



# You're Doing It Wrong

## One-on-Ones

How to Make One-on-Ones Actually Useful for Your Team

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*1st Edition*



# Introduction

If you want to ensure your team remains happy and productive, one-on-ones are a must. These individual meetings go beyond an open door policy to ensure each employee is given your undivided attention on a consistent basis. By dedicating a specific time to connect individually with every member, you can gain a wealth of insight into team dynamics that's simply not available anywhere else. You'll also be better equipped to provide the support your direct reports truly need.

If you're looking to get started with one-on-ones or want to improve the outcomes of your existing meetings, this eBook is for you. We'll show you:

- Why one-on-one meetings are critical for positive manager-employee relationships
- What makes for a great one-on-one meeting
- Common one-on-one meeting mistakes

We'll also share a starter toolkit you can use to either launch a new system for one-on-ones or transform your existing meetings. Stick with us to the end of this eBook, and soon you'll have everything you need to make a real and lasting impact.



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# What Is a One-on-One Meeting?

Put simply, the one-on-one meeting is a key ingredient for any positive manager-employee relationship. In a work world where so many meetings are considered a waste of time, one-on-ones do not fall into this category. This is one recurring meeting that every team member genuinely needs.

The basic concept is relatively simple: The manager sets aside a designated time to meet with each individual team member on a regularly-scheduled, recurring basis. It might occur as frequently as once a week or be spaced out with a full month in between. The important thing is that they recur consistently.

In his classic *High Output Management*, iconic Intel CEO Andy Grove had this to say about one-on-ones:

*"It turns out that the one-on-one is not only a fundamental element in the manager/employee relationship, but perhaps the best source for organizational knowledge that a manager can get. In my experience, managers who don't have one-on-ones understand very little about what's happening in their organizations."*



One-on-one meetings are an essential component of effective management and, when structured properly, can be used to completely transform the manager-employee relationship.



# Who Use One-on-Ones?

One of the great things about one-on-one meetings is that there's no limit to who could (or should) use them. Whether you manage a team of two or 20 and work at a small startup or global corporation, your employees WILL benefit from effective one-on-one meetings.

In fact, many of the leaders behind the world's most recognized brands have found one-on-ones to be so effective that they actively encourage managers everywhere to use them.

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*"On the day-to-day front, you want to make sure that everyone is happy, productive and engaged in their work. This includes meeting with people regularly one-on-one and making the time and space to talk about any smaller issues they have or roadblocks in their way. It means...walking a lead through a tricky interpersonal situation, or putting everything on pause to take a walk with someone who is having a tough day."*

- **Jessica McKellar**, Director of Engineering, Dropbox



*“Generally, people who think one-on-one meetings are a bad idea have been victims of poorly designed one-on-one meetings. The key to a good one-on-one meeting is the understanding that it is the employee’s meeting rather than the manager’s meeting. This is the free-form meeting for all the pressing issues, brilliant ideas and chronic frustrations that do not fit neatly into status reports, email and other less personal and intimate mechanisms.”*

- **Ben Horowitz**, Cofounder, Andreessen Horowitz

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*“It turns out the favorite place in my office is not in my office at all. It’s actually outside of my office...the path I take for walking one-on-ones, which is something I started doing a couple of years ago.”*

- **Jeff Weiner**, CEO, LinkedIn

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**Key Takeaway:** If your primary role involves leadership and management, you should be holding regular one-on-one meetings with each and every one of your employees.





# Key Ingredients of a Great One-on-One

Ask 10 different managers how to hold effective one-on-ones and you'll get 10 different answers. Most leaders agree on the basics: Be consistent, avoid distractions and conclude each meeting with next steps. But delve into the details, and the methods used to structure one-on-one meetings vary dramatically. Some managers swear you'll need to set aside at least an hour for each employee, while others state 15 to 30 minutes should be the max. Some one-on-ones are driven purely by instinct; others require set agendas.

Fact is, there's no single format that's going to apply consistently to every meeting with every employee. In fact, the structure *should* vary a bit based on personality and preferences.

