

Just Between You and the Boss

Both boss and subordinate might cringe at the thought of regular meetings between the two. But a study on biweekly personal interviews shows that such meetings may be quite productive.

By R. WAYNE BOSS

Attempts at resolving organizational conflict stretch from one extreme to the other. The evolution strategy of nonintervention is as ineffective as its opposite, the revolution strategy, which proposes disruptive activities to effect drastic change. Somewhere in the middle lies the happy median that proponents of organization development feel most comfortable with: supportive confrontation. In adherence to this strategy, problems are confronted and resolved in a supportive atmosphere; goals are clarified and necessary changes are suggested in a climate of cooperation and trust. As a result, personnel are effective and efficient in accomplishing organizational goals.

A possible vehicle for helping employees develop supportive-confrontation skills is the personal management interview. It

depends on the entire group. A quality relationship between the leader and each subordinate, however, is the key to a productive team. A healthy relationship with one's supervisor is more important to work-group success than a healthy relationship with one's peers. In fact, it is difficult, if not impossible, to resolve problems with peers effectively until the problems are resolved with the supervisor. Thus, the personal management interview offers a structured opportunity for maintaining healthy supervisor-subordinate relationships.

During the first few minutes of each personal management interview, the participants review the assignments planned at the previous session. Although the format for the remainder of the meeting varies, each interview includes the following:

■ Discussion of administrative or organizational problems currently faced and suggestions for resolutions;

■ Resolution of interpersonal problems between supervisor and subordinate (Problems are dealt with early, before they fester and create further difficulties.);

■ Discussion of personal problems faced by either party;

■ Identification of individual and organizational needs;

■ Training in administrative and management skills (A major problem in most organizations is that people are promoted to supervisory positions because of technical expertise, rather than managerial ability. Through personal management interviews, subordinates can learn the skills necessary to prepare them for promotion.);

■ Information sharing to bring both parties up to date on happenings in the organization;

On the surface, these goals appear contrary to team-effectiveness goals; the interview promotes one-to-one behavior with the leader, while team effectiveness

person understands fully what the supervisor expects from other department members.

Once the role negotiations are complete, regular personal management interviews are held. These meetings are weekly, biweekly or monthly, depending on the need, and normally last from 30 minutes to an hour. The major objectives are to improve communication between supervisor and subordinate, resolve problems and increase the subordinate's accountability.

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The participants explore each other's expectations and what each party is willing to deliver

is a private meeting held regularly between a supervisor and each of his or her immediate subordinates.

This follows an initial role-negotiation meeting between supervisor and subordinate. The role-negotiation session typically takes one hour and deals with specific

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Table 1—Participating Organizations in Personal Management Study

Description of Organization	Size	Biweekly Interviews?
1. Department of State Government	55	Yes
2. Private-Sector Planning Organization	34	Yes
3. Private-Sector Scientific Research and Development Company	10	Yes
4. Private Nonprofit Hospital	275	Yes
5. Comparison Group: Department of State Government	115	No

- Goal setting by the subordinate, both on a short- and long-term basis;
- Review of the action items generated during the meeting (This ensures that participants clearly understand their assignments. Later, one participant writes up the action items and gives a copy to the other person.).

Interviews in action

A study of personal management interviews was conducted with 489 professionals from five public and private organizations (see Table 1). The comparison group was made up of 115 people who work in the same geographical region as the participants from organizations 1, 2 and 3. No interviews took place in the comparison group during the one year between data collections.

All members of organization 1 through 4 had a two-hour training session on the purpose of personal management interviews, results that could be expected and suggestions for making the meetings productive. Afterwords, the interviews were implemented, beginning with the CEO and his or her immediate staff, then down the organization through natural teams or family groups. Participation was voluntary, but all members of each organization got involved within two months of the initial training sessions.

The instrument used to measure the effectiveness of the interviews was Likert's Profile of Organizational and Performance Characteristics.¹ The Likert Profile is composed of 18 items designed to measure organization climate. Each item is represented by a 20-point scale and describes four systems of organization. Participants mark the position on the continuum that best describes their organizations at the present time. The six dimensions of the Likert Profile are leadership, motivation, communication, decision making, goal setting and control. In all cases the responses are coded uniformly so that scores run from 1 (an extremely exploita-

tive, coercive, authoritarian rating) to 20 (an extremely participative, group-based rating).

Data from organizations 1, 2 and 3 were gathered three times: prior to implementation of the interviews, after a one-year interval and after a two-year interval. Data from organization 4 and the comparison group were collected at the beginning of the project and one year later. All data were analyzed via t test (student's t, based on matched or paired samples), and levels of significance were based on comparison with the "before" scores. The analyst was not involved in implementing the interviews.

