

Old Adages Ring True—Three Keys to Maximizing One-on-One Meetings

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“The newest computer can merely compound at speed the oldest problem in the relationship between human beings, and in the end, the communicator will be confronted with the old problem of what to say and how to say it.”

~Edward R. Murrow

Lots of people go into one-on-one meetings without giving them a lot of forethought. Consequently, some of those meetings are wasted opportunities. Ideas are poorly communicated and sometimes the relationship even suffers. There are three key principles that apply to maximizing one-on-ones. They are best expressed by old adages.

- 1. Be prepared.** Remember the old Boy Scout motto of “Always Be Prepared?” The same approach should apply to a one-on-one meeting. It is not time to “wing it.” By being prepared, you demonstrate that you will not waste the other person’s time.

Being prepared means that you have done your homework on the front end. If this is a follow-up meeting, you have accomplished your action items or know the status of any project or committee. It means that you have power point slides or hands outs, facts and examples ready that strategically support or explain your ideas.

If this is a first meeting, being prepared means that you know what you want to accomplish as a result of this meeting. You go into it with definite goals. It also means that you know what the other person’s issues are on the front end and can add value by being present.

- 2. Treat others like you would like to be treated.** People have clear preferences for

the way they approach tasks and for the way information is communicated to them. They are direct or indirect, open or self-contained. If openness and directness are two continuums on which people behave, the opposite of open is self-contained or closed and the opposite of direct is indirect. To treat others like they would like to be treated, pay attention to whether they are direct or indirect, open or closed.

People who are open are comfortable with others and easily show emotions. They develop relaxed, warm relationships quickly, and they are very informal. They talk freely about their personal lives and enjoy when you do also. Open people are known to make emotional decisions. They hate being confined by deadlines, schedules or agendas and feel pushed into a corner when you suggest them.

At the opposite extreme are self-contained people. They are much more private and reserved. They keep their distance physically and emotionally and seem to always be on guard. They like it best when you stick to the task at hand or to the agenda. They manage their time well and expect you to do the same. They make decisions based on facts and prefer you not to let your emotions get in the way of making an unbiased decision.

Direct people take control in a meeting. They are forceful and out-spoken. They can be argumentative if they don’t get their way or feel in control. They prefer not to be restricted by rules. In contrast to direct people, indirect people are tentative and reserved. They wait to be approached by others. They weigh their words carefully and avoid conflict unless they really have a strong feeling about something. They would prefer you to think before you speak.

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While people can function in each of these realms, each person primarily has one preferred style for approaching tasks and for the way information is communicated to them. You treat others like they want to be treated when you identify their communication style and flex your style to accommodate them.

- 3. Always tell the truth.** The final adage is something one's grandmother might say. It is particularly important today in lieu of Enron and other corporate scandals. In a one-on-one meeting, while it can be painful, it is important to report numbers honestly and to avoid gray areas.

It is also important when problems occur to take ownership, and often this is difficult to do when you screwed up or because a large dollar amount is involved. However, when people believe they can trust you, your reputation will precede you, and you will always be welcome, even at the executive level.

People have tons of meetings all day long. A lot of those meetings are a waste of time. To insure that your next one-one-one is successful and productive, remember three key principles:

- Be Prepared.
- Treat others as you would like to be treated.
- Always tell the truth.

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