

Vantage Point: Valued Conversations

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Valued Conversations are strategically planned and executed conversations effective executives initiate with their most valued direct reports. They generally occur two to three times annually. The goal is to demonstrate that you care about these people, their lives and their futures, and to reinforce that you hold them in high regard. These conversations are NOT to be confused with monthly, semi-annual or annual performance reviews.

Context:

- Valued employees (high potential managers and high performing individual contributors) at all levels – especially senior levels – want/need periodic meaningful dialog with their boss. In fact, it is common knowledge that the most predictable reason valued employees stay with their current employer is their relationship with their immediate boss ... and, the converse of that is also true.
- Valued conversations are critically essential – they are not necessarily natural. In fact, in all – YES, ALL – 360 data summary reports, executives are rated by their direct reports in the bottom quintile related to their communication effectiveness.
- Executives have understandable resistance to having these conversations:
 - The best executives have hired or promoted subject matter experts or proven managers for their most important direct report roles.
 - The executive may be uncomfortable with the technical aspects of the role of the direct report.
 - The executives are busy and they respect that the valued direct reports are just as busy. **This is incorrect** – all employees always have time to be engaged in a “valued conversation” ... about themselves.
 - The executive is afraid that the conversation will degenerate to a discussion regarding compensation inflation and/or title inflation (this rarely happens and when it does, the effective executive brings the conversation back to a structured process).
- What’s needed (First – NO interruptions – turn away from your computer and silence your phones):
 - A structured – BRIEF – process (the total elapsed time of the discussion is generally less than 30 minutes)
 - Respect and regard – demonstrated value for the direct report’s contributions, thoughts and opinions
 - The valued direct report wants frequency and quality – NOT duration or supervision
 - Quality inquiries regarding the valued person’s professional and personal life
 - Active listening on the part of the executive
 - Positive suggestions on what to do or how to perform better to be more effective

The Seven Questions of the Structured Process: *(You won't always ask all these questions and some or all may need to be modified for your specific organization or situation. You may also choose to ask other personal and professional questions. And, don't talk about yourself too much)*

1. "Thanks for investing your time to talk with me. I'd like you to know some things I am thinking related to where I see the business (overall) and our function (BU, etc.) going." Now, make VERY brief and pertinent comments. Then ask: "Where in your judgment might the organization be going?" Practice active listening.
2. "Where is your area of authority (BU, function, etc.) going?" Practice active listening.
3. "What's going particularly well in your area of responsibility?" Practice active listening.
4. "If you were your boss, what suggestions would you have for yourself and your area of operations?" Practice active listening – then say, "Well, thanks. I would like to offer a couple of thoughts related to your comments." Use this opportunity for alignment and communicating the direct report's broad range of executive support. Make your comments brief, pertinent and developmental!
5. "What can I do to be more effective with my support? What might I do more of or less of?" Practice active listening. Absorb what you hear and *say as little as possible* – making brief commitments where appropriate.
6. "I would like you to advise me on one or two things that, if I did them you would experience me as more effective in our relationship." Practice active listening. Absorb what you hear and say as little as possible – briefly making commitments where appropriate (do not justify anything!). Listen and care.
7. "What do I *not* seem to know or what am I *not* asking that might be beneficial to you, your career, our relationship or the organization?" Practice active listening. Absorb what you hear and say as little as possible – making commitments where appropriate (do not justify anything!). Listen and care.

(Some of these concepts were inspired from an article by Marshall Goldsmith published in Insights-winter 2002)

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