

Guide to Effective One on One Meetings with your Employees



The Before, During and After Guide for the Perfect One on One

Before the one on one:

Optimize your meeting invitation – this sets the tone for the whole meeting. An invitation with a subject line reading “one on one meeting” and no note attached is impersonal and can be fear-inducing. Why not use the email as an opportunity to prime trust and positivity?

A quick note goes a long way!

It’s also important to send a recurring meeting invitation for your monthly one-on-ones to promote continuity and let employees know that you are committed to their growth.

Tip: Send the invitation at least one week in advance so your employees can mentally prepare and organize their notes.

meeting so feel free to bring up anything you’d like. Let me know if you have any questions beforehand

Come Well-Prepared

Showing up to a meeting with last minute ideas is not efficient, and it will make your employees feel as though they’re an afterthought.

Come prepared with notes that you’d like to discuss including:

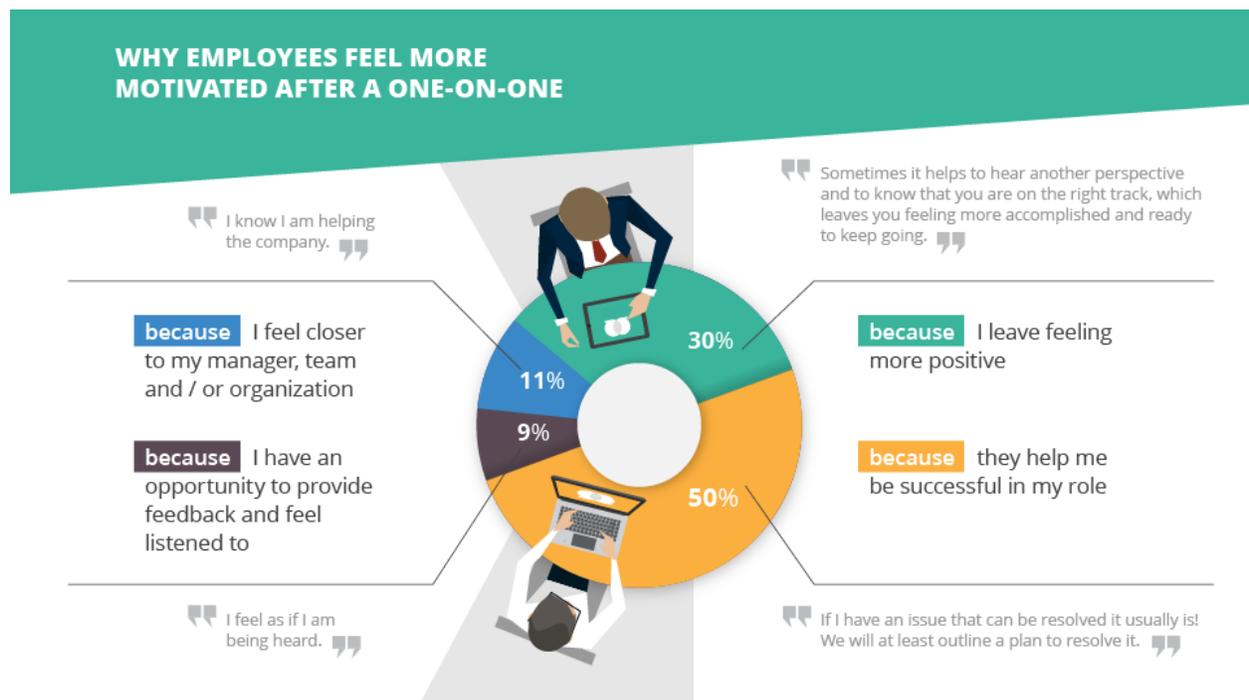
- Recognition for their hard work

(when employees feel valued their productivity increases)

- Constructive feedback
- General observations about their contribution to the team
- Questions – professional or other – to show interest in them as a person all around

Question Ideas for When Your One-on-One is in a Rut:

- Would you like to walk today or go somewhere outside of the office?
- What would you like to see change about these discussions to make them more useful for you?



Prepare questions in advance to ask employees during a one-on-one. Some professional and others just to get to know them a bit better as a

person. You want to create a casual dialogue where they feel comfortable to be themselves.

