

One-on-one meetings

A how-to guide for managers

About one-on-one meetings

As people managers, holding one-on-one meetings with your direct reports is like unlocking a vault filled with treasure.

In this case, those treasures are the hard and soft skills, passion, insight, and potential of every individual on your team. Asking the right questions, actively listening, really absorbing what's shared, and lending support where possible are key to a meaningful one-on-one conversation.

ADVANTAGES OF EFFECTIVE ONE-ON-ONE MEETINGS

Consider the one-on-one meeting as a time to:

- **Catch Up:** Talk about workload, team dynamics, work/life balance, and whatever else is important to you or your direct report
- **Learn:** Discuss the interests and aspirations of your people
- **Find Growth Opportunities:** Explore career development and continuous learning opportunities
- **Do a Wellness Check:** Check in on the well-being of each team member
- **Build Meaningful Relationships:** Build rapport, get to know your people better
- **Observe Changes:** Monitor morale
- **Gain Employee Insights:** Ask strategic questions, get and give feedback
- **Establish Trust:** Demonstrate you value and care about the individual
- **Engage:** Inspire and engage for the collective benefit of the individual, team, department/division, and the organization at large





How-to guide overview

One-on-one meetings are one of the most economic and effective tools in an organization's internal communications arsenal.

This TalentMap One-on-One Meetings How-To Guide was created as a handy resource for people managers and HR professionals. From how to introduce the concept of one-on-ones to following through on discussions, this guide encompasses five steps based on industry insights and tips to make your conversations purpose-filled.

Step 1: Introduce the Concept

What to do if your team and you are new to the one-on-one meeting experience

Step 2: Prepare

How to plan for your first one-on-one meeting and subsequent sessions

Step 3: Strike Up the Conversation

How to set the right tone for a two-way dialogue

Step 4: Talk a Little, Listen Lots

What you can do to keep conversational momentum

Step 5: Wrap Up

How to conclude the meeting with positivity and hold each other accountable for next steps

BONUS: This guide also provides 30 examples of effective one-on-one questions managers can leverage to ensure they make the most of their meetings.





Step 1: Introduce the concept

If your team is new to the experience of one-on-one meetings, consider a walk-about to chat with your people individually. Tell them you'd like to set up one-on-one sessions on a regular basis.

Give some examples of the kinds of things you might chat about like promotion paths, professional learning and development opportunities, ideas and innovation, organizational goals, strategic and tactical issues.

Describe how these informal sessions are meant as a time for feedback: a time to share organizational news, review goals individually and within context of the larger organization, to look at where employees want to go and how to get there. Liken it to a forum for positive, supportive, forward-thinking, and aspirational exchange.

Rather than dictate a time that fits into your schedule, select a mutually convenient time.

Choose a comfortable location for these private conversations. Their office or yours? In a coffee shop around the corner? A quiet corner table in the cafeteria? Via phone or the latest video conferencing app for those working remotely?

Whatever you decide – together – **COMMIT** and **STICK TO IT!** Block the date and time on your calendars.

WEEKLY CHECK-IN VS. ONE-ON-ONE

Check-In Meeting

- Update approach
- Typically one-way communication rather than a conversation
- Employee gives verbal progress/project updates
- Manager gives observations and direction rather than leading by example; gets very little sense of individual's well-being, job satisfaction, learning interests, career path potential

One-on-One Meeting

- Servant leadership approach
- Dialogue is engaging for both parties, explores vastly more than just metrics
- Employee challenged by growth aspirations given a safe place to voice their concerns, ideas, and opinions; able to discuss sensitive or personal matters; feels inspired and supported
- Manager reinforces positive behavior; focuses on building trust and rapport; uncovers insights around company vision and future; gets a sense of team dynamics and overall morale



Step 2: Prepare

One-on-one sessions and servant leadership go hand-in-hand. These meetings aren't for management's edification. Employees come first. The servant leader's role is to connect, nurture growth, and be invested in building relationships.

Depending on manager and employee styles, sessions can be free-form casual or agenda tight. Rigid agendas, however, may be a tad overkill for something that's meant to build rapport, to say nothing of becoming rote, uninspiring. Keep it simple. Keep it flexible.

To help you better understand and communicate with one another, consider introducing a personality tool to your team. There are several profile programs online; many are available at no cost. Crystal, for example, is a fairly popular program that analyzes social media and other public data, alongside self and peer assessments to create a best guess profile about an individual's preferred communication style.

