



PEOPLE MANAGEMENT GUIDE

# Manager's Guide to Effective 1-on-1s

Building trust and driving performance through better conversations — a practical framework for managers at every level.

- 1 Why 1-on-1s matter and what employees actually want
- 2 How to prepare and set a shared agenda
- 3 Running the meeting: safety, listening, time allocation
- 4 Question frameworks by conversation type
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<p><b>3x</b></p> <p>more likely to be engaged with regular weekly 1-on-1s</p>	<p><b>70%</b></p> <p>of employee talk time in a well-run 1-on-1 — manager speaks the other 30%</p>	<p><b>#1</b></p> <p>manager relationship is the top predictor of employee retention</p>
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**PART 1**

# Why 1-on-1s matter

Of all the things a manager can do to build a high-performing team, regular 1-on-1 meetings are among the highest-return. Not because they're on the calendar, but because they're the primary place where trust gets built, problems get surfaced early, and careers get real attention.

<p><b>3x</b></p> <p>more likely to be engaged — employees who meet regularly with their manager vs. those who rarely do</p> <p><i>Gallup State of the American Manager</i></p>	<p><b>#1</b></p> <p>predictor of employee retention is the strength of the manager-employee relationship</p> <p><i>Gallup, "It's the Manager" (2019)</i></p>	<p><b>4x</b></p> <p>more likely to be disengaged when employees get little or no 1-on-1 time with their manager</p> <p><i>Harvard Business Review</i></p>
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## What employees say they want from 1-on-1s

Ask employees directly, and the answers cluster around the same themes. They want undivided attention — not a manager checking Slack mid-conversation. They want a space to discuss real challenges, not just task status. They want development conversations that go somewhere, not career talks that get postponed indefinitely.

What they don't want: a meeting that functions as a weekly status report. When 1-on-1s become status updates, employees stop preparing honestly. They share the polished version, not the real one. The manager leaves thinking things are fine. They often aren't.

<p><b>What makes 1-on-1s work</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consistent schedule that gets protected, not cancelled</li> <li>Shared agenda — employee contributes topics, not just manager</li> <li>Real listening: manager talks 30% of the time, employee 70%</li> <li>Follow-through on commitments before the next meeting</li> <li>Career and development talk, not just task management</li> </ul>	<p><b>What breaks them</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Treating the meeting as a status report</li> <li>Canceling frequently — signals the employee's time doesn't matter</li> <li>Manager dominates the conversation with their own agenda</li> <li>Commitments made but not followed up on</li> <li>No development discussion for months at a stretch</li> </ul>
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**PART 2**

## How to prepare

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Preparation is where good 1-on-1s are built. What you bring into the room determines whether the conversation goes somewhere or circles the same topics again.

**Before every meeting**

Review your notes from last time. What action items did you commit to? Complete them before the meeting — or explain why you haven't. What themes came up that deserve follow-up? What goals or projects were discussed? Knowing the current status before the conversation saves 10 minutes of context-setting.

Check recent work and context. Look at what they've been working on. Be aware of any team dynamics, organizational changes, or feedback from peers that's relevant. A manager who shows up knowing what's been happening earns credibility fast.

**Preparing your agenda items****Things to bring to every meeting**

- Feedback you've been holding since the last conversation
- Questions you want to ask — write them in advance
- Resources, connections, or help you can offer
- Decisions that need their input before you make them

**The 24-hour rule**

Send a shared agenda doc at least 24 hours before. Invite them to add topics. Make their items explicit: their agenda is not optional input, it's the meeting's primary input. Their topics should get addressed before yours whenever possible.

**Collaborative agenda-setting**

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Meetings rated most useful by employees share one pattern: the direct report contributed to the agenda. A shared template helps — one section for employee topics, one for manager topics, plus standing items like wins, blockers, development, and feedback.

The simplest shared format works well — a Google Doc both sides can edit before the meeting. The key isn't the format. It's the signal that this time belongs to both of you, and that their items will actually be addressed.

