# Best Practices: One-on-One Conversations

The Basics

* **The Platinum Rule.** Treat others as they wish to be treated.
* **More is More.** Dialogue can build a strong safety net in any relationship. If you’re not in communication, something’s wrong. If you think something said was ambiguous or incomplete, it probably was.
* **Listen, Listen, Listen.** Ask questions. Show you are listening to the answers.
* **Treat People as People**—not as their role or function.
* **Face to Face is Ideal.** Video conferencing is a great second option. Telephone is good. E-mail is adequate. (But all are better than not communicating.)
* **Adjust your Style.** There may be aspects of your style you might wish to highlight or tone down to help you connect with them.

Relationship Building Around Work Issues

* **Practice Listening.** There are many different kinds of listening that we practice all the time, such as listening to understand or listening to solve a problem. As a leader you can use your listening as a way to gain others’ trust and influence them. (Read the next page for examples on how to “Listen For … Strengths, Values, Emotional Connection, and/or Ways to Endorse.”)

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Listening For

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| **Listening For…** | **For Example…** |
| Strengths | If an employee comes to you sharing how he or she had confronted another employee, a good performer but interpersonally arrogant and aggressive, and the conversation had turned into an argument, instead of jumping in to help him or her strategize on resolving the conflict, you can say: **“I can really see the courage you have to take a stand for something you believe in.”** |
| Values | If you are talking to a leader who has to revamp their bonus system (paying top performers more and supporting people less in order to attract top performers), instead of jumping in to start solving the problem, you can say: **“I can really hear that you value all the players on your team. It’s clear you care about treating people fairly.”** |
| Personal Emotional Connection | If someone is sharing a work problem, rather than jumping in to solve it, you might say: “**This sounds frustrating (tough, upsetting).”** It’s very important to be authentic (to empathize enough to really feel the frustration or the upset as you speak it).  If someone is sharing a new idea, rather than finding what’s wrong with it immediately, you can say: **“That’s so exciting—I’m feeling jazzed!”** |
| Other Ways to Endorse | Instead of solving the problem or showing what’s wrong, look for ways to authentically endorse him or her: Encourage, Agree, Congratulate, Reassure, and Appreciate. |

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Looking in the Mirror

The “S” in the PRES Model stands for “Self-knowing.” As a leader, if you focus only on the “P,” “R,” and “E,” without the “S,” you lose your ability to learn, grow, and change. Leaders who have presence have in common a strong sense of understanding and accepting who they are and knowing what they stand for. Developing deeper self-knowledge leads to a stronger understanding of your own values and how those values impact others.

**The Leader as Teacher**

When you listen to build relationships with your team, you encourage them to share their experiences and feelings and then reflect back to them what you have heard. This is an extremely valuable and unusual communication skill. The most effective leader is one who can accurately analyze and frame another person’s experience in language that is both empathic and inspiring. Sometimes you can tell a person something about him/herself that they may not have actually realized. This is a true “Aha!” moment—the leader as teacher.

**Make a Personal Connection**

Fundamentally as leaders you must find ways to connect on a personal level with your people. You can only do this by sharing and being vulnerable yourself. If the culture of your organization makes this difficult, you must learn to find acceptable approaches. But the information that can be gained and the trust that can be built are priceless. You can start by sharing something about the non-work side of yourself or perhaps share personal challenges or weaknesses—it will invite his/her vulnerability. Get interested in them as people (e.g., if someone mentions their kids play soccer, ask about the soccer team). Find common ground (e.g., we all have had parents, grandparents, role models and important people in our lives, and we’ve all been children). Aim to have a conversation in which you really try to understand what makes the other person tick, what makes him/her unique, what he/she is proud of.

**Giving Feedback**

Giving effective feedback approaches the level of an art form: you must get your point across while being sensitive to your coachee’s self-esteem. Give positive feedback regularly without the need to always follow with constructive suggestions. When giving constructive feedback, start with the positive. When stating the positives, it is vital to be specific and authentic—nothing feels worse than an empty endorsement (“Nice job—but here’s what I really think…”).

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Problem Solving

When confronted with an issue or problem, we tend to want to leap in and solve it. Instead, aim to use the situation as an opportunity to deepen relationships and build trust. With this information you can focus on also being of service to the other person, e.g., help them solve a problem on their own, or offer your network of contacts.

* **Prepare for obstacles and how you might overcome them.** Do some thinking before an important communication about what might get in your way in this interaction. Reflect on whether there is potential for conflict or other risks you will have to face. With these things in mind, you can think about how you can work best with yourself so as not to fall into old habits and patterns. Remember, you can’t need to be right and also have a good relationship.
* **Change the scene.** Slow down and find a place and time without distractions to really connect. Try getting out of the work environment—take a colleague to lunch or coffee so that you can relax and tune in.

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Reaching Out in Four Acts

Act I: Enter with Generosity

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| --- | --- |
| What to do | How to do it |
| Make a personal connection | “How has your day been?” |
| Share agenda setting | “I thought we should talk about...What are you thinking of?” |
| Slow down and listen deeply | Listen for strengths, values, personal/emotional connection |

Act II: Express the Truth with Empathy

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| What to do | How to do it |
| Walk in their shoes | “I imagine that feels…” |
| Use “I” statements | “When I saw the email you wrote, I got upset, because…” |
| Listen with generosity | “Does this ring true for you? What’s your perspective?” |

Act III: Envision a Win-Win

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| --- | --- |
| What to do | How to do it |
| Form a partnership | “We could both profit if..” |
| Get out of the box | Brainstorm possibilities; Use story and metaphor |

Act IV: Exit Aligned

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| What to do | How to do it |
| Share ownership of next steps | Get concrete about roles, responsibilities, and dates  “Thank you for…” |
| Check out | “How’d it go?”; Share your truth about this interaction |