Whether your style is more conference room or coffee shop, there are a few fundamentals to get right. When we asked a diverse group of respected managers for their top one-on-one tips, there were some striking similarities in the answers we received:

*"Managers are meant to lead, so asking a subordinate to run the show doesn't always come naturally."*



1. **Be consistent:** Cancelling often or failing to stick to a consistent format, even a loosely-structured one, will prohibit you from getting as much as possible out of one-on-one meetings.
2. **Don't wing it:** It's important to enter one-on-ones with a strong sense of what you hope to achieve. If you want to get ideas of how you can better support employees, come armed with a list of insightful questions to ask.
3. **Remember that it's the employee's meeting:** The more attuned you are to individual work styles, preferences and personalities, the more successful you'll be at one-on-one meetings. Active listening is key.

That last one is especially important, and is often the most challenging. Managers are meant to lead, so asking a subordinate to run the show doesn't always come naturally. Thankfully, there are a few tricks that can be used to make it a seamless, unawkward process:

## Request an Agenda

The one-on-one meeting is your chance to learn about all the things that aren't nearly as visible as a status update. For example:

- Where will an employee go when a particular coworker's decisions are forcing her to put in extra hours unnecessarily?
- What happens when a personal tragedy is impacting an employee's ability to focus at work?



- When a team member isn't getting the logistical support she needs to achieve an important milestone, where will she turn?

These are examples of issues that should not be addressed in emails, status meetings or team reporting tools. You need to have one-on-one conversations to learn about and address them. And an agenda will help ensure you do just that. In this case, however, you should ask your employee to be the one to supply it.

By asking your employee to prepare a simple outline ahead of time for the meeting, he will be forced to think through any pressing issues and be prepared to speak thoughtfully about current needs and challenges. Have him walk you through the agenda at the meeting, and pause to ask relevant questions only as necessary.

Remember that your primary job is to listen and think of the meeting as an opportunity for your employees to take responsibility for conveying what they need from you to succeed.

## Ask Good Questions

Have you ever sat at a table with someone who made you feel really understood? You tell a story, he asks a question. You answer.

*“Remember that your primary job is to listen and think of the meeting as an opportunity for your employees to take responsibility”*



He's intrigued. And so he asks another. And another. You feel heard, understood and important.

That's what happens when you're in the presence of a true listener. These people instinctively know how to ask the questions that get people to open up. They react to answers and prod when appropriate to keep the conversation going.

To do the same during your one-on-one meetings, focus on doing 90% of the listening and just 10% of the talking.

This can be a challenge for managers when active listening doesn't come natural. It can even become a problem when the one-on-one is with someone who has a thoughtful, introverted work personality and is accustomed to doing a lot of listening himself.

You can overcome this challenge by arming yourself with a long list of excellent one-on-one questions, and then choose a few for each meeting. If you want to make your one-on-one meetings ultra-productive, share your questions ahead of time. For example, you might send each employee a set of three "pre" one-on-one meeting questions, such as:

- What's going really well that you're excited about?
- What's not going well, or where do you feel stuck?
- Is there anything you need me to take action on immediately?



Just be sure to review the answers in advance so you'll be ready to bring up important issues or ask about specific areas for improvement.

You'll know these strategies are working the next time you hear an employee say something like: "Now that we've talked it through, I'm much more comfortable about this issue" or "Now I get it."

**Key Takeaway:** One-on-ones are not for managers—at least not directly. The conversation should focus on the employee and be noticeably free of talk about tactics or status updates. These open-ended discussions are more about mentoring, coaching and even venting when it's needed.



# One-on-One Pitfalls to Avoid

While a consistent cadence and proper preparation will go a long way toward making one-on-ones productive, there are a few easy-to-make mistakes that can turn an otherwise excellent one-on-one into a time waster:

## 1. Over-preparing

Remember: This is ultimately the employee's meeting, not yours. For this reason, the responsibility of preparing for one-on-ones should fall primarily upon your employee. This meeting is a chance for your employees to talk, share, vent and open up. By giving them control to set the pace and tone, you enable them to become comfortable discussing the issues that truly matter to them.

Another reason to avoid over-preparing for one-on-ones: You'll waste precious time. If you manage a team of 10 people, you would have to prepare for 10 meetings. Your team members will each prepare for just one.

**Instead**, ask your employee to answer a few key questions ahead of time so that you can be thinking about their answers in advance of the meeting.



