

The Ultimate Guide to One-on-Ones



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01 / Introduction

In the modern workplace, employees are a company's biggest asset – and biggest expense. Finding ways to optimize their performance should be considered worth the investment. However, employee performance is largely dependent on effective management. Once an employee is onboarded, it is up to their manager to coach that employee to her fullest potential.

Some managers will say one-on-ones are a waste of time. Often, ineffective one-on-ones are a result of managers not knowing what their direct reports are working on, or being unsure of the purpose of the meeting. Common mistakes include treating the meeting as a status update – something better accomplished via email – or managers using the meeting to speak rather than listen to updates and questions from the direct report.

A one-on-one is defined as a meeting between a manager and their direct report, typically ranging from once per week to once per month, and from 30 to 60 minutes. The meeting is held in private and although structure varies greatly depending on individual needs, this is seen as a safe place for the employee to ask questions, discuss relationships with co-workers and express concerns.

For those in the C-suite, it's important that these meetings take place throughout the organization, so concerns about the company's direction can bubble up to where it can be addressed by leaders. As Andreessen Horowitz founder Ben Horowitz wrote in "A Good Place to Work," a good organization is one where "people can focus on their work and have confidence that if they get their work done, good things will happen for both the company and them personally."

This e-book will explain the crucial components of an effective one-on-one meeting and how this simple management process can drive motivation throughout an organization.



Ben Horowitz

"In good organizations, people can focus on their work and have confidence that if they get their work done, good things will happen for both the company and them personally. It is a true pleasure to work in an organization such as this. Every person can wake up knowing that the work they do will be efficient, effective and make a difference both for the organization and themselves. These things make their jobs both motivating and fulfilling."



02 / The Value of 1:1s

Effective one-on-ones provide a great deal of value to employees, managers, and your company. Each person in your organization relies on feedback in order to improve. Annual reviews have failed to provide the feedback needed to enhance performance, and have been proven largely ineffective, with many large organizations removing them entirely. With the removal of the annual review, the weekly or frequent one-on-one becomes more important than ever. Every member of the organization experiences value over time from the regular one-on-one.



Employees

Knowledge workers who enjoy lots of autonomy still need feedback. Sure, they rely on their own creativity for problem-solving – but the barriers they face will come from inside the organization – red tape, or access to another team needed for collaboration. The structure of one-on-ones allow employees to get a second look at the challenges they are facing. The manager need not correct the employee's course of action, but merely come in as a partner helping to pave the way to success. It is useful to have a trusted advisor to act as a coach as employees progress in their career.

A weekly one-on-one is also one of the few avenues where employees can feel safe discussing career development with their manager. If the employee hopes to receive a promotion, it is helpful to break out the skills needed to move to the next level, and invest time in the weekly one-on-one into developing those skills and assessing relevant opportunities for growth. Employees should have access weekly to discuss their personal objectives and see where those intersect with those of the company. A huge piece in motivation and employee engagement is knowing you're contributing to the company's success.



Managers

Managers are responsible for key deliverables. A manager is only as successful as their team. It is up to the manager to be a coach and help encourage their team to achieve the greatest results. Often managers are busy working on their own deliverables and their day-to-day management responsibilities slip. By structuring a weekly one-on-one, it's ensured that they take the time to manage and help nurture their team.



One-on-ones also give managers an opportunity to coach employees and develop an authentic connection. Alternatively, in group settings, team members have to compete for airtime. The one-on-one meeting enables each team member to be heard and have concerns addressed. When employees feel valued, they become empowered, bringing the manager closer to her own results.



The Company

No other line item costs a company as much as its employees' salaries. Replacing, rather than retaining these employees, costs even more. The key demotivators that drive attrition are when employees don't know a company's vision, transparency is lacking or if employees don't know if they are making a difference. These are all basic components that leaders assume are being communicated company-wide, but so often teams or entire departments feel left in the dark, and thus become de-motivated.

One-on-ones are an effective way to ensure that information and knowledge are trickling down throughout the organization. On the flipside, leaders should also be aware of the information trickling up. Sometimes, gossip or rumors in the lower ranks can inform the company on new opportunities or threats.





03 / How 1:1s Fit Into Performance Management

Manager-driven performance management is being embraced by forward-thinking organizations. The one-on-one is a key driver of quality manager interactions with reports, and fits into a larger scheme of innovative performance management.



Performance Evaluations

Traditional performance reviews are stressful for managers because of both the time they consume and the potential of having to initiate difficult conversations with employees. There is a lot of research that has proven these annual reviews are not effective in optimizing employee performance. For employees, there is the element of surprise – “If I was not meeting expectations for the past six months, why are you only telling me now?”

If one-on-ones are a habit, even if you chose to continue running performance reviews or a regular structured check-in, these will not come as a surprise or be painful. Managers will have set expectations for how difficult topics are approached, and will have a relationship with employees that allows them to share results of their evaluation. By using a real-time feedback tool, this information can be captured for the one-on-one and also stored for the review.

