

Your Guide To 1:1 Meetings That Work

Practical tips for meaningful manager-employee conversations.





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Why 1:1 Meetings Matter

It's likely your organization asks managers to meet with members of their team on a weekly basis. These meetings are often termed "1:1s."

When conducted properly, 1:1 ("one-on-one") meetings offer significant benefits to both employees and their managers.

For employees, they are a dedicated time for feedback, career development and help to build a stronger relationship with their manager.

For managers, 1:1s are critical for delivering feedback on employee performance, addressing concerns and fostering a more engaged and productive team. They're also a way to build trust, which is an essential ingredient for positive employee engagement.



The downside of 1:1s?

It's all too easy for them to become just another meeting on a busy calendar that both managers and employees dread. The good news is there are steps you can take to make sure 1:1s remain a strategic use of time for both the manager and the employee.

This guide gives you solid advice to help your managers conduct 1:1 meetings that are a benefit, rather than a burden.

We include tips for how to:

- Prepare for and conduct an effective 1:1;
- Structure the topics for a 1:1, including how to discuss difficult issues; and
- Ensure proper follow-up.

Let's get started!

Ground Rules for Effective 1:1s

Before we get into the meat of the 1:1 meeting, here are three basic ground rules to follow.

1

Be open. Great managers model openness and vulnerability. For some, this can be difficult, but it gets easier with practice. It's important to remember that 1:1s serve to slowly generate trust with one team member at a time in order to develop an authentic relationship.

2

Be balanced. A 1:1 shouldn't focus solely on what an employee needs to improve or be a vehicle for delivering bad news. Strive for a mix of feedback. This meeting is also a time for managers to receive feedback on their own performance.

3

Be Consistent. A 1:1 meeting isn't just a "nice-to-have." Weekly or bi-weekly meetings help managers keep tabs on how employees are feeling and ensure growth and development are regularly addressed. It can be tempting to cancel these meetings when things get busy, but doing so repeatedly is a surefire way to dampen engagement.

Trust Impacts Employee Engagement

Employee disengagement is costly. Gallup estimates that it costs employers worldwide \$8.8 trillion annually in lost productivity. That's about 9% of global GDP! Plus, disengaged employees are more likely to be searching for another job. Hiring, onboarding and training replacements adds to the financial impact.

One effective way to guard against employee disengagement is to foster trust and openness between employees and managers. A 1:1 meeting is an excellent way to lay the foundation for trust.

How To Conduct an Effective 1:1 Meeting

STEP 01

Prepare for the Meeting

Craft an agenda. Come up with a list of topics to discuss. **See What To Talk About in a 1:1** on page X for tips. Share the agenda with the employee ahead of time and allow employees to add their own items to create a sense of ownership and buy-in.

Keep it brief. The point of an agenda isn't to stifle creativity. It's to direct the conversation productively. In general, it's better for a manager to explore a few topics in-depth instead of addressing a laundry list. The optimal meeting time is around 30-45 minutes.

Always have back-up topics. Sometimes it may seem like there isn't enough to talk about every week. That's an opportunity to have some long-ranging discussions about growth and development and what's in store for an employee's future.



Pro Tip:

Resist the temptation to use 1:1s for status updates on an employee's current projects. Instead, dedicate 1:1s to discussions about career growth, development and feedback. It's ok to earmark a little time for status updates, but make sure it doesn't dominate the discussion.

STEP 02

Conduct the Meeting

Pay full attention. Both the manager and employee should turn off all devices to reduce distraction. If the meeting is remote, both parties should close other computer tabs that could cause them to lose focus. This will help the manager really tune in to what the employee is saying and how they are feeling.

Ask open-ended questions. Managers can encourage deeper conversation by asking questions that require reflection and discussion, versus simple yes or no questions.

Listen more, talk less. Research conducted by Professor Steven G. Rogelberg finds the “biggest predictor of a 1:1’s success is...the amount of time that person talks during the meeting.” Aim to give the employee the floor for 50-90% of the meeting.¹

Take notes. A 1:1 requires follow-through, so good notes can help managers accurately follow up on promises and action items.

Open and end on a high note. Our minds hold onto introductions and conclusions most tightly, so make sure managers start and wrap up the meeting on a positive note.

Stay flexible. Sometimes work of personal circumstances may throw off an agenda. Be willing to meet employees where they are at that moment.



When Change Happens, Keep the Focus

Has a big change rocked your company? Is something going on in an employee’s personal life? When this happens—and it will—1:1s aren’t a time to lose focus.

Encourage managers to suspend judgment, be supportive and above all to not cancel the meeting unless they must.

