

Common leadership wisdom tells us good leaders hold 1-on-1 meetings with their direct reports. Less common is the wisdom of how to make those meetings a good use of time. Some give up or just hold them occasionally. Others hold them religiously but they're not really sure why. For some they're a weekly social time. And in the worst cases, we dread 1-on-1s with our bosses because we know we'll come away with more things to do and beat up over what we've done wrong. Ouch!

Here's a brief leader's guide to successful 1-on-1 meetings:

1. **Shared purpose.** Because they're paying you, you owe it to your employer to work together toward organizational success. So agree with your report that organizational success is your context.

As a leader, you're responsible for the success of those you lead. So further agree that your purpose for meeting is to make sure your report has everything they need for short-term and long-term success.



2. **Regular rhythm.** Weekly or bi-weekly (in rare cases perhaps less frequent), it needs to be predictable. We don't have to bother each other now with non-urgent things if we know we can bring them up at our regular Tuesday meeting. This is NOT a low-priority meeting that you can bump without consequence! If your schedule changes, give your report the option of rescheduling or cancelling. Traveling? Connect via phone or video-conference, even if it's a shortened meeting.
3. **Your agenda is secondary.** The meeting is about your report's success, so their agenda takes priority over yours. You may have information to share (if it's important for your report's success), but their needs come first. Schedule another meeting if you can't get to your agenda.
4. **Your contributions.** Assess your effectiveness by asking how well you provided these five things at each meeting:
  - **A Listening ear.** Listening signals respect, allows them to process their own thoughts, and helps you identify what they're struggling with (among other things).
  - **Encouragement.** Affirm and appreciate what they're doing well, no matter how little that may be!
  - **Support.** Including clarity, focus, and direction. Ask what they need from you to succeed at each task. Help them set priorities – expecting them to “just do it all” is a cop-out.
  - **Inspiration.** Help them connect the dots between their work and organizational success. Stretch and challenge them while expressing your support and belief in them.
  - **Accountability.** Be clear to distinguish “ideas” from “expectations”. Always keep a list and follow up on agreed-upon expectations.
5. **Watch how they leave.** Slumped shoulders, head down? Spring in their step and smile on their face? Looking forward to your next meeting? My 1-on-1's with my boss used to be a highlight of my week. (OK, not always, but usually!) Not every meeting will produce an emotional high, but even when you disagree they should know you're rooting for them. If they leave on a downer, loop back to encourage them soon – don't wait for the next meeting.

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