

# 1-on-1 101

By Cal Zant

*“The difference between an interaction  
and a relationship is frequency.”*

*– Dr. Travis Bradberry*

When it comes to relational leadership, one of the most important tools in your toolbox is the 1-on-1. We live in a fast-paced age where technology has boosted productivity, and redefined how we communicate and connect with others. Vast social networks with hundreds of friends allow us to know when an old friend from high school has their first child, or where someone we used to work with recently went on vacation. But there is a paradox: We feel more “connected,” but alone at the same time. Some have described this new phenomena as “being alone together.” Similar to feeling lonely in a crowded room, there is activity but very little intimacy.

The truth is we can work with someone for years and never really know them. Where did they grow up? What are their passions and dreams for the future? What are they dealing with at home? As leaders it’s easy to be so busy and distracted by the daily whirlwind that we never connect with our people. This is a veiled epidemic in our society.

***We believe a leader’s mission is to intentionally care for their people and raise them up to their maximum potential. To do that effectively we must truly know them, and regularly connect with them to cultivate deep relationships. 1-on-1’s are an effective tool to help you do just that.***

Our 1-on-1’s are a recurring one-hour meeting each week where leaders can connect with each of their direct reports. This time is specifically set aside to build rapport and relationships with team members in an effort to know them intimately and further develop them both professionally and personally. What

a meaningful 1-on-1 looks like will vary from one person to another. There isn't a formula or hard rules. But we can share a few guidelines we've learned to set the stage for effective 1-on-1's and avoid common pitfalls.

## It's Their Meeting<sup>1</sup>

One key to a good 1-on-1 is understanding that *it is the employee's meeting rather than the manager's meeting*. It's intended to be a free-form meeting for whatever is on their mind or most important at the time. They can share victories and dreams, or discuss frustrations and pain points. You don't know what your employee needs or wants to talk about most, because you can't read their mind. That's why they should be the one setting the agenda and leading the meeting. When you ask your employee to set the agenda, it has two powerful effects: 1) it shows you're serious about making this time about them, and 2) it empowers them to use the time wisely by coming prepared with important things to talk about and questions to ask that will be really valuable to them.

Be upfront and clear with them on what this time is for. Most people defer to their boss in a meeting, so you will need to remind them you want them to run the meeting. Give them an idea of what a good 1-on-1 looks like:

- What things 1-on-1s are usually used to talk about (goals, questions, high-level talk about company priorities, career development, life outside work)
- What your role is as manager (to listen and offer help)
- What their role is (the meeting leader, the talker, the person getting value from the time)

1-on-1's should be valuable according to the employee's definition, which means they won't all look the same. In fact, what those weekly 1-on-1's look like can vary dramatically from one person to another, and that's okay. Don't try to

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<sup>1</sup> Matsudaira, Kate and Kate Stull. "How To Do A One-On-One That Really Counts." 2014. PopForums.

manufacture the same conversations in each one. These should be conversational and personalized to the individual.

## Outside of the Whirlwind

You likely have a lot of interactions with your people through the week, but your 1-on-1 conversations should be more than a casual or operational conversation.

*This is not a time where they catch you up on what they're working on.* Good leaders are engaged and aware of what their team is working on, but status updates should happen outside of your 1-on-1's. If you find your conversations being dominated by operational items, you may not be checking in with them often enough during the rest of the week.

*This should not be done "shoulder-to-shoulder."* What we mean by that is there are times where you will be alongside your team members providing training or coaching as they are doing their job. It may be just the two of you and last an hour, but that does not constitute a 1-on-1. Your 1-on-1 time must be a special time that is set aside each week where you are eye-to-eye and available for intentional conversation. Put your phone away, and give them your full, undivided attention.

Changing the location by meeting at a coffee shop or outside your normal environment can be a good way to help people make a mental shift to topics that are different than the more transactional conversations you have during the week. Getting creative with the environment can also keep 1-on-1's from getting stale.