Ask Employees to Think Ahead

Just as you should prepare, it's important to ask employees to come prepared with specific things to discuss as well.

1. Retrospective thoughts on the past month
2. What they would like to work on going forward
3. What they need from you as a manager to help them achieve their goals
4. A roadmap consisting of things they would like to accomplish on a professional level

- **Note:** If you can't make it to the meeting for whatever reason, send a new invitation right away with a quick note. Canceling last minute without rescheduling can be hurtful as your employee took the time to prepare important things to discuss.

During the One-on-One:

Start with the Positive – One-on-ones are not always the most settling for employees. As much as they are open to criticism so they can learn and grow, it's still tough to learn about your short-comings. This is why it's important to start off on a positive note.

AVOID the compliment sandwich! It's overdone and predictable. Be genuine and authentic with your opening positive feedback so that when you move into areas of criticism your employee already feels safe in the conversation. But you don't have to end on a forced positive note – it makes the whole session seem forged. The point is to have open and honest communication, not follow a rigid formula.



All criticism should be constructive and productive. Think of it as coaching rather than criticizing. Offer actionable ways in which the employee can fix the problem or work on a solution together.

Focus on Behavior

People are not their actions, so when you offer criticism or coaching be sure to discuss their behavior, not their personality. It is easier to change what you do than who you are.



Don't say: You are very disorganized.



Do say: It seems that you had some trouble managing your time for the last project.

- Note – Be sure to have these sensitive conversations in a private, confidential place where employees feel safe to express themselves.

Actively Listen

Like in any relationship, communication is at the core. Part of good communication is not speaking but listening. Employees want to feel heard.

How to actively listen:

- Maintain eye contact
- Offer gestures such as a head nod to show your engagement
- Put devices away to avoid distraction
- Before jumping into your answer, recap what they've said

Don't be afraid of silence in the meeting. It allows time for the employee to reflect.

Try the 80/20 Rule in your one-on-one meetings. Actively listen 80% of the time and only speak about 20%. That will help you to learn how the employee is doing or feeling without your own perceptions getting in the way.

Set Objectives

How to Set Goals

- ❖ Avoid creating a long and unrealistic list of objectives for the month.
- ❖ Come up with 1-3 things that you both agree to work on (personal or professional).
- ❖ Ask in what ways you can help support them.
- ❖ Write down the goals and share via email as a sort of contract.
- ❖ Have different kinds of goals (short and long term) to keep things actionable.

Note: Remember to take notes during the meeting (using pen and paper, not a laptop or tablet as it acts as a physical barrier) so that nothing slips through the cracks. This will help you to follow-up properly in the next one-on-one.

After the One-on One

Ask for Feedback

One of the most important parts of being a manager is being relatable and human. You hope to be able to connect with employees on a real level, and the best way to do this is to humble yourself, be vulnerable and let them know that you too could always use improvement.

After the session, send employees a follow-up question as simple as:



Thanks for sharing and listening to my feedback.
I hope it will be helpful for you to become the best you can be. I would also like to improve my performance as a manager as well, and optimize our one-on-ones. Do you have any feedback to offer me? I would be very grateful for your insights.

If you can't put yourself in a vulnerable state, why would the employee in front of you do the same? You really have to be on the same level as the employee to establish trust. The key to all one-on-ones is trust. Trust happens through vulnerability.

Send a Written Recap of the Meeting

Within one day of the meeting, send your employee a recap of what you discussed and the goals that you have set together. This creates a sort of contract holding both yourself and your employees accountable for the next steps.

And, after an hour-long discussion it's helpful to extract the main points and clarify the key takeaways to keep the important things foremost in everyone's minds.

Here's a quick recap of our meeting and the goals we set for next time. Let me know if you have any questions or something you would like to add:

Goal 1: _____

Goal 2: _____

Goal 3: _____

I look forward to our next one-on-one, but don't hesitate to reach out in the meantime if you need anything.

Note: When you send the recap and outline the goals, be sure your employee is aligned. Simply ask whether your recap is representative of your discussion and ensure that they are comfortable with the next steps.

Put Action to Intention

Most importantly, be sure to put action to your intention. If you promised to send a list of helpful books to read on a certain topic, be sure to send the list. If you offered to help them reach a goal by coaching them once a week, be sure to make the time for them.