- After introducing the concept of one-on-one meetings, send individual confirmation emails to each team member
- Mention how both of you will need to prepare in advance for a meaningful exchange
- Suggest the individual keep a running list of points for discussion in the days (or weeks) leading up to your one-on-one; exchange lists with each other the day before you meet or compare lists at the outset of your meeting and decide on agenda priorities together to make the most of your time.

After your first one-on-one:

- Block the meeting time in your calendar for the next 12 months
- Ensure reminder notices are automatically sent to your direct report
- If you want to have a conversation around continuous learning and career development, tactical or strategic issues with a problem-solving element, give a heads-up so the other can reflect and prepare
- Should meetings become more of an update exchange and less of a conversation, pick a topic and include it in the reminder notice:
 - Find parallels between current affairs media coverage and organizational issues. If a major sporting event is on the horizon or has just concluded, for instance, you can ask:
 - "Why do you think (individual or team) has done so well? How might this apply here in our department/organization?"
 - Do a Google search for question suggestions to stimulate conversation. A few examples:
 - "Who do you admire most (in the organization) and why?"
 - "If you could change one thing about (this organization) what would it be?"

“WHEN EMPLOYEES KNOW THEY HAVE A STANDING MEETING, THEY ARE LESS LIKELY TO BARRAGE YOU WITH A ‘CONSTANT STREAM OF INTERRUPTIONS’”

- Elizabeth Grace Saunders, author of *How to Invest Your Time Like Money*



Step 3: Strike up the conversation

During the first one-on-one, reiterate the purpose. Remember and remind yourself and your employees these one-on-ones are two-way conversations; private chats about what's going on professionally and personally.

From that first meeting onward, start off with something positive and upbeat to establish a positive and upbeat tone. Sing the praises of a job well done. Acknowledge the effort and long hours put into a project. Share accolades others have related to you about this individual or that you've observed in their relationships with colleagues.

As noted previously, some believe setting a formal agenda keeps one-on-one meetings productive and on track. Others prefer a less formal approach and invite employees to lead off the conversation. Choose and use the technique that's best for you and the person with whom you're meeting. Having an agenda, though, might be the best technique the first few times to set direction and tone until you've both found a cadence of your own.

Always Remember!

- Be punctual and don't cancel at the last moment. Both actions convey the meeting and individual take lower priority than other matters. Show respect.
- Be present. If you're meeting in an office, close the door; mute notifications on your phone (and computer); devote your full attention. Be aware. Stay in the moment.





Step 4: Talk a little, listen lots

Few people are ever invited to talk about themselves, much less, to share their views with a supportive, active listener. One-on-ones are the place where employees can safely express observations about how their work and work environment can be improved or simplified.

- Be curious
- Be attentive
- Listen to concerns
- Invite ideas
- Debate, discuss
- Ask for feedback about the organization's policies and procedures
- Can things be done differently? Where and how?
- Be open to being managed upward. Your direct reports probably have insights that can help you in your own professional development.
 - Does your management style work for them?
 - Are you giving enough feedback and is it what they need?

BE AN ACTIVE LISTENER

Clarify or paraphrase comments to make sure you've understood exactly what was meant:

- "Let me know if I got you right. Do you mean that you would rather see me being less involved in your daily task?"
- "So you are saying that I should give you more autonomy in making decisions regarding your daily tasks?"

Acknowledge feelings:

- "I understand your strong feelings about autonomy at work."



HOW LONG IS LONG ENOUGH?

Meeting frequency, length of time, and format will vary depending on the size of your team, the size of your organization, the individual's experience, and their function. For some it might be weekly, for others bi-weekly or monthly.

Sessions can run from 20 minutes to an hour or more. Initially that's your call. However, together at your first meeting agree on a specific day and time that works for you both (e.g. every Monday at 1:00 PM). As you move forward over the weeks and months, adjust frequency and session length until you find the right fit.

Don't be surprised if meetings sometimes take a handful of minutes rather than the allotted time. The employee has nothing pressing from their end and neither do you. No problem. Just remember to touch base as agreed. Use this opportunity to pick out a broad business topic or to talk on a personal level. What did they do on the weekend? What about you? Sharing personal stories helps build a relationship of mutual honesty and trust.

