

How to run 1-on-1s

Committing to regular 1-on-1s with each of your direct reports is the first step. But it's not enough. Managing these critical meetings effectively is equally important if you want a team of productive, positive people. Here's how to do it:

1. Schedule weekly 1-on-1s for the next six-plus months.

A weekly rhythm is usually best, but in certain situations you may need to increase that to two per week. Scheduling far in advance ensures that both of you will always have time on your calendar. Make it a "must-do" habit.

2. Block off at least 30 minutes.

Many managers prefer an hour. Thirty minutes is barely enough time to complete a deep conversation and cover professional development topics.

3. Never cancel.

If you do, it communicates to both your report and the rest of the team that they're not important to you. If something urgent comes up, reschedule the 1-on-1 for another time that same day.

4. Hold 1-on-1s in a comfortable environment.

Don't do them in public since this may hinder people's willingness to discuss sensitive or emotional topics. Usually an office or small meeting room with a closed door is appropriate.

5. Ask your report to bring a list of things to talk about.

Let your report drive the agenda while setting aside 10 minutes at the end to discuss the person's professional development. It's OK for you to have a topic you want to discuss, or [feedback you want to give](#), but keep the primary focus of the meeting on your report.

You can also pass along our [worksheet for direct reports](#) to help the person prepare.

6. Start the meeting by taking the person's temperature.

Is he or she concerned? Worried? Beaming? Many managers start by simply asking, "How are you?" Others follow up on details they've learned about reports' lives outside work (e.g., "How was your trip to New York last weekend?"). This communicates that you view your reports as human beings, not just workers — and that you care enough about them to remember things that they've mentioned before. Showing that you care is one of the simplest but best [ways to motivate employees](#).

7. Draw out issues.

This is particularly important for introverted or quieter team members. Ask open-ended questions, and don't be afraid to try waiting out uncomfortable silences. Some people will start talking once they realize that you're not going to fill the void. You can also try rephrasing the same question in multiple ways, or using follow-ups to terse answers (e.g., "Could you say more about that?"). However, be careful not to come across as if you're interrogating the person. A warm, encouraging tone and positive body language will help.

Here are some prompts that might help get things rolling:

- *“Tell me about some of the challenges you’ve faced this week.”*
- *“What can I do to help with your work? Your career in general?”*
- *“What are you most concerned about?”*
- *“What’s your No. 1 problem right now? Why?”*
- *“What’s the biggest opportunity we’re missing out on?”*
- *“What are we not doing that we should be doing?”*
- *“Are you happy working here?”*
- *“What suggestions do you have?”*
- *“What have you learned this past week?”*

Startup manager [Rie Langdon](#) describes how she knew something was going on with a quiet direct report — and how she drew out the underlying issue.

8. Provide coaching.

Once you’ve identified an issue, try the [GROW coaching model](#) to help your report find a solution, rather than solving the problem yourself. This will help the person learn how to solve problems autonomously. To use the GROW model, ask questions that help the coachee establish a goal, explore the situation, generate a set of options and finally plan the way forward.

9. Ask for feedback.

Every few 1-on-1s, [ask for direct feedback](#) for yourself as a manager. This will help you improve your relationship with your reports, as well as your skills as their leader. It’s usually best to give the person time to prepare, especially given the power dynamics in manager-employee relationships.

- *“I’m looking for ways to sharpen my skills and could use your help. Next week, would you be willing to share some feedback on one to two things that I could do better as your manager?”*

10. Give feedback.

A 1-on-1 can be a good time to [give helpful reinforcing](#) or [redirecting feedback](#) if it doesn’t dominate the meeting and take away from other discussions. Otherwise, it may be better to give the feedback separately. In either case, use the standard feedback model by describing the specific behavior and impact, listening carefully to the response, working toward shared expectations and creating a plan to get there.

11. Discuss career development.

Spend 10 minutes in each 1-on-1 talking about career development. Ask your direct report to assess the previous week. What worked? What didn’t? Also help your team member pick one skill or topic to focus on during the coming week, along with activities he or she can do to improve. At least once a month talk about long-term development goals. Here are a few questions you can try:

- *“How did the development ideas we talked about last time work out?”*
- *“What development areas do you want to work on this coming week?”*
- *“Have you given any more thought to your long-term goals?”*

- *“What steps do you think you could take to reach the goals you’ve mentioned?”*
- *“How is your recent work helping or hurting your professional development?”*

12. Take notes and follow up.

1-on-1s are rarely effective if you don't follow up on the topics, goals and actions that you discuss. Draft a quick summary of what was discussed and agreed upon during your 1-on-1 and send it by email. And always follow up on any commitments you make. Your team will be watching to see if you honor your word.

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