

FOREWORD

Now more than ever, we are forced to do more and more with less and less. We expect more from our employees with less training, more results with less time, more profits with less investment, and even more customer service with less effort on the part of (naturally) fewer employees!

The economic downturn has only made things more difficult for the increasingly burdened manager. So I was pleased to see that my colleague and long-time friend, Alan Vengel, has worked his magic in this new book. Why are these 20-Minute Conversations that Alan writes about in his book so important all the time? Why are they important in an up economy—and doubly vital during a down economy? The times are indeed changing, and with change comes progress—and with progress comes more work, harder work, and increasing pressures for the continually put-upon manager.

I remember when organizations had the luxury of being able to hire professional managers, managers who managed as their full-time—and only—job. Today we have what I call managers-plus: managers-plus-recruiters, managers-plus-production specialists, managers-plus-cheerleaders, managers-plus-creative, managers-plus-plus!

This supersize, value-plus style of management isn't going away anytime soon. If you find yourself uncomfortable in the role of manager-plus-counselor-plus-coach-plus-motivator-

plus-mentor, these ideas should make the part you're most uncomfortable with comfortable so that you don't avoid it.

Alan's ideas enable today's busy managers to do something they haven't done in quite some time: relax. The minute they hear "20 minutes," managers start to relax; the minute they hear "five-minute prep," they start to relax even more. The more that managers can be provided with the tips, the tools, and the how-to's, the easier it will be for them to have these conversations along with everything else they have on their plate.

The best part is, these conversations aren't rocket science; they're what you do every day anyway, just with a little more guided focus. The importance of these conversations isn't so much in your technique or the setting or, occasionally, even the content; what really matters to your people is the conversation itself.

In my own research on retention and engagement, I continue to learn that it's the conversation itself that makes people feel valued, needed, and appreciated. It can be as simple as a manager stopping for literally minutes to say, "Here's what I appreciate; here's what you did well," even to those people we think already know how they're doing. Quite often, they really don't know how they're doing; just as often, your assumed lack of feedback can leave them stranded, thinking that they're doing far worse than they actually are—or far better. My research and that of my colleagues points over and over again to the fact that people don't leave organizations; they leave bad managers. What makes a bad manager? The manager who doesn't nurture, appreciate, coach, motivate, or mentor his or her people.

Alan's book helps you do all of the above—and then some.

Now, many managers who scan this book will probably think that they have heard all of this before. You know that your people need feedback. You know that you should be communicating with them more. You know that they need to be motivated and even mentored from time to time. You know this stuff but . . . have you done it lately? And if so, how lately? Last week, last month . . . or last year?

If it hasn't been in the last week or two, read on.

Workers of all ages want to learn; they understand that not all career paths lead to upward mobility, but they want to know that their careers offer other rewards, such as personal creativity, ownership of ideas, and the chance to be rewarded emotionally, professionally, and even creatively from time to time. If you're not holding frequent career conversations, you are probably making assumptions about what your employees really want.

In this economy, it's critical to let people know how valued they are; *20 Minutes to a Top Performer* will teach you how to let your people know that you value them, creatively and constructively, emotionally and effectively.

The beauty of Alan's ideas is that they don't require a lot of fancy technology, new equipment, or high-tech gadgetry. There is no task force to create, no commission to deputize, no proprietary license to buy and download; in fact, you don't even need a computer, PDA, stylus, or Internet connection. You already have what is required: two ears and one mouth—and in just that order.

Alan reintroduces us to the long-forgotten art of conversation. Not the “jump-in-the-moment-the-other-person-finishes”

method, but truly the art of listening more than we speak and making what we say that much more powerful in the bargain.

His book shows us that beyond making people feel good, 20-Minute Conversations are just plain good business. Problems are solved in a proven, practical, and effective way, to the mutual benefit of both the manager and the employee. Alan introduces a model of cooperative collaboration that requires that elusive quality that most companies offer but never really deliver: true ownership.

—Beverly Kaye, October 2009

INTRODUCTION: WHY 20 MINUTES?

What can change the direction of history, the course of a life, the value of a relationship, or the tone and tenor of the day-to-day workplace? What can influence decisions, foster respect, generate passion, motivate employees, and create a true team rather than a collective “I”? What can create top performers out of mere performers?

