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## Coaching your direct reports: **The Art of the One-to-One**

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Think about those executives who you have known in your career. Those individuals who you have admired, respected and considered successful. You would likely notice that they had embraced the roles of coach, teacher and mentor. How effective are you at coaching your direct reports? Are you getting the results you expect from them? Do you have a systematic approach to coaching your staff into higher performance? How effective are your direct reports at coaching their staff?

One of the most effective tools you have at your disposal to coach is having a consistent, structured one-to-one coaching sessions with your direct reports. These are high-level conversations where you and your direct reports set aside dedicated time to address the long-term strategic issues facing the company and the developmental issues facing your direct report.

My CEO/Executive clients and TEC members acknowledge that coaching their staff, holding them accountable and growing the executive team is a key on-going challenge. They concur that any improvements made in this area would definitely lead to better bottom line results in their business. Here are some of the key questions I get asked and some thoughts that you may find useful as you continue to develop your own mastery in this very important driver of executive performance:

### **What should the purpose be of the one-to-one?**

1. Achieve better alignment in regards to the vision, mission, and goals of the company.
2. Interrogate reality –what is the “truth” about the current state of the business.
3. Gain a clearer picture of how your direct reports think and solve problems.
4. Tackle tough issues.
5. Identify and remove impediments to their success.
6. Provide dedicated time for coaching and mentoring, key for building a management team.
7. Provoke learning – growth of your team will result in growth of your business.
8. Model behaviour you want your direct reports to exhibit with their teams.
9. Send a message: Giving your time and undivided attention means you consider them valuable players on the team.
10. Provide feedback.
11. Enhance your relationship with your staff.

### **What skills contribute to effective one-to-one coaching?**

**Become a thoughtful questioner** - The secret to powerful one-to-ones lies in asking the right questions. It requires asking many questions, especially when solving difficult problems and working on personal performance issues. A fellow TEC Chair, Susan Scott, offers an elegant exploration of how to understand and achieve success one conversation at a time in her book “Fierce Conversations”. A cornerstone of all my executive coaching conversations is her 7-step process named “Mineral Rights” where you learn how to ask questions that: identify your most pressing issue; clarify the issue; determine the current impact; determine future implications; examine your personal contribution to the issue; describe the ideal outcome and commit to action.

**Become aware of your communication style**– Studies have shown that the meaning attributed to any communication is only 7% to words, 38% to tonality/timbre/volume and 55% to non-verbal gestures/posture. Pay attention to WHAT you are saying and also to HOW you are saying it. Be flexible.

**Be empathetic** – Although you can never see exactly the world through the eyes of others, making the attempt will dramatically change the interaction in a positive manner. Frame issues from a third party point of view. For an elegant insight into this, read *Difficult Conversations* by Stone – Patton – Heen.

**Be slow to understand** – Take your time, avoid jumping into solution mode right away, so that you can get at the real issue. It will show the other person respect.

**Have a sense of curiosity** – Avoid easy, quick answers and stay in “curious” mode. Ask plenty of open-ended questions. How? Where? When? Etc.

### **How often should the one-to-ones be held? How long should they last?**

**It depends, the key is to make the one-to-ones a priority.** – Schedule at least one hour per month of quality, protected time with each direct report. I strongly suggest that at least once per quarter the session be at least one and half to two hours in length. This will make a huge difference in your ability to deliver on the various purposes you may have. Book them at least 3 months in advance as confirmed appointments. Be aware that if you meet too frequently, the one-to-ones can become totally operational. The farther apart the sessions, the more they tend to stay at the strategic level.

### **What are some Do’s and Don’ts of effective one-to-ones?**

1. **Doing most of the talking.** Don’t. It’s that simple. As long as you’re talking, you’re not learning anything you didn’t know already.
2. **Work their agenda, not yours.** Do have the direct report prepare a written agenda for the one-to-one. The agenda should focus at least 25% on strategy and long-term developmental issues (both for the company and for themselves) and contain at least one opportunity to explore in depth. Teach your managers/executives to regularly identify opportunities, not just problems.
3. **Taking the problem away from someone.** There will be situations when people will try to give the problem back to you -- don’t take it. Hold your opinion to the end if necessary and keep exploring theirs.
4. **Create an action plan.** One-to-ones should lead to mutually agreed-upon action steps, with deadlines and expected outcomes. Do write them down and review them at the next one-to-one.
5. **Do inquire about their feelings.** This may not be a natural act for you -- do it anyways and learn from it. Every conversation has three components: the What Happened, the Feelings and the Identity conversations. (For an in-depth understanding, I recommend you read *Difficult Conversations* by D. Stone). If you fail to inquire about emotions, you’ll notice that nothing much changes as a result of your conversations.
6. **Deliver clear messages, clear coaching, and clear instructions.** Do make sure he/she hears and understands it. Don’t leave it open for interpretation.

7. **Canceling the meeting. Don't do it.** You said these meetings were important. Are they or aren't they? Your actions will tell the story. The meeting with you should be considered sacred. If you have to reschedule it, make sure you both agree to hold it as close as possible to the original date.
8. **Do not allow interruptions.** During the meetings, do not allow any phone calls, interruptions or distractions. Turn off your cell phone and your email alert, and hit the "do not disturb" button on your telephone. Be prepared to be here and nowhere else.
9. **Focus on the behaviour, not the person.** Do come prepared with several examples of the behaviour you want the employee to change. You're trying to change the behaviour in general, not a specific situation.
10. **Avoid sarcasm.** Sarcasm is nothing more than thinly disguised hostility that demeans and puts down the other person. Sarcasm may be funny to you, but is not funny to the person at the receiving end. Don't use it.

To enhance your one-to-ones, Lawrence King, a TEC expert resource speaker also suggests the "Rule of Four":

1. Listen four times as much as you talk.
2. Give four times as much positive feedback as critical or negative feedback.
3. Spend four times as much time on diagnosis as solution.
4. Spend four times as much time on business issues as personal.

"Interestingly, when you listen four times as much as you talk, your people will perceive it as just about even," notes King. "The same goes for positive versus negative feedback. To get the most of your one-to-ones, stay in diagnostic mode, ask a lot of questions, and be generous with your praise."

I encourage you to invest in yourself. Become more masterful in the art of one-to-ones and you will significantly increase your executive performance. You will know and trust that your staff has clarity of purpose, that you are coaching them to better performance, that they will take on more and more from you, with the accountability tools needed to get their jobs and yours done. In doing so, you free up your time and energy to do the other tasks that create value for your business.

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