

As a leader, talk is cheap. Action is what counts and practice makes a difference. Below are practical steps to improve performance.

- **Remember that you're working with people.** As Leb Tannenbaum said in episode 32, this one is kind of the ultimate *Let's Get Practical* tip: your employees aren't resources, cogs in a machine, or means to an end. They're people, first and foremost, and people have emotions. This is true whether they're on screen or in person with you, and perhaps more than ever in our lifetime, they're going through a lot all at once. Taking the time to check in at the start of every meeting is a simple, yet powerful way to acknowledge their humanity, emotions, and individual circumstances all at the same time. They'll be better for it, and your meetings will improve, too!
- **People data is as important as financial data, customer data, and all other data you collect.** We're specifically talking about YOUR people here, and the information you can glean from your own employees during simple check-ins with them at the start of each meeting is incredibly valuable. It's often during the check-in that you learn where your employees are professionally, personally, emotionally, physically, and sometimes spiritually, all of which helps you know exactly what your team needs and how you can best support them. If you don't think that would be valuable information, we suggest you give it a try and see if you change your mind.
- **It's perfectly acceptable to be playful in the check-in process!** Not every check-in question has to be super deep and thought-provoking. People like to have fun just as much as they like to work hard and win, so mix it up now and then by asking silly or fun questions when checking in with your employees before a meeting. Obviously, timing is important, but showing your playful fun side sets the tone for your employees to follow your lead, often contributing to more relaxed and positive team culture.

If you can't think of your own playful check-in questions, here are a couple we talked about in the episode or have used with clients of our own:

- What's your go-to joke?
 - What's your walk-up song and why? (You can even let your employees use their phone to play it out loud for the room)
 - What show are you binge-watching these days?
- **Try using one of Leb's favorite check-in questions: "If you had a mulligan, what would you do over?"** If you're unfamiliar with a mulligan, it's a golf term used for a do-over,

something that allows you to take a second shot without the first shot counting against you. Well, who in business couldn't use a mulligan now and then? By asking this question and sharing what you did and how you'd do it differently if you could, everyone in the room learns. And if you listened to Episode 21: *The Link Between Culture and High Performance* with global thought-leader Dan Denison, you already know that Organizational Learning is a key aspect of high-performing companies. That means the simple act of making space at the start of your meetings to ask the mulligan question can positively and specifically impact your organization culture.

And if you weren't already convinced of the power of the mulligan question, here's another reason to give it a try: acknowledging to your team that everyone makes mistakes – including you – reinforces the values of self-reflection, continuous improvement, and life-long learning, three important characteristics of highly innovative companies.

- **Just get started.** You've heard this before and have probably said it to your own employees in other contexts. Well, when it comes to implementing a check-in process with your employees in your business meetings, you don't need to announce it, plan it, or overthink it. Keep it simple and just get started, arm yourself with a check-in question or two for your next meeting and ask it before you jump into the agenda. If you feel the need to give a little context, then absolutely do so! Just don't let the newness of it overwhelm you and keep you from trying it sooner than later. You'll see in no time how easy and valuable it is.

PRO TIP: If you want to ensure the check-in process happens in every meeting, just add it to the agenda itself. And if you've got traditionally introverted or highly pensive employees, don't be afraid to share the question with them ahead of the meeting.

- **When you're ready to take it to the next level, try crafting the best check-in question for each meeting.** If you're paying attention to your team, reading the room, and really working to meet your employees where they're at, then you can take the check-in process to a whole other level by tailoring the check-in question to exactly where your people are at in that moment. It's a little more advanced than just pulling from a list of your favorite check-in questions, but thoughtful, empathetic, and heartfelt questions that address elephants in the room, what's going on in the outside world, or just give people an opportunity to empty the heavy burdens they're carrying can have an unmeasurable impact on the individuals in the room and the team as a whole.