In the case a company runs quarterly check-ins instead of performance reviews, the same theme applies – one-on-ones make these performance evaluations easier, too.



Goal Management

If goal management is a focus of your performance management, whether with S.M.A.R.T. goals, OKRs, or other goal methodologies, one-on-ones serve as a natural springboard for goal-focused conversations around specific areas which are hindering your employee achieving their objectives. But, do not make the mistake as using one-on-ones for status update conversations. Your goal management software should track and visualize employee progress on goals. In the one-on-one, managers should discuss any discrepancies in progress – does the employee need a bigger challenge, or are they struggling? How can the manager reinforce the lessons the employee is learning through experience?



04 / How to Make Sure Employees Get the Most Out of 1:1s

It is up to managers to initiate and follow through on scheduling of one-on-ones. But, the employee should lead the meeting. For managers, good results will come by way of employees airing their concerns and asking questions – understandably, what’s on the agenda be hard for managers to predict!

So, the manager should plan a one-on-one as a free-form meeting. This way, the employee can bring up pressing issues and frustrations that do not make sense to send as a formal email or fit into other types of communications. Off-the-wall (and sometimes brilliant) ideas may be shared, too.

For managers thinking ahead on how to develop leadership skills in their reports, they may ask the employee to send an agenda in advance. This way, the employee can get practice running a meeting and develop a new skill.

Another way to ensure one-on-ones are impactful is follow-up. Take notes, and remember what was discussed. Was feedback given on an idea? Check in later to see if it was executed.

Perhaps an employee is reserved about sharing – some employees will fear asking questions makes them seem weak. As they are developing trust, managers should have a backup plan for how to use the one-on-one time effectively. Consider a “fire drill” you are currently facing. Invite the employee to think through possible courses of action. This allows the employee to get understanding of the issues on their manager’s level, and leaders also get some out-of-the-box ideas on how to address this challenge.





05 / Measuring Success of 1:1s as an HR Leader

It's all well and good to put one-on-ones in the hands of your managers, step back and let them lead. So, what's an HR leader to do to ensure success?

HR can provide the structure needed to make one-on-ones successful. Selecting technology that is accessible to managers enables them to keep the feedback to reports flowing. Develop a system that recognizes and rewards managers who are consistently meeting with their reports.

Consider the goal of one-on-ones: More engaged employees who are motivated and plan to stay with the company. If these goals are being met, perhaps it is less important how often managers do one-on-ones, where, what they talk about, and so on. The process is distributed and run in a way that works for individuals. Managers don't need to

turn in any paperwork that would weigh down the process.

A commonly used measure of engagement is the **eNPS score**, or employee Net Promoter Score, which asks: On a scale of 0 to 10 with 10 being "extremely likely," what is the likelihood you would recommend working at [your company] to a family member, friend or colleague?

This eNPS score will allow companies see, monthly or quarterly, how engaged employees are. It can be done before and after implementing one-on-ones to see the change in engagement.

An example of the eNPS score scale, used to measure employee engagement:



"What is the likelihood you would recommend working at [your company] to a family member, friend or colleague?"

Another way to measure success are through **360 reviews**. Isolate reviews given by reports to managers to check for outliers. This way, you can target training on how to get the most out of one-on-ones to managers who may need it most.



06 / How Frequently to Hold 1:1s

Research shows there is a correlation between how frequently employees need feedback and how many reports their manager has. So, if you have just one report, you may find yourself talking through issues frequently anyway, and a once per month one-on-one is sufficient. Alternatively, a manager with ten or more reports needs to talk to each of them individually, more frequently.



The most popular format for one-on-ones is weekly, for 30 minutes, but we've also seen managers to 60-minute one-on-ones (especially when it's between a department head and mid-level managers). Of course, it's important to pick a frequency and length that you'll follow through with. Once one-on-ones begin getting canceled or postponed, they'll start getting devalued and you'll find neither party prepares or expects much from the process, reducing the impact.





07 / The Biggest Mistakes Made in 1:1s



01. Not Having a Backup Plan: Perhaps things are tense, or maybe too smooth, and you're not sure what to cover in this meeting. Don't lose an opportunity for developmental feedback. Brainstorm solutions to a current high-level company problem and perhaps you'll discover leadership potential in this report.



02. Always in the Office: Sensitive topics may not come up when the employee is thinking of who might be around the corner or how thin these walls really are. Do a coffee meeting, or a walking meeting, to change the scenery.



03. No Follow Through: One-on-one meetings need to be consistent to communicate value to employees and ensure they have a safe place to air concerns. Don't cancel, don't postpone.



04. Renaming or Combining Tasks: Don't try to have a one-on-one with two employees at once – neither will get the quality time they need. The name is simple and to the point, so calling it anything else can confuse as to what the purpose is.