A promise made and broken is worse than not making one at all. To remain credible and trustworthy in the eyes of your employee, be true to your word. This is why it's so important to take notes during the meeting and keep organized afterwards.



Bonus Information

The 8 Best Questions to Ask During a One-on-One Meeting

1. **How's Life** – On the surface, this doesn't seem like a significant question to ask. After all, some managers default to asking this question as a crutch when they're not sure how to open up a one-on-one meeting. However, this question can be actually quite powerful, if you can embrace a greater intention behind it: **To build trust**. When asked, most employees agreed on the importance of having trust and a strong personal rapport going into the one-on-one. The more you know about a coworker's dreams, hobbies, pets, children's names, etc., the greater the sense of trust is. And the greater the trust, the easier a tough conversation is. As a result, many managers kick off these meetings with a "get-to-know-you" question like, "How's life?" or "How's [insert spouse's name]?" or "What are you up to this weekend?" One manager in particular emphasized the importance of talking about life outside of work way **before** you even have the one-on-one. That way, you build a foundation of trust to use if you need to bring up a difficult topic during your one-on-one. Prior to a one-on-one, here are some of **the top 25 get-to-know-you questions** that can help with this:

1. What was your first job?
2. Have you ever met anyone famous?
3. What are you reading right now?
4. If you could pick up a new skill in an instant what would it be?
5. Who is someone you really admire?
6. Seen any good movies lately that you'd recommend?
7. Got any favorite quotes?
8. Been pleasantly surprised by anything lately?
9. What was your favorite band 10, 5, 2 years ago? (Depends on the age range)
10. What's your earliest memory?
11. Been anywhere for the first time recently?
12. What's your favorite family tradition?
13. Who had the most influence on you growing up?
14. What was the first thing you bought with your own money?
15. What's something you want to do in the next year that you've never done before?
16. Seen anything lately that made you smile?

17. What's your favorite place you've ever visited?
18. Have you had your 15 minutes of fame yet?
19. What's the best advice you ever heard?
20. How do you like your eggs?
21. Do you have a favorite charity you wish more people knew about?
22. Got any phobias you'd like to get rid of?
23. Have you returned anything you bought lately? Why?
24. Do you collect anything?
25. What's your favorite breakfast cereal?

2. **What are you worried about right now?** – During a one-on-one, you want to figure if there's anything bothering an employee, before it's too late and they decide to leave or their performance is affected. Few questions do that as well as this one. This question can help unearth the deep-seated concerns, confusion, or uncertainty an employee might be facing. A slight variation to this question is: *"When's the last time you were worried about something?"* This question is rooted in a specific moment of tension that can help make it more concrete for an employee when reflecting on if there is something they might be worried about.
3. **What rumors are you hearing that you think I should know about?**
Asking this question can bring to light rumors that you can dispel before they spin out of control. What the rumor mill is saying is also often a compass pointing to places where people feel stressed. Ask this question to uncover a deeper, disconcerting source of unease or frustration for employees. You'll want to pay attention to that.
When one manager asked this question, it had a direct effect on her entire team's morale. She was able to nip a rumor in the bud very quickly about why an employee was fired.
4. **If you could be proud of one accomplishment between now and next year, what would it be?**
To get a coworker thinking about their personal goals over the next six months, as well as their long-term careers, one manager recommended asking this question. You may not get a meaningful response every single time from every employee you pose it to, as some employees may find it

difficult to answer on the spot. However, it's a great way to spark the initial conversation with an employee about future goals. Not to mention, it's a more thoughtful question than simply asking, "What goals do you have for yourself?"

5. What are your big time wasters?

No one likes to waste time. Few feelings are as stifling and demoralizing, especially in a work setting. As a result, asking this question during a one-on-one is imperative. Once you ask this question, be prepared to think on and follow with concrete ideas for how you think that person's time won't be wasted.

6. Would you like more or less direction from me?

Feeling micromanaged is often another source of stress for an employee – and it's one of the most common. As a manager, it can be easy to unintentionally give an employee too much guidance. At the same time, employees find it equally frustrating when they're hung out to dry with no support. When you ask this question, you can then adjust your management style and techniques. Furthermore, asking this question also signals to your coworker that you recognize the value of providing the right level of support as a manager. As a leader, this question shows you're self-aware.