## Don't "Hold Stuff" for This Time

Throughout the week we all think of things we should talk to an employee about. Since a 1-on-1 is a recurring time that you already have blocked off on the calendar each week, it's tempting to stockpile those items so you can efficiently clear your to-do list at your next meeting. That isn't what this time is designed for. At that point, you're making the meeting about you and not them.

But an even more dangerous pitfall is if you become aware that you need to correct them or have a serious conversation.

Never hold a correction for your next 1-on-1. In fact, don't hold it at all. Go talk to them about it right then! Once you're aware of an issue, you owe it to them to bring it to their attention right away. Withholding feedback until the next 1-on-1 is either for your own convenience or because you're avoiding the conversation, but neither reflect good leadership. Don't turn 1-on-1's into the forum where you give feedback.

*The key is to not bring a list of things you "need to talk to them about."* If you do that, it not only violates the idea that this is their meeting, but it will also make them dread this time together. Your people should leave their 1-on-1's feeling recharged and engaged, not overwhelmed or discouraged.

## **It's About the Whole Person**

1-on-1's are a convenient time for employees to discuss all their pressing issues, brilliant ideas, and chronic frustrations that do not fit neatly into status reports, email or other less personal mechanisms. But keep in mind these shouldn't solely focus on someone's work life and professional development. Think about how many hours of their week is purely professional, and how much is more personal in nature. Likewise, you should split time in the 1-on-1 to touch on both personal and work.

*Our goal is to intentionally care for the whole person: professional, personal, and spiritual.* We're genuinely interested in knowing the real them, the full them, and not just the person we see 8 to 5.

We've seen managers who were only comfortable talking about work. On the other extreme, some managers only wanted to talk about personal life during a 1-on-1, and would awkwardly redirect the conversation if it drifted too close to work. Either view is shortsighted, and completely ignores a huge portion of that person's life. It can also be frustrating or feel artificial if you limit them to one area or the other.

It's usually most comfortable for people to discuss work-related topics, so if you notice that is dominating your conversations make sure to ask them about their family by name. When you ask about people's loved ones it means a lot

because, well, they love them! So the more you remember and acknowledge that your team members all have lives outside of the office, the deeper your relationships with your people will go, and the more trust you'll build.

Finding out you both saw the same movie this weekend is just as effective of a way to build rapport as talking about what you're both working on this week. Create a well-rounded relationship with the individuals on your team as much as possible by making their lives a part of your weekly check-ins.

When it comes to the spiritual aspect, we'd simply encourage you to not avoid those conversations. Some employees are more comfortable talking about faith than others. One way to encourage those conversations is if you as the leader are willing to open up and be vulnerable by sharing your story first. Ultimately, much of spiritual development can't be manufactured, but we believe our role as leaders often comes down to being obedient to prompting. If you feel in your spirit that you should share a story of faith or ask someone a spiritual question, have the courage to be obedient to that.

## **Ask, Don't Tell**

A good 1-on-1 is an opportunity for your employee to get value from you, but that doesn't mean you should do all the talking. Instead, you should be listening the majority of the time. A rule of thumb is they talk 80% and you talk 20%.

Be curious. The truth is, if you genuinely care about them you'll be interested in knowing what is going on in their life.

Resist the temptation to jump in and give advice. Our brains are wired to prefer clarity and certainty, so we all have the urge to give advice, even if we don't really know what the issue is. Even if it's the wrong advice (and it often is), giving it feels more comfortable than the ambiguity of asking a question. Some refer to this as the Advice Monster. We have the best of intentions to stay curious and ask a few good questions, but suddenly the Advice Monster leaps out of the darkness and highjacks the conversation. Before you know what's happening, you're leaping in to offer ideas, suggestions, and recommended

ways forward. Avoid the Advice Monster by truly listening to them and asking good follow-up questions.<sup>2</sup>

## The Return on Regular Deposits

1-on-1's often feel easy to skip or not important, because the topics discussed are often small. But the power of regular 1-on-1's is exactly that: that they are ongoing communication that happens in small doses. It's a chance to give and receive low-pressure feedback and communication on everything from personal goals to alignment on big picture priorities.