Step 5: Wrap up

Close the meeting as you began it – with positivity.

Highlight some of the great things that have come out of your dialogue. Ask whether anything should be done differently for the next meeting. If any action items surfaced, recap what you both plan to do before your next meeting and where meeting notes will be located so both parties have access to this information.

If you haven't already done so, connect on a personal level – ask about pets or family members, plans for dinner or the weekend ahead. Lastly, express gratitude and remind the individual to reach out if anything comes up between now and your next regular one-on-one.

Before moving on to other matters of the day, while the meeting is still fresh in your mind document any key discussion points and next steps. Explore ways to support or offer training in areas where employees need improvement or want to develop new skills for professional growth. File this information in a shared space that's easily accessible to you both and, by its very existence, holds you both accountable for acting on what needs to be done.



30 Examples of one-on-one questions

1. Which part of the day do you feel most productive? When do you feel your energy and focus are at the lowest level? What changes can be introduced to help you make the most of your day?
2. What were your biggest time wasters or roadblocks last week (or over the last few weeks)?
3. What do you do when you get stuck on something? What is your process? Who is the team member you turn to for help?
4. Who on our team inspires you? Whose opinions do you respect? What have they done?
5. Is there anyone you find difficult to work with? Can you tell me why?
6. What do you think would help us work together better? Any suggestions for improvement in the way we work?
7. What do you like most about your work and why?
8. What do you like least about your work and why?
9. If you could change anything in your job, the department, or the organization at large, what would it be and why?
10. What motivates you to work on a project? What elements do you enjoy?
11. Can you name three things we can do to help you get the greatest reward out of your work?
12. What is your greatest accomplishment since joining our team? Do you feel appreciated for this effort?
13. How are your contributions recognized?
14. Have you ever felt undervalued here? Why?
15. Do you have any worries or concerns? What keeps you up at night?
16. How is your workload going? What can we do to help?
17. What are the main bottlenecks? Can we do anything to move things along?
18. What do you want to achieve in the next three years?



19. What are your long-term career goals? What needs to be done to move towards these goals? What can we do to help?
20. Which part of your work is most relevant to your long-term goals? What kinds of projects do you want to be involved with to move toward your goals? Do you feel you're continuously learning at work? What have you learned in the recent past? What areas do you want to learn more about?
21. If you could choose a peer mentor from our team to teach you and give you feedback, who would you select? Is there anyone outside of our team you would choose to mentor you?
22. Do you receive enough feedback? Is feedback helpful for your personal development? What can I do to help you get the feedback you want?
23. Would you like more coaching? What aspect of your job (or career aspirations) would benefit from coaching?
24. What can I do as a manager to make your work easier (or more challenging)?
25. What do you like about my management style? What do you dislike?
26. On a day-to-day basis, what percentage of your work includes my involvement? Would you prefer more or less?
27. How can I support you better?
28. What situation could I have handled differently or better?
29. What advice can you give to help me develop and grow?



Conclusion

This One-on-One Meetings Guide should help you start running meetings with direct reports more effectively, unlock valuable employee insights, and make the most of everyone's time.

Additional Resources:

- <https://hbr.org/2016/08/how-to-make-your-one-on-ones-with-employees-more-productive/>
- <https://blog.impraise.com/360-feedback/1-on-1s-for-engaged-employees-how-good-managers-should-do-them-performance-review/>
- <https://wideangle.com/the-difference-between-one-on-one-1-1-meetings-vs-check-ins/>

About TalentMap

A thought leader focused exclusively on workplace engagement measurements and research, TalentMap is passionate about understanding the people behind organizational success: Employees.

Since its start in 1998, TalentMap has conducted thousands of employee engagement survey projects and surveyed more than one million employees. Working in partnership with public and private sector organizations of all sizes across North America, TalentMap's deep understanding of methodologies and assumptions unique to different sectors alongside volumes of benchmark data accrued over the years have become valued resources for organizations that value their people.

TalentMap employee engagement survey tools – readily customized from hire to retire – are based on years of research, field experience, and scientific measurement. The company also offers expert consulting services, deployment, data collection, analysis reporting, and post-survey action planning. It's a proprietary workplace intelligence process – developed and delivered by people-oriented people consumed with helping leadership teams and HR professionals create positive organizational change.

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