



Kim Scott - 1:1 CONVERSATIONS

RESULTS - Things you can do to get stuff done together—faster

THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF RADICAL Candor is to achieve results collaboratively that you could never achieve individually. You've created a culture of guidance. You've created an exemplary team that embodies the Radical Candor ethos of caring personally and challenging directly. As a result, the team is firing on all cylinders; and perhaps most importantly, it has developed a self-correcting quality whereby most problems are solved before you are even aware of them. It's not time to buy the yacht and sail off to the Caribbean, though. Now you get to use the gift of Radical Candor—all that freed-up time and energy—to focus your team on achieving great results.

Neuroscientist and academic Stephen Kosslyn once gave a talk in which he described how people who work together on a team become like “mental prostheses” for each other. What one person doesn't enjoy and isn't good at is what another person loves and excels at. Together, they are “better, stronger, faster.” Getting better, stronger, and faster in this case means observing the steps of the GSD wheel described in Chapter Four. Your role will be to encourage that process of listening, clarifying, debating, deciding, persuading, and executing to the point that it's almost as if your team shares one mind when it comes to completing projects, and then learning from their results. This is not true just at high-tech Silicon Valley companies. I recently talked to a man who was responsible for training new managers at New Jersey Transit. I asked him what was the first thing they taught. “Don't start by bossing people. They'll just hate you. Start by listening to them.”

One of your most important responsibilities to keep everything moving smoothly is to decide who needs to communicate with whom and how frequently. This means meetings. Obviously, every meeting comes with a significant cost—time—so it is important to minimize the duration, frequency and number of people required to attend. The most important of these meetings is the 1:1 with each of your direct reports.

1:1 CONVERSATIONS

Employees set the agenda, you listen and help them clarify

1:1S ARE YOUR must-do meetings, your single best opportunity to listen, really listen, to the people on your team to make sure you understand their perspective on what's working and what's not working. These meetings also provide an opportunity to get to know your direct reports—to move up on the “care personally” dimension of the Radical Candor framework. Remember: this is not the place to dump all of the criticism you've been saving up. That should come in those two- to three-minute impromptu conversations that you've already been having!



The purpose of a 1:1 meeting is to listen and clarify—to understand what direction each person working for you wants to head in, and what is blocking them. Sheryl once quickly helped me in a 1:1 meeting solve a problem that was enormously important to me and had seemed insurmountable until we talked. I was managing teams in ten different cities around the world and wanted to travel to each of them. At the same time, I was forty and trying to start a family. It's pretty hard to get pregnant when you're five thousand miles away from your husband. What to do? I brought my dilemma to Sheryl. "Oh, that's easy!" she said. I was all ears. "You can't. And you don't have any time to waste. You need to make getting pregnant your top priority." I was immensely relieved. It had seemed impossible to travel and get pregnant at the same time, and I was glad to hear Sheryl say what I had felt. But I also felt crestfallen. Did this mean I couldn't do my job? Of course not! "Remember that global off-site meeting your team wanted but we had a hard time getting budget for?" Sheryl asked. "Let's take another crack at getting the budget. That way you can fly everybody here. They want to come, and you don't want to go. Seems like a win-win."

Here are a few things you can do to make sure you and each of your reports are getting the most out of these 1:1 meetings:

Mind-set

Your mind-set will go a long way in determining how well the 1:1s go. I found that when I quit thinking of them as meetings and began treating them as if I were having lunch or coffee with somebody I was eager to get to know better, they ended up yielding much better conversations. If scheduling them over a meal helps, make them periodic lunches. If you and your direct report like to walk and there's a good place to take a walk near the office, make them walking meetings. If you are a morning person, schedule them in the morning. If you are a person who has an energy dip at 2 P.M., don't schedule them at 2 P.M. You have a lot of meetings, so you can optimize the 1:1 time and location for your energy. Just don't be a jerk about it. You may like to wake up at 5 A.M. and go to the gym. Don't expect the people who work for you to meet you there.

Frequency

Time doesn't scale, but it's also vital to relationships. 1:1s should be a natural bottleneck that determines how many direct reports a boss can have. I like to meet with each person who works directly for me for fifty minutes a week. But I can't bear more than about five hours of 1:1 time in my calendar. Listening is hard work, and I don't have an endless capacity for it every day. So I like to limit myself to five direct reports. When people are remote, I make sure that those conversations happen over video conference, and I try to supplement them with more frequent quick check-ins.

This is not realistic for a lot of companies—including some of the ones where I've worked. If you have ten direct reports, I'd shift 1:1s to twenty-five minutes a week. Plenty of people I know have twenty direct reports, and there's nothing they can do about it. It's just the nature of the way their companies are managed. If you're in that situation, I recommend twenty-five minutes every other week with each direct report. Also, see if you can create some leadership opportunities for the people who work for you and reduce the number of direct reports you have.



