

The 1:1 Playbook

Ed Schaefer · Version 1.0 · August 2026 · edward-schaefer.com/playbooks/one-on-ones · Free to share

Manager behavior explains most of the gap between a highly engaged team and a disengaged one, and Gallup's own research names one meaningful weekly conversation as the highest-leverage habit a manager can build. This document works two ways: read it start to finish and you can run a 1:1 for the first time this week, or keep it open as a live reference once you already know how. Point an agent at it and it can do either job.

1. The 60-second version

- **Cadence:** weekly, every direct report. This is the entry point for every relationship, regardless of seniority.
- **Duration:** 30 minutes.
- **Order:** the direct's items open the meeting, unprompted. Future and career comes next. The manager's items, including feedback in both directions, come last.
- **No pre-circulated agenda.** The manager doesn't send a list in advance. A shared, living document both people add to between meetings is different, and fine.
- **Status can appear. It is never the center.**
- **Protect the slot.** A cancellation without an immediate reschedule sends a message whether it's intended or not.
- **Skip-levels don't substitute for this.** The pull toward one is a signal worth reading about your own management chain.
- **Cadence loosens as trust is earned over time.** It starts fixed for everyone. "No scheduled 1:1s" is never the starting point.

2. The default play

Run this as written for the first several months of any relationship. Everyone starts here, including senior hires.

Get it on the calendar. Thirty minutes, once a week, the same slot every time. Block it yourself.

The direct's items go first, and nothing precedes them. Whatever they bring — a blocker, a question, something going well, something that isn't — that's where the meeting starts, every time. This matches the single strongest predictor of a good 1:1 the research turned up: a direct who authors their own agenda, alone or with the manager, consistently outperforms a manager-run one (Rogelberg, *Glad We*

Met). Andy Grove's original design goes further than this playbook does — the entire meeting belongs to the direct, start to finish. This playbook uses Manager Tools' structure instead, the source most of this material traces back to: sequenced, with room left for the manager too.

Future and career comes next. Where does this person want to be in six months or a year, and what's standing in the way of it. This is the segment that gets skipped when the week is busy and a status question is sitting right there. Resist that. It's also the segment a once-a-year review can't cover on its own.

The manager's items and feedback come last. Whatever the manager needs from their side, plus feedback in both directions. Kim Scott's Radical Candor model uses a standing question for exactly this: "What feedback do you have for me?" Worth building into a regular rhythm.

Don't send an agenda ahead of time. A list circulated in advance turns the meeting from dialogue into tasking, even without meaning to. A shared, living document works differently: both people add to it between meetings, which keeps continuity across weeks.

Status can show up. Projects come up naturally in a good 1:1, and that's normal, a byproduct of a trusting relationship. The moment status becomes most of the thirty minutes, something else in the team's rhythm has broken, and this slot is covering for it.

Protect it. If a cancellation happens, reschedule inside the same week, every time.

3. Script: announcing 1:1s to a team

The rollout is where most managers stall, usually because the first thing a direct report hears is "can we meet" and the mind goes straight to a performance conversation. Deliver it live in a team setting (a team meeting or your regular sync) so everyone hears the same thing at once, then say something close to this, adapted to your own voice and team:

"Starting next week, I'm putting a standing thirty-minute 1:1 on the calendar with each of you, every week, same time. A few things up front, because I know this can sound like something it isn't.

This isn't a performance review, and it isn't a status meeting. I'm not going to walk in with a list of what you've done wrong, and I'm not going to spend the time asking for a project update. That gets tracked somewhere else.

Your half opens it, every time. Whatever's on your mind — a blocker, a question, something going well, something that isn't — that's where we start. I'm not going to show up with my own agenda and work through it at you.

We'll also talk regularly about where you want to be six months or a year from now, and what's getting in the way of that. That's not a once-a-year conversation here.

I'll bring what I need from my side too, near the end. Feedback goes both directions there: what I have for you, and what you have for me about how I'm managing.

If I ever have to cancel, I'll get it back on the calendar the same week."

4. Script: running the first meeting

Open the same way every time. Pick one line and keep it. The consistency does more work than the wording:

- "What's on your mind?"
- "What's top of mind right now?"
- "How are things going?"

Expect some early stiffness. Both people are building a pattern neither has practiced together yet. That's normal, and it eases with repetition, the same ritual every time.

Direct's items. No script needed here. This segment belongs to the direct. If the silence runs long, let it sit.

Future and career. Bring a few of these, and drop the ones that don't land:

- "What's something you want to be noticeably better at a year from now?"
- "Is there a part of the job that's started to feel like a ceiling?"
- "What would make the next six months feel like real progress to you?"
- "Is there a skill, or a kind of work, you want more exposure to?"

Manager's items and feedback. Close with these:

- Whatever specific items the manager actually needs from this person this week.
- "Is there anything about how I'm managing that's getting in your way?"
- "What feedback do you have for me?"

