



Career Compass No. 68:

## My 1:1 Meetings Are a Waste of Time

by Dr. Frank Benest

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Dear Frank,

*I've been a mid-manager in my city's human resources department for two years. While I directly supervise five HR specialists, I also have several of my own ongoing assignments and special projects. With all the demands from my department director, my own work and all the emails, I need more time to supervise my direct reports. In my division, I try to push out the work. However, some of my staff don't seem to be fully energized or committed.*

*While we do get together twice a month for a division staff meeting and I emphasize my open-door policy, I find it difficult to meet on a regular basis for 1:1 meetings with my direct reports. Either the meetings are rushed, or I must cancel given all the other demands on me. When we do meet, I find myself distracted. I also sense that my direct reports don't seem to find our 1:1 meetings very valuable.*

*Given all the demands on me, these 1:1 meetings seem like a waste of time. Can I get rid of this chore and find another way to supervise my direct reports?*



**DR. BENEST:** No! Conducting 1:1 meetings with direct reports should not be perceived as a burden. Rather, they are a great opportunity to engage staff and support them.

An open-door policy, monthly staff meetings, and email exchanges are good but insufficient. In your role of manager, nothing can serve you better than regular and productive 1:1 meetings with direct reports.

## WHAT IS YOUR ROLE AS A MID-MANAGER?

To address this challenge, you should first spend some time reflecting on your role as mid-manager.

First, you won't be successful as a supervisor or manager if you are just results-oriented.

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*It is through relationships that you achieve results.*

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People choose to follow you (or not). Followers tend to follow you if they feel connected to you. (See [Career Compass No. 60: I Don't Like My Mid-Manager Role.](#))

Second, the primary lever for leadership is employee engagement. If you want great achievement from your staff members, they must be actively engaged in their roles and work. The key factor with respect to employee engagement is the relationship between the supervisor/manager and his/her direct reports. As reported by Ryan Fuller and Nina Shikaloff ("What Great Managers Do Daily," *hbr.org*, December 14, 2016), employees who get little, if any, one-on-one time with their managers were four times more likely to be disengaged as individual contributors.

Based on Gallup's research on employee engagement, supervisors can promote actively engaged employees if they:

- Express expectations.
- Provide equipment, resources, and other support.
- Demonstrate that they care about the employee as a person (not just as an interchangeable commodity).
- Support the employee's growth and development.

Third, your primary role is not just "pushing out the work." Your challenge is how to develop employees and promote their learning and growth as they do the work. As you engage your direct reports in new projects, are you providing them with opportunities to stretch and grow? Within certain guiderails, are you providing autonomy in how the work is done? As a manager, are you a "multiplier" or "diminisher"? (see Liz Wiseman, *Multipliers—How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter*). Good leaders ask how every problem can be solved in a way that develops other people's capacity to handle the problem.

## WHAT IS THE OPPORTUNITY POSED BY 1:1 MEETINGS?

1:1 meetings are not a chore. If conducted properly, they offer the opportunity to more fully engage staff and support their performance, productivity, and development.

Specifically, 1:1 meetings allow the manager the opportunity to:

- Get to know the employee.

- Discover what is important to the employee.
- Share yourself.
- Establish rapport and relationship.
- Communicate expectations and provide needed resources.
- Help the employee to be a success at work.
- Support the employee's growth and development.

## **WHAT ARE SOME TIPS TO MAKE 1:1 MEETINGS MORE PRODUCTIVE?**

If you are to make 1:1 meetings more productive, you need to make them a priority and be intentional about them.

Here are some tips for making your 1:1 meetings more meaningful:

### ***1. Reflect on the importance of the 1:1 meetings***

If you reflect on the benefits of the meeting, you are more likely to make 1:1 meetings a priority and focus on how you can make them valuable for you and the employee, especially how they relate to the active engagement of the staff person.

### ***2. Decide on the frequency of the meetings with the employee***

The meetings with a direct report should be scheduled regularly. Depending on your needs and the needs of the employee, typically these meetings are once a week, twice a month, or sometimes once a month. The key is to make them regular meetings.

### ***3. Block regular time in your schedule for each 1:1 meeting with a direct report***

As you have discovered, 1:1 meetings can quickly get squeezed out of a hectic day. Therefore, you must ensure that you have blocked the time out on your calendar and then be vigilant that some daily urgent matter doesn't intrude on this critical time with a staff member.

### ***4. Prepare discussion points; prioritize the key items***

While you don't need to have a formal agenda for the meeting, it is very helpful to jot down in advance a few issues or projects that you want to discuss with the employee. Email the discussion items to the staff person and ask for any items that the employee wants to discuss. You might also ensure as a habit that the staff person update any project tracking or action report documents in advance of the meeting so you both don't waste time on updates.

When you meet, prioritize the discussion items so you get to the most important items. Do some loose timeboxing to ensure that you have time to discuss the most pressing items. If the conversation diverges, it is your responsibility to bring it back on track to focus on the priority issues.

### ***5. Don't use 1:1 meetings just for updates***

While you may want to get an update on an important project assigned to the staff person, you don't want to spend a lot of time on just updates. You can get project updates via email.