## PART 3

## Running the meeting

### Suggested time allocation for a 45-minute 1-on-1

Current work	Blockers	Development	Feedback	Recap
10 min	10 min	10 min	10 min	5 min

The 70/30 rule: employee talks 70% of the time, manager 30% — mostly questions and guidance, not directives.

*Adjust proportions by context: new employees may need more manager time early on; senior contributors often need less.*

### Frequency and duration

Weekly or biweekly for most direct reports. Thirty minutes as a floor, though 45–60 minutes allows room for development conversations that don't feel rushed. Consistent scheduling matters more than perfect timing — a meeting that happens reliably at the same slot each week becomes a reliable container for real conversation.

### Creating psychological safety

Start with a human moment. Don't open with "let's go through the agenda." Ask how they're really doing — and mean it. Share something from your own week first if it helps model openness. Set the container explicitly: "This is your time. Your agenda comes first. Everything here stays between us unless we agree otherwise."

### Active listening

Listen to understand, not to respond. Pause before replying — the 3-second gap after someone finishes speaking is where the most honest additions often come out. Resist the urge to immediately fix or advise. Ask: "Tell me more about that." Reflect back what you're hearing: "What I'm getting is that the project feels stuck at the handoff point — is that right?" Notice what topics make them light up or shut down. Both signal something.

Confirm tracks 1-on-1 conversation themes over time. If "blockers" appears in five straight meetings without resolution, the system flags it. Managers can see their own patterns — topics they consistently avoid, commitments they haven't followed up on, employees who haven't had a development conversation in over a month.

**PART 4**

# Question frameworks

The questions you ask determine what surfaces. Here are proven frameworks organized by what you're trying to learn.

**UNCOVERING CHALLENGES**

- " What's your biggest challenge right now?"
- " If you could wave a magic wand and fix one thing, what would it be?"
- " What's slowing you down?"
- " What decision are you waiting on?"

**CAREER DEVELOPMENT**

- " What skills do you want to develop in the next 6 months?"
- " Where do you see yourself in 2–3 years?"
- " What project would be a good stretch for you?"
- " What would make your work more fulfilling?"

**FEEDBACK EXCHANGE**

- " What's one thing I could do differently to better support you?"
- " Is there anything I should start, stop, or continue doing?"
- " How do you prefer to receive feedback?"
- " Am I providing enough context for your work?"

**ENERGY AND ENGAGEMENT**

- " What part of your work is most energizing right now?"
- " What's one thing that would make your day-to-day better?"
- " How connected do you feel to the team and the mission?"
- " What recent win should we take a moment to recognize?"

**Topics to cover across a month**

No single meeting needs to cover everything. Rotate through these five areas over four weeks so each gets real attention at least once a month:

**Progress and priorities**

What's moving forward? What needs reprioritization? Where is the work stuck and why?

**Blockers and support**

What is in the way? What does the manager need to clear? Who else needs to be involved?

**Development and growth**

What do they want to learn? What opportunities can the manager create or sponsor this quarter?

## PART 5

## Follow-through and hard conversations

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Trust in 1-on-1s is built or destroyed between meetings, not during them. The most important thing a manager can do after a 1-on-1 is follow through on what they said they'd do.

### After the meeting

Write down action items immediately — with owners and deadlines. Send a brief recap with the items you committed to. If you said you'd make an introduction, make it. If you said you'd look into something, report back. Missing one commitment makes the next meeting harder to be honest in. Missing three makes them a performance ritual, not a real conversation.

Track themes over time. The same blocker appearing four times is a different problem than one that appeared once. Development conversations that keep getting pushed to next time need a flag, not another postponement.

### Performance issues

Don't wait for formal reviews. Name a gap in the next 1-on-1 with a specific example: "Here's what I observed versus what I expected — can you help me understand what happened?" Ask what's getting in the way before assuming lack of effort. Document the action plan and follow-up checkpoints.