If managers need help learning what to say and not say during trying times, TINYpulse can help.

¹ Harvard Business Review. Make the Most of Your One-on-One Meetings. December 2022.

STEP 03

Follow Up

Send meeting notes. Managers should consolidate and send meeting notes to recap what was discussed, what each party agreed to and what will be delivered by the next meeting.

Ask employees for feedback. This step isn't fluff. Honest feedback gives managers the input they need to improve their 1:1 skills. It also creates a sense of ownership and shows that 1:1s are more than top-down. Ask employees to indicate what managers should start, stop or continue.

Follow through on deliverables. Nothing decreases engagement like a manager who simply pays lip service to action items. Both parties should come to the next 1:1 ready to report on how they've made progress on goals and to-do's since the last session.



What To Talk About In a 1:1

Content for 1:1 meetings typically falls into four general categories:

- Recognition and praise
- Status updates
- Career development
- Connection to company mission/vision

Recognition and Praise

It's crucial to recognize, celebrate and praise accomplishments. Most managers know this. But how they praise matters, too. Encourage managers to:

Praise a specific and concrete action.

Structure praise around key project or task milestones.

Consider all types of contributions. For example, an employee who constantly boosts team morale deserves recognition as much as one who exceeds a goal.



Career Development

When it comes to career development, managers shouldn't wait for an annual performance review. Regular 1:1s can be used to assess an employee's skills, performance and desire and suitability for the next promotion. Career goals don't have to be discussed in every 1:1, but managers should spend considerable time on this with new employees. The end of a project is a smart time to discuss long-term career goals.

A 1:1 is also a good time to chat about continuing education or leadership programs for high performers. Doing so sends a message that your organization feels its employees are worth investing in.



Workload

With burnout rates on the rise, keeping tabs on an employee's workload is critical. Use 1:1s to assess workload and ensure expectations are clear. It's also a good time to discuss any personal concerns that might be getting in the way of an employee's ability to complete work.

Connection to Company Mission/Vision

Employees increasingly want to feel connected to the organizations they work for. Share objectives and key results in 1:1s to remind employees of the organization's mission and goals and how their work contributes to achieving them.

Let TINYpulse Do the Heavy Lifting!

Our TINYpulse engagement solution can help facilitate and document 1:1s between managers and employees. It helps in setting goals, tracking performance and providing feedback to foster employee development and growth.

What About the Tough Conversations?

It would be great if 1:1s just focused on the positive, but it's not realistic. Sometimes we need to discuss difficult topics with employees and a 1:1 offers an appropriate venue for doing so.

Poor performance. 1:1s give managers the opportunity to dig in and discover why an employee is performing poorly. Is it a lack of training? Not enough resources? Is something happening in their personal life? Are there negative dynamics on the team?

Compensation. If an employee is unhappy with their compensation it's important to understand why. Then, follow up with HR to learn whether any adjustments can be made.

Behavior and attitude. A 1:1 is a good place for managers to address specific behavior and attitude issues. Data derived from a 360-degree assessment can help the employee understand how their actions are impacting the team. Encourage managers to maintain empathy and listen.



Team disputes. Sometimes, a manager will need to intervene when team members can't resolve problems on their own. Ask managers to collect information from all sides before making a call. Also, encourage them to reflect on their own bias so they don't play favorites.

Disciplinary action. If a manager must deliver disciplinary action, HR should help them prepare. Ensure they are clear about why a situation happened and what the disciplinary action entails.

Want more tips on having difficult discussions? Check out **Kim Scott's Radical Candor**. It's full of best practices for discussing tough topics.

TINYpulse Can Help Increase Employee Engagement

Effective 1:1s are just one tool to increase employee engagement in your organization.

[TINYpulse by WebMD Health Services](#) can take you even further.

An innovative employee feedback and engagement software solution, TINYpulse empowers companies to not only measure engagement but also enhance company culture, boost employee retention and elevate performance through employee listening.

To learn more about how TINYpulse can help increase engagement and prioritize the well-being and success of every individual in your organization, check out [these resources](#) or [request a demo](#) from our employee engagement specialists.

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The best managers recognize that 1:1s are not an add-on to their role—they are foundational to it. Those who fully embrace these meetings as the place where leadership happens can make their teams' day-to-day output better and more efficient, build trust and psychological safety, and improve employees' experiences, motivation, and engagement.”²

[Stephen G. Rogelberg,](#)

Chancellor's Professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte



² Harvard Business Review. Make the Most of Your One-on-One Meetings. December 2022.



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