05. Doing it Online: Of course, if you work remotely from your employee, you will have to do a video call. In general, in person → video call → chat.



06. Not Documenting Deliverables: If your employee needs something from you, don't make them follow up a third time – it will erode trust.



07. Failing to Talk About Career Growth: A happy employee doesn't mean that person wants to stay in the current role forever. Timelines, new skills and directions should be an ongoing discussion. Career trajectories today aren't always ladders, so be open to shifting your employee into a new department if it makes sense for their skills.



08. Spending Time on Status Updates: Status updates are easily communicated via email – one-on-ones are for topics that require being in-person. If you must go over project statuses, limit it to five minutes.



09. Always Positive: Private, in-person conversations are good for constructive feedback. Giving constructive feedback takes practice, so don't avoid it.



07 / The Biggest Mistakes Made in 1:1s



10. Allowing Distractions: Emails and messages are constantly coming in. Consider bringing just a pad of paper and pen to minimize distractions.



11. Poor Body Language: Ideally, you'll want to face each other, and make eye contact.



12. Being Forgetful: If your report ask for feedback on an idea, make a note to follow up. If they were given corrective feedback, watch for them to show improvement, and give recognition.



13. Too Much Talking: The manager should aim to speak for 10 percent of the meeting.



14. Eroding Trust: Admissions of weakness – by way of “dumb” questions or noted failure – should not count against your report. Give them credit for bringing something to your attention, and retain trust by keeping it between the two of you.



15. Lacking Structure: A suggested formula allows for 15 minutes of initiatives for which your report needs your approval, 15 minutes for issues you need to raise with the report or new projects to delegate, and 10 minutes for airing concerns and discussing developmental goals.





08 / How to Launch a 1:1 Program



For Employees

When employees benefit from one-on-ones, the company benefits. To effectively launch one-on-ones, identify how consistent one-on-ones fit into the mission and objectives of the company. If the company is hiring rapidly and needs to maintain culture as it grows, discuss how one-on-ones help maintain culture. If the industry is thinning and the company needs to double down on innovation, one-on-ones will support the spread of ideas. Your company's objective should be clearly communicated when you roll out one-on-ones.

Secondly, communicate the value to the individual. One-on-ones are not just an extra task to complete. They serve to take employees where they want to go in their career. They give employees the feedback they need to succeed.

Lastly, ensure employees know that the process is for them. Managers may set the schedule and frequency, but employees have a right to speak up if their needs are not being met in one-on-ones. Be clear that managing up is an option and continuous feedback is a priority for the organization.



For Managers

Managers, similarly, need to know the value of one-on-ones, and how they fit into the overall objectives of the company. Engagement and employee motivation drive retention. Make this front-of-mind for managers, and show them how an eNPS score or other measure can indicate the motivation levels of their team.

Depending on the experience and skill set of your managers, provide a structure for one-on-ones. This might be a recommended set of tools for scheduling and tracking these meetings. You can supply a template if managers are leading one-on-ones for the first time. If some managers have more experience, pair them with less-experienced managers so they can act as mentors.



The Tools You Need for 1:1s



01. **Calendar tool** with automatic reminders



02. **Collaborative agenda** that both employee and manager can edit



03. **Goal management** to track progress (optional)



04. **Video conferencing** (in case workers are remote)



05. **Quiet, non-public setting**

09 / Conclusion

In a good organization, successes will be recognized and failures will be corrected by the manager, and the employee will continue to gain responsibility, bring value and see a clear path for advancement. In a bad organization, the employee's best efforts will be ignored. Having a culture of one-on-ones can help you keep your best employees and set them up for ongoing success.

Find Out More



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www.reflektive.com/demo



10 / Bonus: Sample 1:1 Questions

01. Who do you admire in the company?
02. What's the No. 1 problem with our organization? Why?
03. What's the biggest opportunity that we're missing out on?
04. What's not fun about working here?
05. On a scale of 1-10, how happy are you? Why?
06. What would it take to make your week a 10?
07. What went well this week?
08. What was one thing that your last manager did that you like that I don't do?
09. What is part of your job now that you wish you could change or do less of?
10. What don't you like about the product?
11. What do you think you are best at?
12. What do you love about your job?
13. What do I do that you don't like?
14. What could have gone better?
15. What can I be doing to help you more?
16. What are we not doing that we should be doing?
17. What are some rumors (gossip can be productive!)?
18. Think of a time you were happy in your job – why?
19. What are some personal life issues right now that you'd like to talk about?
20. Name 1-2 roadblocks and wins from the past week.
21. Is there anything I should start doing? Stop doing?
22. If you were me, what changes would you make?
23. If we could improve in any way, how would we do it?
24. How can I support you better?
25. What are your career goals?
26. Tell me your best idea.
27. Fill in the blank: You know it was a good day at work when _____.
28. Do you have any feedback for me?
29. How are things with your teammate _____?
30. Are you happy working here?