



The good 1:1 conversation guide

How managers can have valuable conversations at work





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Anna Wildman



Do you remember being taught how to hold important conversations at school? Communication can be the make-or-break factor in working relationships, yet most of us never learn one of life’s most important skills.

Today’s managers must navigate all kinds of topics with their employees, some of which might feel personal, or challenging – like performance, feedback, development and stress, to name a few. Yet 69% of managers are uncomfortable communicating with their reports, with only 6% of managers being skilled at having candid 1:1 performance conversations.

Imagine what would happen if most managers actually felt confident in their 1:1 conversations with employees?

What if employees felt confident to raise their own topics with managers, and steer conversations towards the drivers that are impacting their performance, engagement and, ultimately, the business’ success?

Productive, high-quality 1:1 conversations could change everything, but managers need to be enabled to drive them. As performance management guru Anna Wildman explains in her book *Now You’re Talking!*, “The success of the conversation is almost entirely down to the way the manager leads it... get the tone and phrasing right and they create understanding and buy-in. Better still, they help the team member to take the best possible action going forward.”



This OpenBlend guide demonstrates how leaders can unlock the transformative power of conversations. Because great managers have great 1:1 conversations – and great 1:1 conversations unlock great performance.



The importance of 1:1 conversation



1:1 conversation can drive employee engagement – or disrupt it. 1:1 conversations can drive performance – or prevent it. 1:1 conversations can drive a career – or stall it. They can leave employees feeling heard and motivated to work towards a shared goal with the business, or, they can leave them feeling isolated, unimportant and disengaged. The difference between the two lies in how conversations are organised, prepared for, what they focus on, how they are guided in the moment, and the strength of the outcome achieved. Traditionally, it takes years to build an effective manager–employee dynamic, but with the right tools and training in place to support open, honest 1:1 conversations, this can be entrenched from the start.

Time to change mindset

There's so much focus on helping managers to have 'difficult' conversations, but it's time to shift our thinking. Conversations shouldn't only happen when there's a problem to be solved: they should be consistently adding value. Managers and employees alike should be looking at 1:1 conversations as an opportunity to bring everything to the table – discussing both challenges and opportunities and raising conversation points without fear of judgment.

Unleashing engagement

Businesses are facing a disengagement crisis: the risk of leaving things unsaid is too great. Only one in five (21%) employees feel engaged at work, according to a global report from Gallup. The other four in five? It's common sense that disengaged employees are neither at their most productive nor their happiest. Different sources estimate that disengagement costs between 18% to 34% of employees' annual salary. The right conversations, at the right time, can make all the difference to every individual's engagement.

What matters most

Let's inspire managers and employees to talk about what matters most to them at the right time. Yes, that might mean the personal, as well as the professional. An engaged team is one in which people bring their whole selves to work. By deeply understanding each other, and having an open forum for discussion, we can hold valuable 1:1 conversations that generate performance-driving actions.

69%



of managers feel uncomfortable communicating with their employees



Five critical 1:1 conversations at work

Since we launched OpenBlend, we've seen the direct impact that 1:1 conversations have on individuals and workplaces. Here are the five workplace conversations we see as critical to boosting employee engagement and performance.

1. Clear goal setting

- — Stress is often a result of unclear expectations. If employees don't understand the goals they are working towards, how can they feel motivated to achieve them? And how can managers take action to help employees achieve those objectives? Managers and employees can co-create achievable yet ambitious goals through productive conversations, then use 1:1s to evaluate progress. Personal goals should be contextualised, showing how every individual contribution rolls up to organisational strategy.

2. Development

Most of today's workforce prioritise development in their role. A study by Gallup found that what employees most wanted from managers was clarity, feedback, opportunities to learn and grow, and accountability. However, the same study discovered that only 30% of employees strongly agreed that their manager involves them in goal-setting, while only 19% talked to their manager about steps to reach their goals. When 87% of millennials (and 69% of others) rate professional growth and development opportunities as important to their job, it is vital that these development conversations are taking place.

