

ONE-ON-ONE

The Hard Thing About Hard Things, Horowitz, Ben.

After I first wrote about one-on-ones, people flooded me with feedback about one-on-ones. About half the responders chastised me, saying that one-on-ones were useless and that I shouldn't put so much emphasis on them. The other half wanted to know how to run more effective one-on-ones. It seems to me that both groups are likely talking about two sides of the same coin.

Perhaps the CEO's most important operational responsibility is designing and implementing the communication architecture for her company. The architecture might include the organizational design, meetings, processes, email, Yammer, and even one-on-one meetings with managers and employees. Absent a well-designed communication architecture, information and ideas will stagnate, and your company will degenerate into a bad place to work. While it is quite possible to design a great communication architecture without one-on-one meetings, in most cases one-on-ones provide an excellent mechanism for information and ideas to flow up the organization and should be part of your design.

Generally, people who think one-on-one meetings are a bad idea have been victims of poorly designed ones. The key to a good one-on-one meeting is the understanding that it is the employee's meeting rather than the manager's meeting. This is the free-form meeting for all the pressing issues, brilliant ideas, and chronic frustrations that do not fit neatly into status reports, email, and other less personal and intimate mechanisms. If you are an employee, how do you get feedback from your manager on an exciting but only 20 percent formed idea that you're not sure is relevant, without sounding like a fool? How do you point out that a colleague you do not know how to work with is blocking your progress without throwing her under the bus? How do you get help when you love your job but your personal life is melting down? Through a status report? On email? Yammer? Asana? Really? For these and other important areas of discussions, one-on-ones can be essential.

If you like structured agendas, then the employee should set the agenda. A good practice is to have the employee send you the agenda in advance. This will give her a chance to cancel the meeting if nothing is pressing. It also makes clear that it is her meeting and will take as much or as little time as she needs. During the meeting, since it's the employee's meeting, the manager should do 10 percent of the talking and 90 percent of the listening. Note that this is the opposite of most one-on-ones.

While it's not the manager's job to set the agenda or do the talking, the manager should try to draw the key issues out of the employee. The more introverted the employee, the more important this becomes. If you manage engineers, drawing out issues will be an important skill to master.

Some questions that I've found to be very effective in one-on-ones:

- If we could improve in any way, how would we do it?
- What's the number-one problem with our organization? Why?
- What's not fun about working here?

- Who is really kicking ass in the company? Whom do you admire?
- If you were me, what changes would you make?
- What don't you like about the product?
- What's the biggest opportunity that we're missing out on?
- What are we not doing that we should be doing?
- Are you happy working here?

In the end, the most important thing is that the best ideas, the biggest problems, and the most intense employee life issues make their way to the people who can deal with them. One-on-ones are a time-tested way to do that, but if you have a better one, go ahead with your bad self.

THE RIGHT KIND OF AMBITION: THE BILL CAMPBELL ATTRIBUTE

One of the biggest misperceptions in our society is that a prerequisite for becoming a CEO is to be selfish, ruthless, and callous. In fact, the opposite is true and the reason is obvious. The first thing that any successful CEO must do is get really great people to work for her. Smart people do not want to work for people who do not have their interests in mind and in heart.

Most of us have experienced this in our careers: a bright, ambitious, hardworking executive whom nobody good wants to work for and who, as a result, delivers performance far worse than one might imagine.

Truly great leaders create an environment where the employees feel that the CEO cares more about the employees than she cares about herself. In this kind of environment, an amazing thing happens: A huge number of employees believe it's their company and behave accordingly. As the company grows large, these employees become quality control for the entire organization. They set the work standard that all future employees must live up to. As in, "Hey, you need to do a better job on that data sheet—you are screwing up my company."

I call this characteristic the Bill Campbell attribute after the man who is the best I've ever seen at this. If you talk to people who worked in any of the many organizations that Bill has run, they refer to those organizations as "my organization" or "my company." A huge part of why he has been so remarkably strong in this dimension of leadership is that he's completely authentic. He would happily sacrifice his own economics, fame, glory, and rewards for his employees. When you talk to Bill, you get the feeling that he cares deeply about you and what you have to say, because he does. And all of that shows up in his actions and follow-through.

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