Figure 1 shows the Likert Profile results. (The data represent averages of the combined group scores in each organization. In no situation did scores for individual variables differ from the trends illustrated.) The scores for organizations 1 through 4 show significant improvement one year after implementing regular interviews. The scores also show that level of improvement either was maintained or improved for organizations 1, 2 and 3 during the second year. In contrast, the scores for

Another factor: Although no formal interventions aside from the interviews took place in any of the organizations, it may be that changes in the environment produced the positive results. The likelihood of this appears slim; but given the results for the comparison group and the fact that organization 4 is in a different geographical region than organizations 1 through 3, the possibility of environmental changes exists.

A fourth factor is the size of the organization. It may significantly affect the degree to which personal management interviews can be effective. The organizations ranged in size from 10 to 275 employees. The potential for generalizing these results for larger organizations is limited.

In spite of these limitations, study participants consistently reported several benefits of the interviews. They said the interviews were effective for holding personnel accountable. Although it's one of their responsibilities, few supervisors know how to hold their people accountable without appearing to be the "bad guy." Few have the supportive-confrontation skills necessary to instill accountability in an educational and motivating manner. The assignment-review aspect of the interviews ensured that both supervisor and subordinate were held accountable for fulfilling responsibilities on a regular basis. As a result, completion of assignments increased significantly. Thus, experience with the interviews supports the notion that when results are measured, productivity improves; and when results are measured and reported back, productivity increases at an accelerated rate.

A healthy relationship with one's supervisor is more important to work-group success than a healthy relationship with one's peers

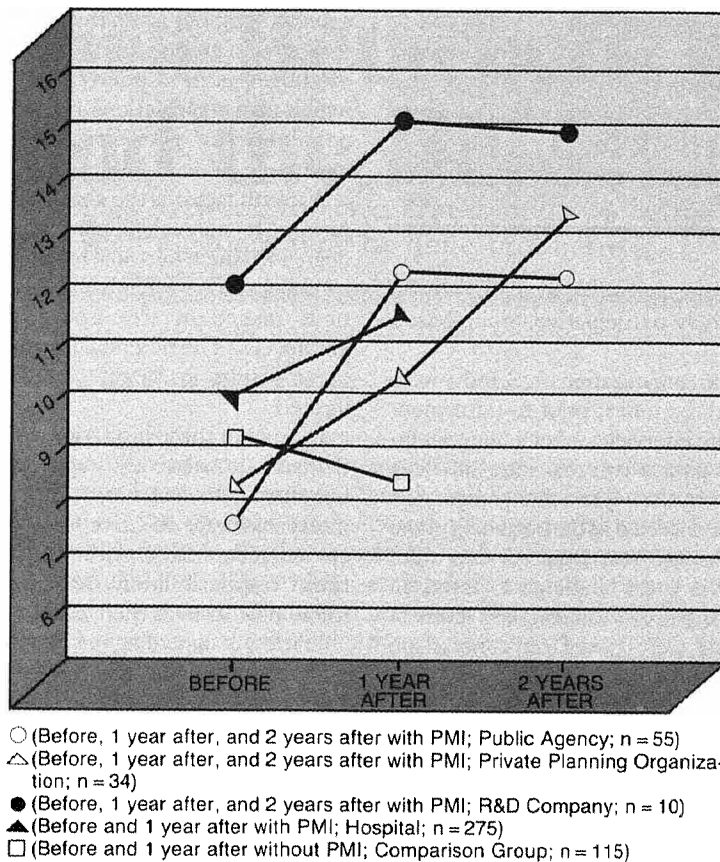
the comparison group, which did not implement interviews, show a slight decrease over the one-year period.

The study data suggest that regular personal management interviews can have a positive impact on organization climate. However, a number of factors should be considered in evaluating these results. First, the results may be peculiar to the organizations selected for this study; even with using a comparison group this still is a possibility. Second, participants were not selected at random. Therefore, the results may be due to selection treatment, rather than the interviews.

Increased accountability made it easier for participants to administer discipline. All action items were documented, so competent and responsible people got noticed immediately. The records of those who did not measure up were equally apparent; and because the facts were available to all parties, the failures were painfully obvious. In some cases, people lacked the skills necessary to do the job. Others had talent but were in the wrong job. Still others had been hiding in the organization and needed to be replaced.

The interviews proved particularly helpful to two groups of people: those with dif-

Figure 1—Average Responses on the Likert Profile, With and Without Implementing Personal Management Interviews (PMI)



difficulty in dealing with accountability and those with difficulty in dealing with certain issues at regular staff meetings.

The improved accountability helped increase the effectiveness of group-based decision making. One of the major difficulties with participative management is that most people want an opportunity to influence decisions that affect them, but few want the responsibility that comes with that participation. Effective personal management interviews make it almost impossible to avoid those responsibilities.

Also reported as a benefit was the regular contact between supervisor and subordinate. A major complaint of most personnel in this study was lack of contact with their immediate supervisor, given the differences in schedules and the demands on their leader's time. The interviews guaranteed subordinates access to their supervisor for at least one uninterrupted hour every two weeks.