- **Check-ins are more effective when you first check in with yourself.** You've heard countless CEOs and thought-leaders on The Frustrated CEO Podcast extol the benefits of self-care and self-awareness. Well, here we go again: remember to check in with yourself first before each meeting to be mindful of where you are personally, professionally, emotionally, physically, relationally, and spiritually. Leading from a place of self-awareness offers peace and confidence as you lead others through the check-in process, and it may even help you create the right check-in question for your next meeting.
- **Checking in with employees at the start of a meeting absolutely sacrifices meeting time, but there's always ROI.** Check-ins benefit your meeting in so many ways that it's hard to understand why leaders don't use them at the start of every meeting. As Leb Tannenbaum said in episode 32, your agenda after the check-in is so much more focused, energetic, and creative because your people are more present as a result. The right question enables employees to unburden themselves and compartmentalize things weighing on them that don't pertain to the meeting they're in. They might hear things from others in the room that deepen their working relationships and strengthen teamwork. If it was a playful question, your check-in may just function to shift the energy enough to spark creativity and mood, clearly increasing meeting engagement.

Whatever time you dedicated to the check-in process, the payoff is worth far more than the few minutes you invested in it at the start of the meeting.

- **Sometimes, you might need to check in again in the middle of the meeting.** No matter what you do, there are always times when a team is flat or a meeting isn't going as well as you need it to. The advice here is to stay present, read the room, and don't be afraid to pause the meeting to check in again to right the ship – even in the middle of the meeting, and even if you already checked in with everyone at the beginning. In these moments, don't be afraid to be honest about what you're seeing or feeling, what might be lacking, or what might be needed to change the momentum and get the most out of whatever meeting time you have left. We think it's always better to acknowledge a flat meeting and attempt to fix it with a second check-in than it would be to try to forge ahead and finish an already-unproductive meeting.
- **The check-in is a great opportunity for you, the leader, to show care, concern, and empathy for your people.** If you've been listening to The Frustrated CEO Podcast and reading any leadership articles of late, then you've already heard how important it is for you to up your empathy in 2022. Employees of all ages and stages want leaders who care, and the check-in process is such an easy way for you to do just that. Using valuable

meeting time and space to check in with your people shows you see them as people and not just workers. What you learn from them during check-ins is valuable information you can use – not in a manipulative way – but to flex your own approach and conversation to better connect and build relationships with your employees. And since you already know that stronger work relationships increase retention, it's a no-brainer. Checking in with your people at the start of your meetings is an easy step toward showing more care and concern for your people.

- **If the check-in seems superficial or too high level, don't be afraid to call it out.** Let's get one thing straight about the check-in: it's not a check-box exercise just to say you did it. Check-ins are meant to invite conversation, create community, learn more about each other, share knowledge and information with each other, and improve the morale and energy in the room. If your check-in feels superficial and people are giving 50,000-foot answers just to get through it, you can ask follow-up questions to get them to open up a little bit more. "Tell me more" is a great question to ask and invites a deeper answer.

Pro Tip: To make your check-in questions most impactful, ensure you're leading by example by being vulnerable in your answers and not giving superficial answers yourself. Your team will follow your lead.

- **A good check-in before a meeting can literally change the energy in the room.** After listening to episode 32 and reading to the end of this *Let's Get Practical*, if you still don't believe in the power of a good check-in before a meeting, then just file this away until the next time you find yourself in a room full of people with no energy and seemingly no desire to be there. Leaders who regularly use the check-in at the start of meetings continually attest to the dramatic impact it has on the mood, morale, energy, and engagement of team members in the meeting. When you're staring into the face of another low-energy meeting, remember this bullet point and see if pausing to check in with your people changes the tide for the better.
- **High-performing teams get to know each other!** If you aspire to have a true and cohesive team instead of a collection of individuals who just happen to work together, you'll want to create opportunities for your people to discover more about each other. What better way to do that than by regular check-in questions to start every meeting. Over time, team members will come to learn about and appreciate each other more because of it.

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