## 2. Being inconsistent

There will be many times when you're tempted to reschedule. Don't. This sends the message that your employees are the most expendable action items on your schedule. And while some recurring meetings can do more harm than good, the opposite is true of one-on-ones. It's critical not only to make a schedule, but to stick to it.

**If you're frequently cancelling one-on-one meetings**, try changing the duration. It could be that you're forcing yourself to schedule other priorities around one-hour sessions, when in fact the most important details can all be better addressed within 30 minutes.

## 3. Avoiding criticism

Accepting constructive criticism can be tough. But the manager's job during one-on-ones is to listen, learn and coach—even when it means addressing uncomfortable issues involving things you could be doing differently.

When you encourage your employees to talk about challenges they're facing, the next natural step is to discover what you can be doing to help. Questions such as, "Do you have any suggestions for me?" can open the doors to straightforward, substantive discussions. Be ready to listen and react with solutions that help move things forward, even when it means changing your own approach.



**Instead**, make your employees feel comfortable enough to offer feedback by asking how you can better support them and make their jobs easier or more enjoyable.

## 4. Failing to be present

Push notifications and desktop alerts are the enemies of productive one-on-ones, as are open office doors or meetings held smack-dab in the middle of an open floor plan. Nothing will prevent your employee from opening up quite like a decision to engage in “drive by” conversations with other colleagues mid-meeting.

**If your one-on-ones keep getting interrupted**, pick a new meeting space and keep the location confidential. If the one-on-one is conducted remotely through video-conferencing, eliminate all potential distractions at least 10 minutes before the session begins.

**Key Takeaway:** Few methods are as effective at inspiring employee engagement as regularly held one-on-ones—but only if you get them right. Make a point of avoiding common pitfalls and your one-on-ones will go a long way in helping employees achieve true happiness and productivity at work.





# One-on-One Tipsheet

## Top-of-Mind Tips from Respected Managers

When in doubt, follow these tried-and-true techniques to make your one-on-one meetings more productive and constructive.

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### **Brett Huff**

Engineering Manager, Trello:

*You must sincerely desire to help your employees. Even when they cause problems and they're struggling, you must see past that to the potential no one sees.*

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### **Juan Montemayor**

Senior Manager of Software Development, Rackspace:

*Come up with a format and stick to it. I schedule a one-on-one weekly for 15 to 30 minutes. Short frequency helps keep the change small so we can stay in sync. I find that if they go longer, the one-on-one tends to drag on and become less productive.*



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## **Kimberly Hunter**

**Director of Operations, Recruiter:**

*My one suggestion applies to both supervisors and employees: LISTEN. Listen to what the other person is saying and let them get their complete thought spoken before you start crafting a response in your head to what they are saying. We all want to be heard. We have all been talking to someone who looks past us, or says “uh huh” during our talk, and it is obvious they are waiting for a break in the conversation so they can speak. It doesn't feel good or make us feel valuable to be on the receiving end of that treatment.*

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## **Santiago Jaramillo**

**CEO, Emplify:**

*I attempt to maintain consistent attendance in order to let direct reports know that my time with them is valuable. To this end, I've found it's more effective to have recurring meetings set so it isn't a weekly task to find time, which invites user error.*



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## Steph Hinds

### Head Ninja, Growthwise:

*Preparation is everything, but I'm not just talking about preparing the morning of or the night before. If you want to have a really productive meeting you need to have an aim: What do you want to happen after this meeting?*

*You also need to have an agenda, such as some questions to keep the meeting on track. The preparation needs to be from both the manager and the employee. It's so much easier when both people know exactly what they are in the meeting for.*



# Conclusion

The one-on-one is hands-down one of THE best ways to keep entire teams productive, happy and engaged. And, as we've shown you in this eBook, these meetings do not have to be difficult to implement. All of the tools you need—such as a quiet space and a schedule you can stick to—are right at your fingertips. Simply follow the steps and stick to the process, and you'll be amazed at the difference a dedicated one-on-one meeting can make.



# About the Authors

This eBook was written by the team at Jell, a reporting platform for managers and employees to track daily activities, plan long-term goals and eliminate the need for extraneous recurring meetings. Jell powers productivity with tools that take just a few minutes a day to complete and keep entire organizations updated on plans and progress.

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