Keep this segment to what genuinely needs this person's ears directly. A full project status readout belongs somewhere else in the team's rhythm.

5. What belongs in each segment, and what doesn't

Segment	Belongs	Doesn't belong
Direct's items (opens the meeting)	Whatever the direct brings, unprompted: blockers, questions, concerns, wins, informal status they choose to raise themselves	An agenda the manager sent in advance; the manager's own items
Future and career	Growth, skill development, career trajectory, what's next	A full project status readout; a stand-in for a real performance review
Manager's items and feedback	The manager's specific items, feedback in both directions, anything that needs this person's ears directly	A wall of tasking; status as the main content

Skip-levels don't belong anywhere in this structure as a substitute for it. See Variations, below.

6. Failure modes and fixes

The meeting has become a status meeting. The most common failure, and the one worth naming first. If most of a 1:1's thirty minutes is project status, the meeting has stopped doing its actual job: building trust and catching problems early. Fix: move status to wherever the team's other rhythms already carry it, and use the direct's opening question to pull the conversation back to what it's for.

It keeps getting cancelled. A cancelled 1:1 that doesn't get rescheduled the same week reads as "you weren't a priority this week," regardless of the actual cause (this is Camille Fournier's "oil change" framing: skip it and expect to get stranded later). Fix: reschedule inside the same week, every time, no exceptions for how busy the week got.

The manager sends a written agenda ahead of time. Even a well-intentioned list, circulated in advance, shifts the tone from dialogue to pre-assigned tasking. Fix: stop sending it. If continuity across weeks is the actual goal, move to a shared, living document both people add to. Ownership is what changes; the manager stops being the one who sends it.

The direct goes quiet or just says "nothing to report." Expected in the first several meetings, before the pattern is established. Fix: keep the same opening question every time, and give it several weeks to work. The pattern recognition is the point, and it builds only with repetition.

A manager uses a skip-level instead of fixing the relationship in front of them. Fix: name what's actually driving the urge, and address it directly with the manager in that chain. See Variations, below, for how to tell which problem it actually is.

7. Variations

Skip-level pull. When the urge to sit down directly with someone below your own direct reports shows up, read it as a diagnostic signal about your own management chain. It's almost always pointing at one of three things: a communication gap, fixed by tightening what your own 1:1s actually cover; a performance gap, fixed with direct coaching aimed at the specific weakness; or a trust gap, the hardest one, which gets rebuilt in a direct conversation with the person you don't fully trust. None of this makes skip-levels categorically wrong. A skip-level earns its place when the motive is genuine curiosity about how the work happens or real investment in a specific person's growth, and an employee is always free to request one. But going around a manager signals something to that manager whether it's intended or not. That consequence is worth managing on purpose.

Seniority and trust. The cadence in Section 1 is where every relationship starts, including senior hires. Over time, as trust is established, it can loosen: less frequent scheduled time, more async or on-demand contact standing in for some of it. The standing slot on the calendar is what signals a manager is serious and has time for this person, so the loosening happens later, once it's been earned. A minority of teams have gone further recently and dropped the scheduled meeting entirely in favor of pure async contact. That's a real, credible position in current research, and it's explicitly not this playbook's default. This playbook's default: hold the weekly cadence for at least six months before loosening anything. The signals it may be time: the direct raises things unprompted rather than saving them for the meeting, and the work itself is stable, with a clear plan over a longer horizon and less changing week to week. Treat those as signals, not a formula. There's no checklist that makes loosening safe; it stays a case-by-case judgment, and loosening at the wrong moment can set a relationship back. When in doubt, keep the slot.

Remote. The dedicated, synchronous meeting doesn't need to change shape for a remote report. It needs to be protected harder, because the informal hallway version of this contact doesn't exist for them. A remote direct's 1:1 carries more weight than an in-office one.

AI-era. AI changes two things about how this meeting runs. First, it can absorb the administrative work: taking notes and maintaining the shared living document, with a real opt-out, since some people won't want AI present and that preference should hold. Second, a problem doesn't wait for the scheduled 1:1 to get raised, the same way it wouldn't wait for a standup: async and on-demand contact exist so a problem never sits unaddressed while it waits for the next scheduled meeting. In a perfect world, with AI hooked into everything, a problem raised async between meetings would flow into the shared living document automatically, and continuity would be free. In practice that's overhead, and it won't always get captured; the chat channel itself becomes the archive when something doesn't make it into the document. Not everyone maintains a document at all, and that can work too. I ran 1:1s in Miro for a stretch, building a shared artifact live during the session with a place to put things ahead of time, and liked it. The tool matters less than both people having somewhere to put things between meetings.

8. This is a fit question, not a recipe

The shape above is a strong default. Where a specific team actually sits against it, and what that's costing, is what the Engineering Ways of Working Diagnostic is built to find.