## **6. Start the meeting with a positive**

It is always a good idea to start the meeting with something positive. You might want to share a “win” by complimenting the staff person on hitting a project milestone, making a good presentation to senior management, or handling a successful recruitment.

## **7. Share some of yourself**

Since 1:1 meetings are about creating relationship and connection, you want to get to know the other person. It is always easier for the other person to share information about themselves if you start by sharing something about your family, a hobby, a recent vacation, or something provocative that your daughter said at the breakfast table. You can then ask what the employee did over the weekend.

It is always good to show a little vulnerability. Vulnerability creates connection. Periodically, you can demonstrate vulnerability by saying

- “I made a mistake.”
- “I’m stuck.”
- “I don’t know how to proceed.”
- “I need your help.”
- “I trust you.”

## **8. Be fully present**

During my management career, I had problems with this one. It is easy to be distracted or thinking of what you must get done by the end of the day. However, you need to shift gears and focus on the other person and the conversation. You must understand the meeting is a key opportunity to connect and help grow and develop the staff person. To devote your intention to the other person:

- Close the door.
- Turn off your phone.
- Mute your computer.

To help make it a more informal conversation, you can move from behind your desk and sit across from each other at a round table or in two seats facing each other. The desk is a barrier that you want to avoid.

In addition, you might want to consider periodically conducting the meeting away from the office at a café or even have a walking meeting. Again, a key goal is developing relationship and rapport. It is easier to promote relationship in a more relaxed setting.

## **9. Ask questions; listen intently**

Leadership, especially the coaching function, is more about asking questions than providing answers or solutions. To help the staff person figure out how to proceed on a challenging project, you can ask several catalytic questions:

- “Why is this project so important?” (Always start with the “why.”)
- “What is working?”

- “What isn’t working?”
- “How are you responding?”
- “What are you learning?”
- “What does success look like?”

Active listening requires that you ask open-ended questions, listen intently, avoid distractions (including conversations going on in your head), ask probing follow-up questions, and then summarize and paraphrase what you heard. By acknowledging the other person’s interests, hopes, values, and concerns, you demonstrate that you truly heard the person.

Listen more than you talk. Typically, a good conversationalist listens twice as much as he or she talks.

### ***10. Listen with a curious mind***

Most of us, including me, are not particularly good listeners. To listen deeply and promote learning for yourself and the staff person, don’t immediately seek to rebut (“yes, but”). Instead, say “tell me more.”

### ***11. Be forward-looking and focus on progress***

You don’t want to focus on the past and the mistakes people make. By exploring the lessons that the staff person is learning and ways to improve things going forward, you promote responsible risk-taking and continual learning and improvement. Also, emphasize the progress that you see the staff person or team is making. As Teresa Amabile indicates in her book *The Progress Principle*, people will stay self-motivated if they see progress.

### ***12. Share a relevant personal experience/story***

Stories are the most powerful way to communicate (see [Career Compass No. 50: “Story-Telling: A Powerful Way to Lead and Communicate”](#)). Therefore, if you can share a relevant personal experience about how you overcame some adversity or engaged dubious stakeholders, it helps the staff person find his/her way in addressing the challenge. Of course, don’t tell a story or share a personal experience for the mere sake of telling the story; the story must be relevant to the discussion.

### ***13. Problem-solve with the staff person but keep responsibility with the employee***

Managers typically love to solve problems. However, in your 1:1 meetings, you must let the staff person solve the problem. Ask questions such as “What do you need to do next?” or “Whom do you need to involve?”

If you are to maintain the accountability with the employee, it is essential that you don’t jump in to solve the problem.

### ***14. Inquire about desired learning and career aspirations; offer support***

1:1 meetings are a good venue to explore the learning and career goals of your direct reports. Some managers ask their direct reports to include learning and career development goals in their annual work plans.

If you want to discuss the employee's career development activities, let the staff person know in advance that you'd like to explore their professional or career development. That way they can prepare for the discussion.

Again, if you can demonstrate interest in the employee's growth and development, and offer suggestions and resources, the employee is more likely to become or stay actively engaged. Moreover, employees tend to stay with an organization if they are learning and growing. (See Frank Benest, [Retaining and Growing Talent—Strategies to Create Organizational Stickiness](#), *PM*, Oct 2008.)

### **15. Express gratitude**

Just like the beginning of the meeting, it is valuable to end the 1:1 session with something positive. You can express your appreciation--even gratitude--for the work that someone is doing on behalf of the organization and the people that they serve. You must be authentic in expressing appreciation. Unfortunately, we usually don't take the time to acknowledge how grateful we are for the efforts of others.

(For a discussion of some of these tips, see Rebecca Knight, "How to Make Your One-on-Ones with Employees More Productive," *hbr.org*, Aug 8, 2018.)

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*Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's liaison for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail [careers@icma.org](mailto:careers@icma.org) or contact Frank directly at [frank@frankbenest.com](mailto:frank@frankbenest.com). Read past columns at [icma.org/careercompass](http://icma.org/careercompass).*