

ONE-ON-ONES – THE PULSE OF AN ORGANISATION

Of all the management strategies I've ever seen or used, the monthly one-on-one system, in which a manager takes time out to have a productive, reflective discussion with each employee and create an action plan of 1 thing the employee is going to improve by the following month, is a stand-out. It is also the single greatest weapon for winning the staff retention battle. I say this because the most important relationship in an organisation, is the one that exists between an employee and his immediate supervisor. If this connection flourishes, so does the business. This is what one-on-ones cultivate. They are a superb tool for managers to build strong bonds with team members which is why learning how to do them well is the best leadership training ever.

They also:

- a) **Identify common problems to be acted on:** One-on-ones enable leaders to gauge the pulse of an organisation and find out what's *really* going on. If one person says that the new IT system is twice as cumbersome as the old one, or that customer enquiries have plummeted because of poor ads, then that individual may just be a whinger, or externalising to compensate for their own lack of results. But if everyone is highlighting the same issue, then it's something real that needs to be addressed. For instance our UK employees kept telling us that our charter flight booking system was ineffective. (They actually used a very effective four letter word to describe how ineffective it was). This became a key organisational system change. By keeping everyone updated monthly on what was happening to source and build a new one over the next 12 months, we didn't lose anyone over this issue. It's a win-win. The organisation identifies and solves common problems and employees, empowered when their voices are heard and acted on, are far less likely to leave.
- b) **Inspire with the big picture:** It's so easy for both employees and managers alike to get caught up in day to day activities, focusing only on perspiration, not inspiration. Yet employees want to work for organisations that have a clear direction and purpose that engages and enthuses them. One-on-ones create a dedicated time for telling the business story, including people in the vision and sharing with them how their actions contribute to moving the business forward. If people feel like and are genuinely part of something bigger than themselves, they become more motivated and productive, and are less likely to leave.
- c) **Help people develop, both personally and professionally:** By flipping from the conventional appraisal attitude of telling or disciplining, to a more open approach of listening, exploring and resolving, one-on-ones become a power tool for improving people's skills and capability. The added bonus is that there's rarely any need to sack anyone. When people face up squarely to poor performance each month through the non-achievement of their own action plans, they either improve or leave of their own volition. This cuts the need for HR mediators too, because when people are talking to each other regularly, they don't need a middleman to sort out problems.

Ironically all of the above occur naturally in a start-up business. When an enterprise consists of a small, agile team, communication and trust are a natural part of this process. Everyone knows what's going on, are an integral part of the big picture, can make change and through the chief's hands-on involvement, give and receive regular meaningful feedback.

Yet as an organisation grows, so does the need for a formalised one-on-one system, at every level. The head of finance needs to do them with her team, the IT chief with his technicians, the regional manager with his business leaders, the CEO with the executive team and so on. It's only in this way that larger organisations can replicate the responsiveness of a smaller enterprise.

A study by Bersin and Associates¹ found that actionable development plans alone result in twice the revenue per employee and a 27% lower staff turnover rate. Yet still most businesses don't use them, preferring to stick with their conventional unproductive annual appraisal system. As the HR head of software company Atlassian, Joris Luijke found when he analysed their twice-yearly performance appraisals: '... the model did exactly the opposite to what we wanted to accomplish. Instead of an inspiring discussion about how to enhance people's performance, the two reviews caused disruptions, anxiety and de-motivated team members and managers².' The company ripped their original model apart and implemented monthly check-ins. This required some restructuring as certain teams were simply too big for managers to be able to do them effectively. The results were worth the effort, however. The organisation has since won numerous *Best Employer* awards; both independent and internal staff engagement surveys show extraordinary high engagement scores of 87% and 83% respectively; and the company has found the smaller more flexible teams they created have been a boon to their bottom line.

One of the main reasons employers tell me why they don't do regular one-on-ones is lack of time. They see them as simply more meetings, unproductive 'out of office' sessions. Yet because they've never done them, they've never witnessed the awesome power that they unleash. Imagine a sportsman seeing his coach only once or twice a year. It just wouldn't happen. The same applies in business. Doing one-on-ones regularly actually saves time by reducing office conflict and stress, defusing complaints, expediting solutions, and improving performance. Workers become happier, customers better served and the leader can focus on business planning, strategizing, and celebrating rather than continually recruiting and cracking the whip. It's a far more satisfying experience for everyone.

How To Do Them: Like every system reading about it is one thing. Implementing it correctly is another. [Click here](#) to download my 5 step guide for conducting an effective one-on-one.

My final caveat on one-on-ones is that if an organisation introduces them and then does nothing about the common, major issues aired across the board, the effect on retention will be disastrous. People are intelligent and expect to be treated that way. There's nothing guaranteed to incense them more than words that don't align with actions, and good employees (and their leaders) will always bail out when the company doesn't follow through on its promises.

¹ *High Impact Performance Management Survey*, Bersin & Associates, 2011

² Posted by Joris Luijke on Jan 16, 2011 <http://www.managementexchange.com/story/atlassians-big-experiment-performance-reviews>