### Difficult feedback

Prepare specific examples in advance. Lead with intent: "I'm sharing this because I want you to succeed." Describe impact, not just behavior. Ask for their perspective — they may know something you don't. End with support: "Here's how I can help you work on this."

### Disengaged employees

Start with curiosity, not conclusions. "I've noticed you seem less energized lately — what's going on?" Look for root causes: role mismatch, lack of growth, team dynamics. Co-create small experiments rather than prescribing solutions.

### Remote teams

Video on by default. If you must cancel, shorten to 15 minutes rather than skip entirely, and reschedule that day. Repeated cancellations tell employees their time isn't protected.

PART 6

## Getting started

### If you're new to 1-on-1s

- 1. Schedule immediately.** Get recurring meetings on the calendar before the week is out.
- 2. Explain the purpose.** Share the intent: "This is your time, not a status report."
- 3. Start simple.** Three questions to open: "What's going well? What's challenging? How can I help?"
- 4. Protect the time.** Don't cancel for the first three months — the habit matters more than the content at this stage.
- 5. Ask for feedback.** After four weeks: "What would make these more useful for you?"

### If you're improving existing 1-on-1s

- 1. Audit recent meetings.** Are you talking more than 30%? Skipping development? Canceling often?
- 2. Ask your team directly.** "How can I make our 1-on-1s more valuable for you?" — and act on what they say.
- 3. Pick one thing to change.** Overhauling everything at once doesn't work.
- 4. Test for a month.** Try the new approach consistently before evaluating.
- 5. Review your notes.** Look at three months of notes — what patterns do you see?

## Sample questions library — quick reference

### CHECK-IN AND ENERGY

- " How are you really doing?"
- " What's on your mind this week?"
- " What's your energy level right now, 1-10?"

### WORK AND PROGRESS

- " What's your biggest priority this month?"
- " What progress are you most proud of recently?"
- " Where do you need clarity or direction from me?"

### TEAM AND CULTURE

- " How's your relationship with the team feeling?"
- " Who do you want to work more closely with?"
- " How connected do you feel to our mission right now?"

### RECOGNITION AND MOTIVATION

- " What recent win should we take a moment to recognize?"
- " What's giving you energy in your work right now?"
- " How can I better recognize your contributions?"

## About Confirm

Confirm is performance management software built for how modern teams actually work. It runs 1-on-1 tracking, continuous feedback, goal management, and Organizational Network Analysis (ONA) in a single platform — light enough for teams that hate overhead, structured enough for HR leaders who need data.

Confirm is the only mainstream performance platform with ONA built in natively. Three questions, 90 seconds per employee, 85%+ participation. The resulting network data shows managers who on their team is most trusted, most connected, and most at risk — context that makes every 1-on-1 conversation more grounded.

### What HR and People leaders say

**Kit Krugman, SVP People and Culture, Foursquare:** "We reviewed Lattice, Rippling, and Culture Amp. Confirm was the only platform designed to be light-weight, fast, and easy to use."

**Julia Psitos, VP People & Talent, Alfred:** "For the first time in my 10+ years in People/HR, 100% of team members completed their self evaluations."

**Joe Bast, VP People & Operations, Thoropass:** "We launched on a Monday, and by Saturday morning we had 98% of performance reviews done. I don't know that I've ever seen that level of completion in that amount of time."

**Carrie Carroll, Director of People Operations, QuotaPath:** "Confirm has transformed the way we do performance reviews, and helped us become a more data-driven HR organization."

### SEE CONFIRM IN ACTION

## Book a demo with the Confirm team

We'll walk through how 1-on-1 tracking, ONA, and continuous feedback work together in a live environment — and show you what it looks like with your own team structure.

[Book a demo →](#)

[confirm.com/request-a-demo](https://confirm.com/request-a-demo)

**98%**

review completion,  
Thoropass

**85%+**

ONA participation

**100%**

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Alfred