Finally, to avoid meeting proliferation, I recommend that managers use the 1:1 time to have “career conversations” (see chapter seven) and, if relevant, to do formal performance reviews.

Show up!

Probably the most important advice for 1:1s is just to show up. In an ideal world, you have less than ten direct reports so that you can have a weekly 1:1 with each of them. Even in that ideal world, between your travel schedule, the fact that you will inevitably get sick sometimes, and the occasional vacation, you will have to cancel at least two or three out of thirteen scheduled 1:1s. If you reserve some of those slots for special 1:1s (i.e., performance reviews, soliciting feedback, “career conversations”), you will have only seven or eight “regular” 1:1s per quarter. And if your world is not ideal and you have more than ten direct reports, you probably have 1:1s every other week. That means you’re having three or four 1:1s with each of your direct reports per quarter. So, no matter what fires erupt in your day, do not cancel your 1:1s.

Your direct report’s agenda, not yours

When your direct reports own and set the agenda for their 1:1s, they’re more productive, because they allow you to listen to what matters to them. However, I recommend setting basic expectations for the agenda and how it’s delivered. Do you even want a structured agenda? If you do, and you want to see it in advance, say so. If you don’t, and you won’t even look at it in advance, set expectations accordingly. Are you OK if they come in with a set of bulleted items jotted on a napkin, or do you prefer they keep it in a shared document so you can refer back to it? Whether you want a structured agenda or you prefer a more free-flowing meeting, the agenda itself should be directed by your direct report, not you. Your job is to hold people accountable when they come unprepared—or to decide that it’s fine to have an agenda-less 1:1 from time to time.

Some good follow-up questions

Here are some follow-up questions you can ask to show not only that you are listening but that you care and want to help, and to identify the gaps between what people are doing, what they think they ought to be doing, and what they want to be doing:

- “Why?”
- “How can I help?”
- “What can I do or stop doing that would make this easier?”
- “What wakes you up at night?”
- “What are you working on that you don’t want to work on?”
 - “Do you not want to work on it because you aren’t interested or because you think it’s not important?”
 - “What can you do to stop working on it?”
- “What are you not working on that you do want to work on?”
 - “Why are you not working on it?”
 - “What can you do to start working on it?”



- “How do you feel about the priorities of the teams you’re dependent on?”
 - “What are they working on that seems unimportant or even counterproductive?”
 - “What are they not doing that you wish they would do?”
 - “Have you talked to these other teams directly about your concerns? If not, why not?” (Important note: the goal here is to encourage the people to raise the issue directly with each other, not to solve the problem for them. See “Prevent Backstabbing” in chapter six.)

Encourage new ideas in the 1:1.

It’s worth keeping Jony Ive’s quote, “new ideas are fragile,” top of mind before a 1:1. This meeting should be a safe place for people to nurture new ideas before they are submitted to the rough-and-tumble of debate. Help them clarify both their thinking about these ideas and their understanding of the people to whom they need to communicate these ideas.

The ideas may need to be described in one way for an engineer and another for a salesperson. Here are some questions that you can use to nurture new ideas by pushing people to be clearer:

- “What do you need to develop that idea further so that it’s ready to discuss with the broader team? How can I help?”
- “I think you’re on to something, but it’s still not clear to me. Can you try explaining it again?”
- “Let’s wrestle some more with it, OK?” “I understand what you mean, but I don’t think others will. How can you explain it so it will be easier for them to understand?”
- “I don’t think ‘so-and-so’ will understand this. Can you explain it again to make it clearer specifically for them?”
- “Is the problem really that they are too stupid to understand, or is it that you are not explaining it clearly enough?”

Signs you’ll get from 1:1s that you’re failing as a boss

1:1s are valuable meetings for your direct reports to share their thinking with you and to decide what direction to proceed with their work. They are also valuable meetings for you, because these meetings are where you’ll get your first early warning signs that you are failing as a boss. Here are some sure signals:

Cancellations. If people who report to you cancel 1:1s too often, it’s a sign your partnership is not fruitful for them, or that you’re using it inappropriately to dispose of criticism you’ve been stockpiling.

Updates. If people just give you updates that could simply be emailed to you, encourage them to use the time more constructively.

Good news only. If you hear only good news, it’s a sign people don’t feel comfortable coming to you with their problems, or they think you won’t or can’t help. In these cases, you need to ask explicitly for the bad news. Don’t let the issue drop till you hear some.



No criticism. If they never criticize you, you're not good enough at getting guidance from your team. Remember that phrase: "What could I do or stop doing that would make it easier to work with me?"

No agenda. If they consistently come with no topics to discuss, it might mean that they are overwhelmed, that they don't understand the purpose of the meeting, or that they don't consider it useful. Be direct but polite: "This is your time, but you don't seem to come with much to talk about. Can you tell me why?"

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