What can help you influence others and manage and lead more effectively?

Words.

Conversations.

Conversations bridge the gap between people who have different values, different views, and different backgrounds. A conversation can speak volumes or cover up dirty little secrets. Conversations can unite or divide a workplace. A conversation can bridge party politics, mend opposing views, and bring people together.

Conversations give voice to your leadership. Every day, in every way, whether you are speaking one-on-one or inspiring the troops, your words have weight, value, and meaning. Words send signals—sometimes smoke signals, sometimes alarm bells. A hundred conversations a week tell people what

your priorities are, how you value others, what's on your mind, and *who you are as a leader*.

Conversations at work and outside of work aren't so different.

Most of us wonder, "What do I say? How do I begin? How can I keep the conversational ball rolling? How can I candidly say what I need to and still keep the relationship intact?" Conversation is defined as a "daily expression and exchange of individual opinions."

For the uninitiated, there are two types of conversations:

1. *Disruptive conversations*. A bad conversation is "disruptive"; it sets you apart from others, rather than drawing them in. People know when they're in a disruptive conversation; its earmarks are platitudes, false niceties, passive-aggressiveness, and the almost total absence of true listening. When you speak *to* others rather than speaking *with* them, you are engaging in disruptive conversations.
2. *Connective conversations*. A good conversation is "connective"; it invites people to participate. It's not a lecture. It's not a harangue. A connective conversation is two people equally exchanging their views and perceptions, reserving judgment, and applying logic. All connective conversations have some common characteristics. They're truthful. They build trust and relationship. They come from positive motives.

Conversations are not absolutes; on any given day, we can flip-flop from disruptive to connective conversations, and flip

right back again. Nor are conversations one-sided. As Charles Schwab once said, “It’s not a conversation if only one person is talking.”

The purpose of this book is *not* to tell you how wrong you are when your speaking is disruptive. The purpose of this book is to *help* you see the value of conversations—quick, efficient conversations—in crafting top performers in your organization and to help you find and fine-tune your leadership voice so that your conversations are connective, powerful, and positive and get results.

There is never enough time to do everything,
but there is always enough time to do the most
important thing.

—Brian Tracy

Results Speak Louder than Words

Most managers would agree that somewhere in their charter, getting results plays a vital role in achieving personal and professional success. And for many managers, achieving technical or project results comes naturally. But the key to long-term organizational and leadership success is *moving employees to action*.

Never before in the history of the modern workforce have organizations and the managers in them been more in need of talented, committed people. Managers realize that the daily

leadership of their employees is critical, yet many of them do not know how to help the people who work for them make significant changes in how they do their work.

Communication is key. Communicating what you want your employees to do and actually getting them to do it creates one of the largest gulfs between managers and employees in any organization. To bridge that gulf, effective leaders know how to have three distinct types of conversations with their employees:

- *Conversations that change performance.* First, effective leaders know when and how to use coaching. They recognize both the value and the effectiveness of being successful coaches in an environment based on teamwork. Coaching moves people to action by focusing on *performance* and *feedback*.
- *Conversations that keep people interested in and satisfied with their work.* Second, effective leaders are comfortable with motivating. Great leaders know that they do not need to be mind readers and that they need to be able to involve others to “translate” thoughts and ideas into words and actions that encourage employees. Motivating moves people to action by focusing on *engagement* and *interests*.
- *Conversations that keep people learning and ready for the future.* Third, these managers are savvy mentors. Not only do they find mentors for themselves, but they offer mentorship to those in need. This can take the form of

giving advice or imparting verbal wisdom, but, just as often, it can mean leading by responsible example. Mentoring moves people to action by focusing on *supporting* and *developing*.

This book, *20 Minutes to a Top Performer: Three Fast and Effective Conversations to Motivate, Develop, and Engage Your Employees*, dissects these three important conversations and explains *how*, *why*, and, just as importantly, *when* each conversation is appropriate for a particular situation.

Over the last 25 years, I have presented seminars, programs, and keynotes to more than 500 corporations as a consultant and speaker. For the last 5 years, I have been handing out a questionnaire to all the participants in my training classes—culminating in responses from more than 4,300 managers and employees. The most important question being answered boiled down to, “Who are the most effective leaders you have had, and what did they do that made them effective?” The answer to this question, along with other research, has formed the basis of the approach in this book.