You don't want the only time you sit down with an employee to be when huge, bad things are happening. That is no way to build a healthy relationship. Plus, 1-on-1's can make those huge, bad things less likely to happen, too. *Why? Regular check-ins make it less likely that you'll get separated from someone.* Weekly 1-on-1's help you to stay on the same page, know what they're going through, and close the gap on misunderstandings before they grow into huge, bad things that you may not be able to recover from.

By making regular deposits to develop a relationship before a crisis, you and your team will be better able to communicate problems as they arise, and you'll be equipped to survive conflict when bumps in the road do occur. Also, with these ongoing investments in the relationship, an employee is more likely to open up to you when they go through storms in their personal life. Often people don't have a safe place to discuss real struggles or heartache, so what a privilege it is if they trust you enough to be vulnerable and invite you to walk through something with them.

Although we may all hope for breakthrough 1-on-1's where angelic choirs sing, the truth is it's rare for one particular meeting to be magical. The value comes in consistently investing in the relationship with your time and focus. It's similar to having a regular date night with your spouse. It may seem unimportant in the moment compared to other ways you could spend your time, but you don't want to wait until a crisis

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<sup>2</sup> Stanier, Michael. *The Coaching Habit*. Box of Crayons Press, 2016.

to realize your relationship isn't as strong as you thought and you should have been spending more time together.

## Present Over Perfect

1-on-1's can be uncomfortable, especially at first. Embrace the discomfort. It's so common for us to have surface-level conversations about work, sports, or the weather, because if we're honest we never learned the set of skills we need to navigate real intimacy, which is often difficult. While most of us yearn for real connection, we seem to avoid it at the same time. We dive into information or work or bicycling or whatever, because it feels good to be good at something, to master something, to have the answers, when authentic relationships and intimacy often feel profoundly out of our control. So little by little, we tiptoe away.

Deep, authentic connection will never come quick or easy. People are not short-term projects. Quick charm and making someone feel loved in an instant is so much easier than showing someone your love over and over, day in and day out. Close, personal relationships are built over years, repetitive motions, staying, showing up again, and being vulnerable again.<sup>3</sup>

"Anything worth doing is worth doing right," is a common saying. I was shocked when I heard someone flip that on its head by saying, "*Anything worth doing is worth doing poorly.*" By that he was challenging the paralyzing idea that if something is really important, then you should spend lots of time planning and perfecting it before you start doing it. But if we believe something is really important, maybe we should simply start doing it ... even if it isn't perfect.

***The most important key of 1-on-1's is this: JUST DO IT.*** It's easy to make this overly complicated, or allow feelings of inadequacy and discomfort prevent us from making this investment. But our people are worth it! Put it on the calendar this week, and make it happen. Then, do it again next week. By simply making the time and sitting down to do a 1-on-1, you've won half the battle.

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<sup>3</sup> Niequist, Shauna. Present Over Perfect. Zondervan, 2016.

1-on-1's with your team members should be a sacred time on your calendar that you protect. You must commit to make it one of your highest priorities, and keep the appointment. While your team member might still say, "Of course it's okay!" with a smile on their face when you ask if you can cancel this week's meeting, they are still, at the heart of the conversation, receiving the message that you value something else above your time with them. And that's not the kind of message you want to be conveying.

If you absolutely must miss a meeting, try to reschedule it for the same day and apologize. Make it clear that your 1-on-1 time together is a big deal to you, and you value your time with them.

The deepest craving of every human being is to be seen and truly known ... and loved anyway. We crave for someone to know the real us, inside and out, and still accept us. To be fully aware of our strengths and flaws, and still believe in us ... to continue to see greatness in us. Someone may only have one or two people in a lifetime like that, but they're the ones who make a lasting impact. Let's be that for our people! They're worth it!

*To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial.*

*To be known and not loved is our greatest fear.*

***But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything.***

*It liberates us from pretense,  
humbles us out of our self-righteousness,  
and fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us.*

*– Timothy Keller*