



The Look & Sound of Leadership™

Executive Coaching Tips

SINCE 1990

DYNAMIC ONE-ON-ONES

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OCTOBER 2017

There are a million ways to conduct one-on-one meetings with direct reports. How you run yours will reflect your personal style. This month's coaching conversation focuses on specific best practices that will enhance your one-on-ones no matter what your style.

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Balancing tasks and relationships

Bennett was a Brit working in Kuwait. He was enjoying living overseas and found the work to be a healthy stretch. He led a team of four and reported to a guy named Sabah who Bennett said was terrific.

During our video-link coaching conversations, Bennett and I had spent a lot of time discussing trust. He was concerned that, because he was a foreigner, certain bridges were closed off to him and others were completely hidden. He was eager to deepen the trust with his boss and his direct reports.

He and I had discussed cultural differences, differences in personality types and styles, and the nature of trust itself.

One day I asked Bennett if he and Sabah had one-on-one meetings.

They did. Once a week. Usually thirty minutes. Bennett described them as pleasant but not particularly productive.

I asked if he'd ever had one-on-ones that were productive.



He had. I asked about them.

“This was a long time ago. I was very junior. I was reporting to a woman named Roberta,” he told me, smiling. “I remember two distinct things happened in those meetings. Most of the time we focused on accountability. She held me accountable. She was helpful and encouraging. I never felt I was getting scolded, but she kept me accountable. She taught me my job.”

He went on. “In addition, and this made a big impression on me, there were also times that were focused just on me, as a person. She took the time to get to know me.”

“Sounds nice,” I said.

“It was! She got me to think about my career, what my long-range goals really were. We didn’t talk about those things every meeting. Maybe every fourth or fifth time. But when we did, we’d spend maybe half our time talking about, well, just *things*.”

“She was invested in you,” I offered.

He nodded happily. “And I was devoted to her!”

“I really resonate with that story, Bennett,” I said. “What you’re describing reflects something I say every executive has to do every day in order to be successful.” I held up one hand so he could see it on his screen in Kuwait. “On the one hand, you have to be good with your tasks. You have to manage your work. Communicate well. Execute with excellence. Do. Your. Tasks.”

I held up the other hand and said, “*And* you also have to build and maintain positive relationships in the workplace. Every day. You have to do both. And it sounds as though Roberta, consciously or not, made sure both those elements were present in your one-on-ones – the tasks and the relationship. I think really good one-on-ones make time for both.”

He nodded slowly. “This is interesting to think about.”

“What is?” I asked.



Comparing one-on-ones and job interviews

“I’m wondering what’s transferable from my one-on-ones with Roberta to my one-on-ones with Sabah. I can see how, if our one-on-ones were better, I might not worry so much about trust.”

Then he shook his head and continued. “I’m afraid not much is transferable. I’m the subordinate in both, yes, but with Roberta, I was so young. I remember asking a million questions. I don’t think that’s what Sabah wants from me.”

“Why? What do you think he wants?”

“He wants me to be the subject matter expert. That’s why I’m here.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “That makes me wonder what it would be like if you showed up to every one-on-one with Sabah with, let’s say, three questions for him. Questions about the business. About one of your projects. About the people *in* the business. Or maybe about something you saw in the street! Maybe something about him. If you came to every one-on-one with three questions, what would that be like?”

“I’d prepare differently. That’s for sure.”

I stayed silent.

He said, “I think I would be more interested in what we talk about. More interesting, too, probably.”

I kept silent.

After a bit, he said, “I’m thinking about the one-on-ones with my direct reports. They’re polite, I’d say. They don’t ask me questions. Well, no, one of them does ask me questions sometimes. And now I think of it, I tend to favor him above the others.”

“Because of the questions?”

“I’m willing to consider that, yes,” he said. “So maybe I ought to start showing up with Sabah that way. With questions.”



He laughed and said, “This makes me think of advice I gave my daughter about job interviews. I said she should always have just as many questions as they do. Even if she doesn’t get to ask them all. Having questions shows you’ve been thinking.”

“You think that advice applies to one-on-ones?”

“Don’t you?”

“It’s sure an interesting idea – that a behavior that can make you successful in a job interview can also make you successful in your one-on-ones with your boss.”

“Like the interview’s never over,” he groaned.

“But that’s true in a way,” I said with a smile, “because every time you show up, you’re making an impression, right?”

“Frightening to consider,” he laughed. “True, but frightening nevertheless.”

“Here’s a different question. What do you think is the purpose of your one-on-ones with Sabah?”

Purpose and commitment

He considered only briefly, then said, “Keep him updated on all these projects I’m leading,” he said. “I get a little insight from him, too, now and then. But mostly I’d say we’re there so I can update him.”

“And, if he were here, what do you think *he’d* say is the purpose of your one-on-ones?”

“I think he’d agree. At least, I hope he would! That’s pretty much all that happens when we’re together.”

“But you’re not sure?” I asked.

