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How to Run a One-on-One Meeting Part One

*This is part three in a four-part series on one-on-one meetings. Check out [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#) on how **NOT** to run a one-on-one meeting. Read those first.*

"You have two ears and one mouth for a reason."

My mom was incredibly smart. Of course, I didn't know that at the time, but she totally taught me how to do one-on-one meetings. Unfortunately, after going 17 years between hearing that advice and doing my first one-on-one meeting I forgot mom's wisdom. After all, the other person had two ears and one mouth too, so who's the genius now?

As I mentioned in [part one](#), when I first started them, one-on-ones were all about me, the boss. I quickly learned that did not work, so I reversed course entirely. I made four mistakes, which I outlined in that post, and here were my four corrections.

Five Tips to Run an Effective One-on-One Meeting

1. **Pick and Stick to a time.** When I first started, they were held when I wanted, usually with little notice. I learned that in order to signify that this time was sacred, I let team members choose a specific time each week and *that was their time*. Less than four times per year would that time change due to vacations or holidays. Tip: Don't do them on Monday or Friday.
2. **Remember it's not about you.** Once I realized that the one-on-one meeting was for my team, not for me, things started to change dramatically. They opened up more about problems at work (and outside of work...see point #3 below). I became less interested in spouting what I thought, what I needed, and what I cared about, and began to listen...really listen.
3. **Follow a format...but not rigidly.** I used a form that I creatively called my [One-on-One Meeting Form](#) (you can download it by clicking the link). This form provided the basic outline for the meeting and gave me some basic questions to ask with each section of the meeting along with plenty of space for taking notes. The outline of the meeting was 15-10-5. Fifteen minutes was entirely for them to talk about their life, their problems, their whatever. At first, this required a lot of prodding by me. I had to ask a lot of questions to get them to talk about themselves because they weren't used to me actually caring. ***If any section of the meeting should go long,***

it is this section. If it goes twenty minutes, that is fine. The next ten minutes were for me to communicate to them. *Only on very rare occasions did I use my full ten minutes.* I never wanted them to feel rushed with their time so I ordered my communication by importance, kept an eye on the clock and really tried to keep it under seven or eight minutes. The last five minutes was about coaching, again focused on them, asking how I could help, where they feel they need to improve, etc. [Download the one-on-one meeting form.](#)

4. **Get personal.** At first, it was all about business, but I remembered that people genuinely do like to talk about themselves. So I began to ask more questions about how their lives outside of work were going. I learned spouse names, kids' names, hobbies, and more. "How is Sarah?" is an entirely different question than "How is your wife?" Asking a golfer if he made it to the golf course this weekend is a much better question than "How was your weekend?" Their fifteen minutes could be spent entirely on personal stuff or entirely on work. It was up to them. I found that over time it usually followed a progression of a few minutes of their biggest work problem or success, five to ten minutes of personal stuff, and a few minutes back at work.
5. **Make it very informal.** This isn't an inquisition and it's certainly not a weekly job interview. This time is strictly for me to learn about them and how I can help them as their leader. That is it. I've done them in a conference room (sitting at a 90 degree angle to them on a corner, not face to face), at their desk, outside at a picnic table, and once in a car on the way to a meeting. But never at my desk. Always make it as private as possible and always keep it informal. That is a huge key to developing transparency.

Which of these tips will have the most impact on your one-on-ones?

This is a part of my series on one-on-one meetings. For all posts in the series and free downloads to help you start and run the meetings go here: [One-on-One Meetings for Leaders](#)