

Are your One-on-Ones Increasing Dysfunction on your Teams?

By Debbie Ellisen

Have you ever questioned the value of your one-on-one meetings? Most of us dutifully hold them but rarely ask why. In fact, when asked, many of my clients say something like, “It’s my direct report’s time with me. I let them talk about whatever they want in order to get their job done.” While it always sounds like a great idea, there is a downside that needs to be put in perspective. Leaders are spending as much as 30 hours per month in one-on-ones (a meeting between a leader and his or her direct report) hoping to build relationships, helping people grow, and improving morale. However, many one-on-one conversations are undermining the team, fueling dysfunction, and lowering morale and productivity.

The first time I realized just how damaging one-on-ones can be was when I was working with a leader of a multi-billion-dollar tech company in Silicon Valley. We were at an offsite with a team reviewing an assessment on their team’s effectiveness, which indicated that the team was struggling with commitment to decisions. As we unpacked the reasons for the issues, a phenomenon unfolded that no one, especially the leader, had realized.

The leader had allowed scope creep into the one-on-ones. Instead of talking about the development of the employee, which is the most productive use of a one-on-one, team members had broadened them to include other things that were important to getting their own jobs done, such as:

Their opinions on important decisions.

Issues they were having with other team members.

Requests for direction and decisions on operational issues.

The result of this scope creep was that individuals were holding back from voicing their thoughts in the team meetings and, instead, waiting for one-on-ones. Decisions were being made in one-on-ones that should have been debated with the larger team. Not surprisingly, the team wasn’t truly bought into the decisions that were being made.

We cut her one-on-ones down from an hour a week to 45 minutes twice per month. She saved 17.5 hours a month and significantly improved the trust and commitment on her team by bringing topics to the group. Staff meetings came alive because they were making decisions together instead of just reporting out. The ‘meeting after the meeting’ and hub-and-spoke accountability – which thrive in a one-on-one culture – were harder to change. But, with the leader’s guidance the team gradually started addressing their issues with each other instead of through the leader.

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Since that session, I have encountered this same phenomenon many times. Well-intended leaders try to do the right thing and end up causing more harm than good. When it came up again a few days ago at another team meeting, I saw the leader crushed by the fact that he thought he was doing the right thing by giving everyone attention and direction, only to realize that he was leaving most of the team out of important conversations. So, what can you do to improve your one-on-ones?

DO:

- Identify one or two opportunities for the employee's growth during a specific period of time
- Ask for examples of the employee exemplifying those behaviors since the last one-on-one
- Discuss progress on operational deliverables
- Coach them on how to talk with a person with whom they are having an issue
- Ask what you or the organization can do better
- Mix it up from time to time and ask bigger questions of each other about how you collectively can bring more value to the organization

DON'T:

- Change or cancel the meeting without providing a clear reason
- Change a direction or decision affecting the rest of the team
- Agree to talk to another team member about an issue your direct is having with them (encouraging hub-and-spoke accountability)
- Be defensive about constructive feedback they give you

Review this check list with your team so they can hold you accountable to these practices. And whatever you do, do not use this as license to cancel your one-on-ones. I was recently with a team whose leader notoriously canceled one-on-ones because he didn't see their value. The reality was that he was doing more DON'Ts than DO's. He has since refocused them and has received accolades from his team for doing so. Do them right and watch your people flourish.