Participants cited not just increased quantity but improved quality of supervisor-subordinate communication as a benefit. They consistently reported get-

ting more work done in less time than they had ever thought possible.

The trust level between supervisor and subordinate also improved, they said. The importance of this finding cannot be over-emphasized; trust is second only to financial stability as the most important variable in determining organizational health and productivity.

Supervisors in organizations 1 through 4 reported that regular personal management interviews saved time. Most of them initially resisted the idea, complaining that they didn't have time for private meetings with subordinates—the subordinates already took too much time as it was. After implementing the interviews, however, supervisors reported that they actually spent less time with their people, and the quality of the time spent improved substantially. A major timesaver was the decrease by as much as 80 percent in the number of unnecessary interruptions. People held nonemergency items until the regularly scheduled meeting. Also, certain subordinates—those who formerly felt uncertain about their personal relation-

ships with their supervisors—found no further need to use interruptions to “test the water” and determine whether problems existed. The motivation for such interruptions disappeared as interpersonal trust and quality of communication improved.

Participants also reported that the quality of their weekly staff meetings improved substantially. Content analysis of these meetings originally showed that the majority of the time (in some cases as much as 90 percent) was spent on information exchange between the supervisor and individual subordinates. The personal management interviews provided time for these one-to-one issues to be addressed, so staff meetings could concentrate on matters involving the entire staff.

Participants said the interviews helped them deal with problems, and that addressing conflict regularly prevented problems from growing.

The regular feedback that participants received on strengths and weaknesses proved helpful, too. The feedback was used to make mid-course corrections, improve behavior and make certain that subordinates were on the right track.

Last, the interviews served as a vehicle for effecting and managing change. They enhanced the opportunities for effective communication and problem resolution, which provided fertile ground for change to take place. In addition, they ensured constant contact and reinforcement, which are critical in sustaining positive change.

Before you begin

Several conditions must exist for the personal management interview to be effective. The first is a supportive and trusting environment conducive to supportive confrontation. The supervisor is the person most responsible for establishing that environment; the importance of his or her supportive attitude cannot be overstated. Without it, the interviews can result in a higher level of autocratic control and adverse relationships. The interviews provide a classic opportunity for power-hungry leaders to take advantage of subordinates' increased vulnerability and to punish them for mistakes. If this occurs, the personal management interview can become a highly destructive force in the organization.

The interviews must be held on a regular basis, and the time spent must be free of interruptions. This is important for two reasons. First, the employee feels less important when the supervisor responds to

an unknown caller instead of concentrating on the meeting. Second, it takes twice as long to overcome an interruption than it does to endure one.

Both parties must prepare for the meeting by creating an agenda. Without advance preparation, the interview may become nothing more than a rap session.

Another condition is not necessary, but is recommended. The meeting runs more smoothly when a trusted third party whose only responsibility is to take notes and record action is present. When highly personal or confidential information must be addressed, the third party is excused. Using such a person is a luxury in most organizations—a luxury that none of the organizations in the study had. Nonetheless, a third party to do the reporting dramatically increases the amount accomplished in the interview. Supervisor and subordinate are free to discuss problems without being hampered by note taking.

Leaders must be willing to hold subordinates accountable and ask the difficult "why" questions when assignments are not completed. More importantly, however, they must hold themselves accountable—they must be willing to share power with the subordinates—because the leaders also have assignments to complete regularly.

The interview format must be flexible, both in frequency and content. Leaders should seek input from subordinates to determine how the interviews can be most productive. For example, a new employee who works closely with a supervisor may need to meet weekly, while a more experienced employee who works independently may need to meet only once a month. Further, a supervisor may spend an entire session helping a subordinate resolve an organizational problem, but spend another employee's interview resolving a personal conflict.

Leaders must be willing to listen to their people, both at the intellectual and emotional levels, and to respond intelligently. Some problems require nothing more than a listener; others require immediate action.

Finally, leaders must be willing to empathize with and feel a certain amount of love for their people. In the organization sense, that may sound too impractical and sentimental. More appropriate terms may be "concern," "care" or "sincere interest." These are variations of love, and their power is strong. People will do positive things because of love that they will do for no other reason.

The results of this study may be unique

to the participants, which limits the degree to which the findings can be generalized. Further, the results should not lead readers to assume that regular personal management interviews will be the answer to all their problems; such is simply not the case. The interview is a tool with both strengths and limitations.

More research must be done before the interview's effectiveness can be ascertained. Future studies should focus on its

success in different organizations with different leadership styles and cultures. For now, the personal management interview remains a strong possibility among efforts to develop supportive-confrontation skills.

References

1. Likert, R. (1961). *The human organization: Its management and value*. New York: McGraw-Hill.



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