“Not really, no. You’re making me realize we’ve never actually discussed why we have them, or how we’ll measure success, or what we want.” He gave a rueful laugh. “I’d never start a project without having that conversation, but I’ve never done it with Sabah. Or my direct reports, either. Well, that’s on my to-do list, for certain!”



He made a note and asked me, “What else should I be doing that I’m not?”

“Do your one-on-ones get cancelled very often?”

“Here? No. It’s not exactly fast-paced here. At my last job they got cancelled all the time.”

“And how was that for you?”

“To be honest, when my boss cancelled our one-on-ones, it was frustrating. It made me feel a bit second-class. But I have to confess, I did it to my directs now and then. I always felt guilty. Is that the point? Don’t cancel?”

“Well, how was it to feel second-class?” I asked.

“OK. Point taken. Don’t cancel.” He made another note. “What else?”

Balance airtime

“Earlier, you said that pretty much the only thing happening in your one-on-one with Sabah is you updating him. So how would you assign the airtime? Over the course of five or six one-on-ones, are you taking up ninety percent of the time? Sixty? What would you say?”

“Probably eighty, I’d say.” He asked, “Is that bad?”

“Bad? No, it’s not ‘bad.’ But it doesn’t feel balanced, does it? It could easily be unbalanced in the other direction, right? I can imagine one-on-ones where the *boss* takes up eighty percent of the airtime.”

“And that’s not good?”

“Well, like I say, it’s not ‘bad,’ but it’s not balanced. Can you remember? Were your meetings with Roberta balanced? Over the long haul, did you each get about fifty percent of the airtime?”

He considered and said, “I think so, yes. I remember she used to tell me about the meetings she would



have with her boss. I couldn't always follow what she was talking about, but I was glad she told me. I understood more over time. It was a terrific education."

"Sounds like it," I said. "Given that you and she were good at balancing tasks and relationships, I'm not that surprised that the airtime was pretty evenly balanced, too."

"You know," he said, "if I start showing up with three questions, like the interview idea, that will begin to change the balance right away. It might not get us down to fifty-fifty, but it'll be more balanced than it is now. This is good. What else should I consider?"

Prep and focus

"Tell me how you report out to Sabah," I invited.

"What do you mean?"

"What's your style? Are you a bottom-line kind of guy? Are you a storyteller? Are you handing him a deck and letting him read it?"

"I give him a deck and we go through it together."

"You prep a deck every week?" I asked

"Every week," he answered.

"So you show up prepared."

"I try," he said.

"OK. That's good. Prep is important. Some people figure since the meetings happen every week, they can just show up and wing it."

"But you think that's not so wise?"



“Every time you show up you’re making an impression,” I repeated.

“Well, I’m glad I’ve got the prep part covered. What else?”

“Does Sabah ask a lot of questions?” I asked.

“A lot? No. But he asks the same ones over and over.”

“Why? If he asks the same questions, why don’t you anticipate them – prep the answers and put them in the report?”

He laughed, a bit embarrassed. “Oh, my! That sounds so elementary. I should, shouldn’t I? Funny. I’ve been focusing on the work. The milestones. The roadblocks. The next steps. I go in feeling I have this truckload of information and I have to hose him with it in thirty minutes.”

“Lovely,” I said archly.

“Focusing on the work has made me forget the building block questions. How does he like to communicate? What’s of interest to him? What’s of interest to me? How is he trying to influence me? How am I influencing him?”

“Great questions,” I said.

“And I could be asking myself the same questions about my direct reports.” He nodded vigorously. “All these things I’m thinking about with Sabah, I can do them with my reports, right?”

“You bet, Bennett,” I said.

He began making notes, speaking as he wrote. “Balance tasks and relationships. Balance airtime. Don’t cancel. Prep with them in mind. Have three questions to ask. Did I miss anything?”

“Well, I have one more thing, not that you missed it. It’s part of balancing tasks and relationships. When you were talking about Roberta, you said she took the time to get to know you, as a person. I think



showing interest in another person is powerful. But, unless you're falling in love, you usually have to choose to do it. It requires choice to show real interest in another person. But you *can* choose it, whether you're the boss or the subordinate. For example, you could be interested in Sabah."

"I could," he said solemnly. Then he looked doubtful. "I'm not certain he'd be comfortable talking about himself."

"That's for him to decide. You can still show interest. And who knows what you'll end up talking about?"

Bennett implemented the ideas from his notes in his one-on-ones with Sabah and his direct reports. Over the course of a few months, he felt trust was beginning to sprout a leaf here and there. Deepening his one-on-one meetings had given him more of *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.

Core Concepts:

- Dynamic one-on-ones focus on tasks and the relationship. Express interest in the other person as a person.
- Show up with questions. Demonstrate curiosity and engagement.
- Discuss why you are having one-on-ones in the first place. You don't have to have them, you know!
- Don't cancel. Repeated cancelations say, "You're just not that important."
- Over time, each of you should get about the same amount of airtime.
- Prepare. These are not casual chats. They exist for a purpose.
- Tailor your airtime to the other person. How do they like to be communicated with? What's of interest to them?



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