Based on these responses, we have developed a new mindset for leaders that helps to reduce stress for both leaders and employees. As a result of this research, leaders have enjoyed a more direct, clean, and concise way to communicate, and employees have stopped wondering what their managers really want.

We now have a direction and purpose for each conversation, avoiding the tendency to mix these conversations up and thus

create unnecessary confusion in the mind of an employee concerning what these conversations are about. And leaders are no longer frustrated by having to use time for these conversations, but getting vague results because their approaches have been vague to begin with. Consequently, leaders can have shorter, more impactful conversations, and employees can produce faster results because they now know exactly what is expected of them.

Hence, *20 Minutes to a Top Performer*.

Conversation: The Voice of Leadership— 20-Minute Conversations That Get Results

The good news is that managers already know how to use most of the skills involved in *coaching*, *motivating*, and *mentoring* top performers. For many of us, we simply need to hone these skills so that we are more purposeful and efficient, and also figure out when best to use them. I believe that you will find this book realistic and useful. It's been especially designed to be interactive and practical for busy managers with many responsibilities and too little time for people management.

Great leaders grow great people. And a key to that growth is a leader's ability to move people to action through performance and development conversations. In today's fast-paced, ever-changing, overstressed work environment, these conversations need to be not just *effective*, but also meaningful.

In their book *The Value Imperative: Managing for Superior Shareholder Returns* (Free Press, 1994), management experts

Selection from 20 Minutes to a Top Performer, by Alan Vengel

James McTaggart, Peter Kontes, and Michael Mankins contend that “Leaders come out of meetings without clear decisions.” Your people need to walk away and think that the time was well spent.

The day-to-day pace of business leaves most managers with little time and energy for developing the people who report to them. “Leaders—spend too much time meeting,” conclude the authors of *The Value Imperative*, “when they have no clear agendas—and are unfocused as to specific outcomes.”

By developing their ability to have focused, outcome-oriented conversations that engage and motivate their talented people, any manager can be a successful developer of top performers.

Overall, *20 Minutes to a Top Performer* will help you develop your ability to get excellent results by

- Learning about three critical leadership conversations—*coaching*, *motivating*, and *mentoring*—and when and how to have them
- Examples of real business leadership behaviors that move people to action
- How to build 20-Minute Conversations for immediate application

The gift of gab truly is given to most of us at birth; we are born instinctively knowing how—and when—to get what we want. Truly, anyone can twist things around to get his or her way once. To truly succeed in business, however, you have to achieve your goals again and again, often with the same people.

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That takes honest influence skills, the kind that allow you to look the other person in the eye, even as you push for what you want. It's not just a win/win but a win/win/win situation because it's right for *you*, for *the business*, and for *the employee*.

You'll find that *20 Minutes to a Top Performer* is not a book full of complicated models or tricks; it offers sound wisdom and sage advice on quick, efficient, time-sensitive dialogue for the extremely busy leader in all of us. That's it: 20-Minute Leadership Conversations. No more; no less.

But it's just what you need to succeed.

Less Really *Is* More

What if I told you that, in 20 minutes or less, you could influence your employees to be more successful, enjoy their work more, and play as a team more effectively than through any 60- or 120-minute knock-down, drag-out confrontational sit-down?

What if I added that in addition to getting more, faster, and better results from your employees, you too could gain important feedback and critical direction from your own employers in just 20 minutes or less?

You can, you know, merely by putting *20 Minutes to a Top Performer* into practice.

Coaching moves people to action by focusing on performance and feedback. So forget coaching that is a drawn out complicated dialogue. This is *next-generation coaching*, coaching the way it needs to be. And this is coaching with a time

limit: a 20-Minute Conversation that changes the results you get as a leader and builds and maintains your employees' success with the work they do.

We've all mourned at the mass grave of "death by committee." We've all endured countless, endless, interminable meetings, conference calls, and meet and greets where little gets accomplished, but much time is wasted; *20 Minutes to a Top Performer* is the antidote to that grim corporate reality. As a result, you get what you, the business, and your employees all want: *more results in less time*.

Why 20 Minutes?

