Touch Base,” “Sync Up”)

“A 1-1 is a dedicated space...for open-ended and anticipated conversation between a manager and an employee....”

- Asana

<https://wavelength.asana.com/workstyle-what-is-a-1-1/>



Two Stats and an Opinion

- “75% of people say their immediate supervisor is the most stressful part of their job”
http://www.hoganassessments.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Hogan_TL_Yearbook_14.pdf
- A boss in the upper 10% of boss quality provides a productivity increase equivalent to adding a person to a nine member team
<https://www.nber.org/papers/w18317.pdf>
- “Ninety minutes of your time can enhance the quality of your subordinate’s work for two weeks”
Andrew Grove, “High Output Management”



Connecting the Dots

- The Employee-Manager relationship is an important one
- A strong 1-on-1 approach is a good investment in yourself as a manager
- An effective 1-on-1 with your employee is a good investment in your employee



8 Ways to Ruin Your 1-on-1s

1. Cancel them because you're busy
2. Don't prepare
3. Dominate the conversation
4. Use them as status updates
5. Be transactional
6. Have a strict agenda
7. Hold back on feedback
8. Focus only on the present



#1



DENIED
Cancel them because
you're busy

#1: Cancel them because you're busy

- You have lots of other meetings.
- You are pulled in many directions.
- Sure, you're a manager. You do your "real" work after hours.

BUT

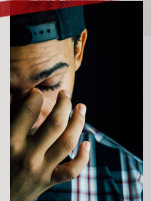
When you cancel a 1-on-1, **you are telling your employee s/he is not important enough** for your time.

#1: ~~Cancel them because you're busy~~

- ✓ Reschedule
- ✓ Have lunch together
- ✓ Send someone to your other meeting
- ✓ Reshuffle your schedule
- ✓ Shorten the length
- ✓ Reduce frequency



#2



#2: Don't prepare

- Positively, we know you care about your employees.
- Yes, we'd like 1-on-1s to be open-ended.
- Sure, you're very busy.

BUT

When you don't prepare for a 1-on-1, you are telling your employee you **haven't thought** about her/him until that moment.



~~#2: Don't prepare~~

- ✓ Carve out time to reflect on the previous 1-on-1
- ✓ Pay attention to what happens in between
- ✓ Spend a few minutes to anticipate the next 1-on-1
- ✓ Write it all down
- ✓ Expect the same from your employee





#3

DENIED
Dominate the conversation

#3: Dominate the conversation

- Yup, you have a lot of information to share.
- Conversational gaps can be uncomfortable.
- Yes, you have a lovely voice.

BUT

When you dominate the conversation, you are robbing your employee of the opportunity to **be heard.**

~~#3: Dominate the conversation~~

- ✓ Listen first and foremost
- ✓ Ask questions, ideally open-ended ones
- ✓ Leave some uncomfortable silence



#4

Use them as status updates



#4: Use them as status updates

- Yes, you really need to know how that project is going.
- Sure, the most efficient way to get that information is in your employee's 1-on-1.

BUT

Regularly getting status updates on a project in a 1-on-1 is a misuse of the 1-on-1's purpose.

~~#4: Use them as status updates~~

- ✓ Dive into the work your employee is doing, but frame questions with him/her as customer
 - “How are you feeling about Project A?”
 - “What help do you need to achieve the goal?”
- ✓ Have separate input for status
 - Meeting
 - Email
 - Slack
 - Spreadsheet



#5

Be transactional

DENIED



#5: Be transactional

- Sure, as manager you want information.
- Yes, you want it now.

BUT

Always “getting down to business” in the first minute of a 1-on-1 tends to make employees feel like resources rather than people.

#5: ~~Be transactional~~

- ✓ Take a minute to ask a personal question
- ✓ Build rapport over time
- ✓ You can do all this without trying to be their friend and without being fake



#6



#6: Have a strict agenda

- Yes, I just said a few minutes ago you should take the time to plan for your 1-on-1s
- And yes, you will have specific items you want to cover

BUT

Having too strict an agenda for a 1-on-1 reduces the likelihood of having genuine flowing conversation.

~~#6: Have a strict agenda~~

- ✓ Find balance and discipline
- ✓ Be okay with your preparation to be “wasted”
- ✓ You run your agenda; your agenda doesn’t run you



#7

Hold back on feedback

DENIED



#7: Hold back on feedback

- Yes, it's uncomfortable to criticize
- And also, you might even be uncomfortable giving someone compliments
- Sure, providing feedback can be painful

BUT

Holding back on feedback for your employee stunts her/his growth and impedes strong performance.

#7: Hold back on feedback

- ✓ Take advantage of the 1-on-1's built-in framework to provide performance feedback well before performance reviews
- ✓ Remember that positives are feedback too!
- ✓ Pay attention all the time and just tell the truth...
- ✓ ...in a constructive and contextually-appropriate way



#8

Focus only on the present

A large, tilted red stamp with the word "DENIED" in bold, black letters.

#8: Focus only on the present

- Yes, what the employee is working on right now is important to the company
- Yes, it's really hard to take time to look beyond the short-term

BUT

If you do not dedicate time for the future work and growth path for your employee ... bye bye!

~~#8: Focus only on the present~~

- ✓ Ask your employee what s/he would like to work on
- ✓ Periodically re-interview (“where do you see yourself in 5 years?”)
- ✓ Show that you care about your employee’s individual path for skill development



Takeaways for Managers

- ★ Make time
- ★ Reflect
- ★ Actively listen
- ★ Prepare
- ★ Set expectations
- ★ Pay attention
- ★ Treat employee as customer
- ★ Separate 1-on-1 meeting from status
- ★ Build rapport
- ★ Provide feedback
- ★ Care about path

Sync Cycle



Resources

Dare to Lead, Brene Brown <https://daretolead.brenebrown.com/>

Farnam Street, <https://fs.blog/>

Forbes Leadership, <https://www.forbes.com/leadership>

Harvard Business Review, <https://hbr.org/>

Lighthouse Blog, <https://getlighthouse.com/blog/>

MIT Sloan Management Review, <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/>

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