
1-on-1s: Common mistakes

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1. Conducting 1-on-1s only if there's a problem.



You don't want to be like the stereotypical bad manager who only pays attention when a team member messes up. Plus, what about all of the problems brewing that you simply won't hear about if you never establish regular contact with your direct reports? The best managers don't just respond to trouble. They anticipate it—something that the information flow in 1-on-1s will help you do—and take action to prevent it in the first place.

2. Setting the agenda.

Your role as a manager probably requires you to lead a lot of meetings, and you might find yourself automatically running your direct reports' 1-on-1s. Resist the urge. Instead, encourage them to set the agenda. This will involve them in their own development and empower them to bring forward their most pressing concerns and questions. You'll also gain a much better understanding of what motivates and interests each member of your team. Have a report who doesn't know what to talk about? Pass along our [prep worksheet for direct reports](#).

That said, don't let their setting the agenda prevent you from doing the difficult but vital work of giving feedback or initiating difficult conversations as needed. To ensure you're also making the most of this time, fill out our [1-on-1 worksheet for managers](#) as meeting prep.

3. Canceling.

This 1-on-1 may be just another appointment in a long string of daily meetings for you, but your direct report may have been waiting all week for access to you in order to raise an important issue. Nothing says, “I don’t care” like canceling a 1-on-1. If you really must do it, give the person as much notice as possible, apologize and be sure to reschedule for the next available time slot.

Beware also if your direct report asks to cancel. If your direct report is going on vacation, or crashing against a hard deadline this week, it might be fine to cancel. Once. But a direct report asking to cancel can also be a sign that they are checked out, unhappy at work, or trying to avoid you for some reason. So if the person’s request to cancel comes with a “I don’t have anything to talk about this week” message, it’s wise to keep the meeting and suggest some agenda items of your own.

4. Talking too much.

The power dynamics inherent in manager-employee relationships often result in skewed conversations. You might inadvertently fall into a pattern of doing a lot of the talking in your 1-on-1s. Try to scale back and speak only about 10 percent of the time (and preferably to ask questions). You’ll learn more as a listener than as a speaker, and your direct reports will appreciate the opportunity to be heard.

5. Asking the same questions or covering the same ground every time.

Routines can quickly turn into ruts. And when you ask the same questions every time, you’re basically turning the person’s 1-on-1 into a status report—updates are necessary but often better handled in weekly emails, team meetings or informal check-ins.

It’s usually more productive and instructive to spend valuable 1-on-1 time talking about the good stuff (e.g., career development, big ideas, goals, frustrations, performance expectations and feedback). See [100+ questions for better 1-on-1s with your direct reports](#) for a range of ideas of what to ask to keep things fresh.

6. Avoiding, rather than exploring, any signs of trouble.

Unless you enjoy sudden resignations, emotional meltdowns and simmering tension—the products of long-term avoidance—make it your mission to pursue any signs that there may be a problem or difficult issue simmering beneath the surface. For communication techniques to help, see [How to encourage direct reports to open up in 1-on-1 conversations](#).

After all, walking into a tough headwind is a lot easier (and smarter) than waiting for a full-blown hurricane to develop.

7. Never or rarely giving feedback.

Most people want to know if their manager thinks they're doing okay—or not. And most people want to get better at their jobs. It's up to you to provide a steady dose of both [reinforcing](#) and [redirecting feedback](#), and 1-on-1s afford an excellent opportunity to do so.

8. Never or rarely asking for feedback.

Asking for feedback is the sign of a truly confident, improvement-minded manager. It makes you look stronger, not weaker. It shows that you care what your team members think of you. And it communicates that you're self-aware enough to realize that the power dynamics of the situation often require you to extend an invitation (rather than waiting for them to speak up). Think of the important, insightful things about how you come across that you'll miss out on if you never ask how *you're* doing. For a simple technique, see [Ask your direct reports for feedback on your performance as a manager](#).

Next -> Go back to [1-on-1s](#) to view solutions to common problems, helpful worksheets and other experts' perspectives hand-picked by our research team.