3. Motivation

Performance is always underpinned by motivation – but what really motivates your employees? A blanket approach to boost motivation across the business (happy hours, weekend retreats, perks, etc) will never have the same impact as consistent 1:1 conversations. No two employees are the same, and motivation is deeply personal: what might motivate one may not motivate another. So how do you find out? You ask. Managers need to be open to having conversations about what really motivates an employee, whether it's a professional or

personal driver. One person might be driven by career progression, another might be motivated by having protected time outside of work – but conversation is the only way managers will find out.

4. Wellbeing

The way we feel will always impact the way we work. We are multidimensional beings, and no amount of professionalism can prevent our wellbeing from influencing our day-to-day, whether we are happy, sad, stressed or having a crisis of confidence. Employees need to be able to be honest about how they feel with their managers, and what is really affecting those feelings, be it personal or professional. Yet only 14% of employees feel able to talk about stress and mental health with their manager, meaning that wellbeing issues are often invisible to managers. To change this, managers need to be coached to prompt these critical conversations and be open and available to the responses.

5. Reviews

Reviews shouldn't be intimidating or demoralising, yet for many employees, they often are. A year's worth of feedback is distilled into one, short meeting, with little context and another year until the employee can find out whether they have fulfilled their objectives. It's no wonder that 47% of millennials start looking for a new job after their annual performance review, while only 14% of employees overall are inspired by reviews. How can managers change this? With consistency. End of year reviews should be one part of an ongoing development conversation, just one of many 1:1s that focus on development, opportunities and learning. By building evaluation and actionable objectives into regular 1:1s, end of year reviews can become a positive, inspiring annual summary.

Introducing the conversation funnel

We've discovered how ineffective 1:1 conversations can be flipped to become powerhouses for productivity. How can managers ensure these discussions go to plan?

To ensure conversations are personalised, structured and outcome based we've created a simple funnel so managers can ensure discussions go to plan.

Our conversation funnel is a framework that moves managers and employees through performance conversations in a structured way, creating tangible results and better relationships. OpenBlend's conversation funnel helps managers and employees to prepare for and organise 1:1s. Managers are guided by a coaching approach, and employees walk away feeling heard and clear on expectations.



Our conversation funnel
has 4 steps





Organise

1:1 conversations benefit from a having a regular, logical cadence. If employees and managers both know that 1:1s are booked, they will know that there is an opportunity to constructively raise important goals, feedback and concerns. It allows a more organised approach to the manager-employee relationship that is consistent, rather than ad-hoc. If you have a tool to do this, especially one that integrates with organisational Apps such as Slack and Outlook, like OpenBlend, use it. It will prompt both parties to organise and make sure 1:1s are booked in.




Prepare and focus

Preparation is key to an effective 1:1 conversation. Both managers and employees need the opportunity to add to an agenda, assess progress on goals from the last 1:1 and prepare for the conversation they are walking into. As Wildman suggests: "Decide ahead of time what your opening sentence or two will be." It's impossible to plan the whole conversation, but a co-created agenda that helps to focus the conversation will be invaluable.




Guidance

Talking is important, but it isn't going to get results on its own: it's the actions that come from 1:1 conversations that are key. Managers need to be supported in the moment with a framework that helps them to guide employees through the conversations to actionable objectives. The GROW framework is invaluable: it breaks agenda points down into Goal, Reality, Obstacles and Way forward, guiding both parties from 'agenda items' through to 'taking action'.




Actions

This is the outcome of the conversation, and the key point that makes a 1:1 truly effective. Only 20% of development takes place in the conversation: the other 80% happens between this and the next 1:1. To have an impact on performance, motivation or wellbeing, actions need to be clear and timebound, and employees need to be motivated to achieve them. Again, the only way managers can know this is if they ask the question: how committed are you on a scale of 1-10? If the answer is anything less than a 7, understanding why needs to be part of the 1:1 conversation.



Ready to start enabling the most productive 1:1 conversations your business has ever seen?

Performance management has evolved and for organisations to drive performance, managers need to have the right conversations, at the right time, to unlock employee performance.

OpenBlend is used by the likes of Gymshark, M&C Saatchi and Dr. Martens to help managers have great 1:1 conversations with their employees. Harnessing the conversation funnel, OpenBlend's platform guides managers through an easy to follow framework, creating transformative 1:1s that turbo-charge performance.

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Discover how great 1:1 conversations drive great performance.