7. Would you like more or less feedback on your work? If so, what additional feedback would you like?

Employees surveyed suggest asking this question, because you're most likely to get a resounding "yes." After surveying hundreds of companies and thousands of employees through **Know Your Company**, it was found that **80% of employees say, "I want more feedback about my performance."** Your one-on-one is the perfect opportunity to figure out exactly what kind of feedback someone would like.

8. Are there any decisions you're hung up on?

One of the best ways to help coach an employee is to give them some support on a decision that they're wrestling with. They could be quite distraught because they're not sure which path to take – and you can help. Asking this question during the one-on-one is a wonderful way to alleviate the potential pain they may be feeling around a tough decision.

Whether your one-on-ones are weekly, once a month, or once a quarter, I'd highly encourage you to place one or two of these questions in your typical meeting agenda. Based on the experiences of managers who have asked these questions, you're guaranteed to learn something new and create a stronger rapport with your team.

Are there any questions NOT to ask?

Well, yes. And you wouldn't expect that this question could do more harm than good, but it does.

“How can I help you?”

You would think this would be a great question to ask your employees. One CEO who had asked this question countless times found out why he was wrong.

The question, “How can I help you?” hurts employees more than it helps.

Let me explain.

The other week, I ran a workshop. One of the participants – a CEO – was struggling to get feedback from a particularly quiet employee at his company. He asked the other folks in the room for advice about it.

“What if I asked the employee, ‘How can I help you?’ Do you think that's a good question to ask him to encourage him to speak up?” he pondered.

A few other executives nodded their heads. “Yeah that seems like a good idea,” they said.

Another workshop participant spoke up.

“I hate that question,” she shared candidly (and a bit sheepishly). “When my own manager asks me that, I never know what to say.”

Everyone was perplexed – myself included. How could asking to give help ever be a bad thing?

But as she explained, it clicked for me. Despite being well-intentioned, here are three reasons why “How can I help you?” is a terrible question to ask your employees.

It’s lazy.

When you ask, “How can I help you?” you’re not offering any specific ideas or suggestions for how you can be more helpful. Rather, you’re relying on the employee to do the hard (and delicate) work of figuring out how you need to improve as a leader. Expecting that an employee will tell you what you should be doing better without presenting any thoughts yourself is, well, lazy.

It puts pressure on the employee.

Can you imagine how daunting it is to tell your boss what she needs to be doing differently? That’s what you’re doing when you say, “How can I help?” You’re asking for holes to be poked, for flaws to be exposed And the employee can’t tell if you’re really ready or not to hear it. Anytime you’re speaking truth to power, it’s intimidating. We cannot underestimate as leaders the power dynamic that exists between an employee and an employer. There isn’t any incentive for an employee to critique or say something that might be perceived negatively by their boss. As a result, “How can I help you?” puts pressure on the employee to give a diplomatic response, instead of an honest one.

It’s vague.

Now the employee is forced to quickly think through all the potential things that you could provide help with On what project? On what area of the business? Should they mention communication? Should they bring up that thing that happened during that meeting last week? Or is the boss asking for something more high-level and strategic? It’s tough to know exactly what you’re asking for as a leader, when you ask the questions, “How can I help?”

So, what should you ask instead?

If you genuinely do want to know how you can help and support an employee, try this:

Ask about something specific that you can give help on, first.

Point out your own potential flaw, instead of waiting for your employee to point it out. Offer a critique of your own actions, instead waiting to see if it's something your employee brings up.

The more you go first and share what you think can be better, the more room you'll give your employee to give you an honest response about what they think could be better.

Here are some useful questions you could ask:

- “Do you think I’ve been a little micromanaging with how I’ve been following you on projects?”
- “Have I been putting too much on your plate and do you need some breathing room?”
- “Am I giving you enough information to do your job well?”
- “Could I be doing a better job outlining the vision and direction for where we’re headed?”
- “Have I not been as understanding of reasonable timelines like I should have?”
- Am I interrupting you too much during the day with meetings and requests?”

I guarantee an employee will feel more encouraged to give you their honest take on how you can help if you ask, “Am I interrupting you too much during the day?” rather than just asking “How can I help you?”

Stop hurting your employees with the wrong question. Start asking the right one,