Why put a time limit on leadership? Simple: research suggests that not only can human beings *not concentrate for long periods of time*, but they can typically concentrate on *only one thing at a time*. Clearly, leaders who lack focus and direction and who spend too long meandering through yet another hour-long meeting with no agenda—and very little audience retention—will fall behind rather than surge ahead.

Case in point: a study by the University of Chicago Business School professors found that "leaders need to be efficient in their communications, while setting clear high standards—and persistent in what they need from others."

It's a little like exercise; I read once that with anything over 75 minutes in one workout, you're really doing more harm than good. So why work out for 90 minutes when 60 minutes is actually *more* effective? Likewise, adult learning theory tells

us that people can take in only about 10 minutes of continuous input, after which they stop absorbing much information. Clearly, meetings need to be shorter, not longer—but no less effective no matter despite how long or short they may be.

Time is not the only issue that promises to make 20-Minute Leadership Conversations a vital part of your leadership style. A University of Iowa study offers convincing evidence that adults can focus on only one thing at a time, stating, “We must focus the learning. Be successful with one issue at a time in conversations of 15–20 minute duration.”

This theme was reinforced in *The Owner’s Manual for the Brain* by researchers and authors Geoffrey Woodman and Steven Luck, who state, “Adults can only learn one new skill at a time—pay attention to it—focus without distractions.”

The goal of using conversations with both time limits *and* a clear goal is not to spend all your time coaching—or even motivating or mentoring—top performers in your organization. The goal is to lead every time, with efficient time. In fact, 20-Minute Leadership Conversations are merely tools toward that end, not the end itself. When you’ve mastered the structure of these conversations, you will actually think about them less and do them more. As a result, your leadership will be more focused, efficient, and productive; mere performers will become top performers.

So why, specifically, *20 Minutes to a Top Performer*?

- Because you don’t have time, and you need to get results

- Because you are continuously being asked to do more with less
- Because ultimately the leader is responsible, so your career is on the line
- Because no one ever told you everything that you could do in a structured 20-Minute Conversation
- Because you don't need another long drawn-out meeting
- Because your employees desperately need these 20 minutes with you
- Because leaders need to be purposeful, clean, and quick in how they communicate
- Because you need to take care of yourself first and need a purposeful 20 minutes with your boss
- And did I already mention that you don't have time, but you need results?

Now more than ever, time is of the essence. Do you even have time to read this book? Of course not! That's why I've made this book quick, simple, and usable immediately, so that everyone, regardless of education, background, or position, can create organizational rock stars with *20 Minutes to a Top Performer*.

Arnold Palmer used to talk about "charging the course." What he meant by that was having an "approach with a purpose." So this book is about purpose, speed, and results; it's not about long discussions or management philosophies. It's about having clear goals for your conversation and getting clear decisions and specific results from your team.

When Is the 20-Minute Conversation Useful?

The 20-Minute Leadership method can be used for many different leadership conversations, but we will begin with a focus on three key conversations that every leader needs to have:

1. Coaching for performance
2. Motivating for engagement
3. Mentoring for development

In my research, I have found that these three conversations make up the foundation for leading people to action. I've been a consultant to Fortune 1000 companies for more than 25 years, and over the last 5 years, I decided to undertake a study of what employees need most from their leaders and to answer the probing question, "What behaviors and characteristics do these leaders exhibit?" Throughout this book, we will look at and explore the research I've compiled along with the best practices from industry leaders on these subjects. What, exactly, will you discover throughout *20 Minutes to a Top Performer*?

In *Part 1* of this book, we will focus on the first of the three 20-Minute Leadership Conversations: coaching. Many people feel that they already know everything they need to know about coaching; this section clears up many misconceptions and clearly focuses not only on why coaching is different from motivating or mentoring, but in which cases you will find coaching to be the most effective conversation of the three.

In *Chapter 1* we will look at how to make the 20-Minute Coaching Conversation work, in practical, real-life terms.

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First, we'll review best practices and research to determine the need for performance coaching, then we'll explore the value of Push and Pull behaviors, and finally we'll provide specific relief with the quick coaching five-minute plan called "positive preparation."

We'll also examine real coaching conversations from stories of leaders who have been challenged by time and different performance situations, like Beth, a new manager who inherits a team of talented performers who are underperforming as if they were enjoying their mediocrity. And Sharon, who has 10 things to correct with her direct report, but does not know where to start, how to focus on specifics or how to find the time.

