The Update, the Vent, and the Disaster

Business is noisy.

Business is full of people worrying loudly about projects, process, and other people. These people have opinions and they share them all over the place, all the time. This collective chatter is part of the daily regimen of a healthy business, but this chatter will bury the individual voice unless someone pays attention. And paying attention is best done in a one-on-one with the people you manage.

Your job in a one-on-one is to give the smallest voice a chance to be heard, and I start with a question: “How are you?”

The Basics

Before we start, let’s go over the basic rules I follow regarding one-on-ones:

_Hold a one-on-one the same time each week:_ When you become a manager of people, an odd thing happens. You’re automatically perceived as being busier. Whether you are or not is irrelevant; folks just think you are. Consistently landing your one-on-ones at the same time on the same day is a weekly reminder that you are here for them—no matter how busy.
Always do it: OK, so you are really busy. You’re running from meeting to meeting. It’s easy to de-prioritize a one-on-one because, unlike whatever meeting you’re running to or from, a one-on-one doesn’t represent an urgent problem that needs solving. I’ll beat this perceived-lack-of-value opinion out of you later in this piece, but for now, understand that each time you bail on a one-on-one, the person you’re managing hears, “You don’t matter.”

Give it 30 minutes, at least: Another favorite move of the busy manager is to schedule a one-on-one for 15 minutes or less. It’s the best I can do, Rands. I’ve got 15 people working for me. First, those 15 people don’t work for you; you work for them. Think of it like this: if those 15 people left, just left the building tomorrow, how much work would actually get done? Second, if you’ve got 15 people working for you, you’re not their manager; you’re just the guy who grins uncomfortably as you infrequently fly by the office, ask how it’s going, and then don’t actually listen to the answer.

Having a meaningful conversation with anyone takes time. As you’ll see in a moment, you start with an opener where you figure out where everyone is mentally, which builds momentum into having a conversation of consequence. In your 15-minute one-on-one, all you learn is that you don’t have time to care.

How Are You?

It’s a softball opener. I recognize that, but I lead with a vanilla opener because this type of content-free question is vague enough that the recipient can’t help but put part of themselves into the answer, and it’s the answer where the one-on-one begins.

What’s the first thing they say? Do they deflect with humor? Is it the standard off-the-cuff answer? Or is it different? How is it different? What words do they choose and how quickly are they saying them? How long do they wait to answer? Do they even answer the question? Do you understand the answer isn’t the point, either? The content is merely a delivery vehicle for the mood, and the mood sets your agenda.

As I’m listening to the answer, I’m discerning your mood, and I’m throwing you into one of three buckets regarding the type of one-on-one we’re about to have:

- The Update (all clear!)
- The Vent (something’s up . . .)
- The Disaster (oh dear . . .)