In each chapter, I will also include specific tips, strategies, and exercises that you can *try now*. These are things that you can do immediately to make a difference in how you influence for results quickly.

Chapters 2 and 3 challenge our preconceived notions about feedback; and we all have them. In *Chapter 2* we'll talk about the pros and cons of feedback and why it is so vitally important that you do it right. In *Chapter 3* we'll narrow the focus slightly to how, exactly, to give valuable rather than negligible feedback and help create top performers through this simple mechanism. Along the way, we'll meet folks like Eric, a VP of finance at a large high-tech company who said that his sixth-grade teacher never rewarded him for failing less—and how learning to give feedback helped him profit from his teacher's mistake.

In *Part 2* we will take the mystery out of motivation; we will look at how motivation engages and retains the key talent you

need if you are to succeed. You'll be introduced to folks like Robert, who on his first day of work hears from his coworker Bill, "Don't count on any support from your manager; they don't come with any backbone at all!" And we'll learn how effective leaders can keep both current employees and new hires motivated from day one.

Chapter 4 explores how to first keep yourself fully engaged, because you need to be at your best if you are to motivate and engage your people. We will also introduce a "motivational engagement" survey that allows you to assess what keeps you interested in and excited about your work. Intrinsic motivation includes things that you really have control over and can use with your team to keep people engaged and energetic.

There has been lots of research on what truly motivates people, and in *Chapter 5*, we will look at some of these things more closely. (Here's a spoiler: *it's not money!*) We'll keep it simple and usable, with sections like "Four Reasons Why Leaders Don't Ask" and "The Seven Behaviors of the 20-Minute Motivation Conversation." We'll also hear from leaders like Sarah, for whom her annual bonus was only part of her motivation; the other (perhaps bigger) part of her motivation and engagement in the project was the challenge and the acknowledgement of a job well done. We'll also meet Sarah's boss, Jeff, and a company VP, both of whom didn't quite get Sarah's motivation and, as a result, left one very disgruntled employee in their wake.

In *Chapter 6*, we'll look at easy exercises you can do that will allow you to reengage your people and hold 20-Minute

Conversations that are concrete, focused, and result in action leading to meaningful work. After reading “Six Essential Truths about Motivation and Engagement,” you’ll better understand why top performers require competent motivators.

Part 3 takes a look at the 20-Minute Mentoring Conversation by developing a key role for leaders: the mentor. People need many mentors, not just their bosses. But the boss does play an important part for an employee as a developer, guide, and advice giver.

Too many leaders give up this role over time—or never make an attempt to fulfill it in the first place. And many employees have an emptiness and a craving for this type of conversation. In just 20 minutes, you will be able to construct and hold this important conversation.

Chapter 7 helps you help your top performers by learning to start where they are, not where you are. This critical skill can help leaders mold top performers like Linda, who needs help with negotiating—and gets it when her leader sets her up with a negotiating mentor. Top performers need TLC, but the right kind of TLC; mentorship requires knowing what to say to the right person at the right time, and in *Chapter 8*, I reveal how storytelling can become a big part of that process.

Along the way, I will help you put this mentoring conversation together. We’ll look in detail at why it’s needed and how to keep it to the point, with clear goals and outcomes, so that both the leader and the employee have a sense of future possibilities and developmental opportunities.

In *Chapter 9*, you’ll meet a potential top performer named Dale, who his boss feels has grown a little too comfortable in

his position to live up to his full potential. You'll be able to see how, through proper mentoring, Dale's boss encourages him to become a top performer and how, ultimately, she puts the tools for success into his hands.

Chapter 10 combines everything you've learned so far and asks the critical, very realistic question, "What if nothing works?" Here you will discover the three typical forms of resistance and learn how to manage them effectively with my three-step response to resistance.

Finally, in the *Appendix*, I've included additional worksheets, tips for success, and strategies for development, including ideas on increasing your influence throughout the organization.

So if you're ready, your first 20 Minutes of Conversation await you.

Best is to know—and know you know.
Next best is to know that you don't know.
Third best is knowing, but not realizing it.
Worst is not to know that you don't know.
—Ancient Proverb
