

Real Talk About One-on-One Meetings



Why They Matter, How to Do Them Right, and What HR Leaders Must Watch For

If you manage people, at some point someone has said to you that one-on-one meetings are important. They crop up in every leadership book and every management newsletter at least once a year. And still many managers either skip them, rush them, or turn them into the equivalent of a project status update. That is a missed opportunity and a risk for any Canadian employer serious about engagement, retention, and a compliant workplace culture.

At their best, one-on-one meetings are where leaders connect with employees, build trust, untangle problems before they escalate, and reinforce culture in concrete ways. At their worst, they feel like a chore, a calendar placeholder, or a perfunctory task that happens only when calendars are free. The difference between the two can shape your workplace culture in very real ways.

Let's talk about why these meetings are so critical, how you can guide your leaders to make them genuinely useful, and the compliance pitfalls HR departments need to watch for as they embed one-on-one meetings into performance practices.

What One-on-One Meetings are Really About

A one-on-one meeting is a dedicated time where a manager and an employee intentionally connect one-to-one. The purpose is not to run a status check. It is to create space for meaningful conversation about how the employee is feeling about their work, what roadblocks they might be facing, how their goals are evolving, and what support they need to thrive in their role. These conversations happen outside the glare of team meetings and the formality of annual performance reviews. ([Culture Amp](#))

Some managers treat one-on-ones as checklists where they ask for project updates. That misses the point entirely. One-on-ones succeed when they are about the employee's experience and development more than the manager's agenda. When done right, they foster psychological safety, trust, and alignment. ([LinkedIn](#))

Research and practitioner voices alike point to the idea that these meetings signal care. Renowned meeting experts argue that when one-on-ones are treated as spare time on a manager's calendar, they lose impact. When they are treated as a priority, they can elevate engagement and retention across the organization. ([ddi.com](#))

Why One-on-One Meetings Matter for Company Success

Companies that support effective one-on-one practices see real benefits in performance and culture.

First, one-on-ones build trust. Every employee wants to know they have a space where they can speak candidly without fear of judgment or reprisal. Those conversations help managers grasp what is really happening day by day in the business and where people are feeling stuck or stretched. This kind of trust cannot be built in a quarterly review or an all-hands meeting.

Second, frequent check-ins help avoid surprises when it comes time for performance discussions. Annual reviews are now widely recognized as too little too late. Employees today crave regular feedback so they can adjust, grow, and stay aligned with changing priorities. One-on-one meetings create a rhythm of feedback that supports continuous improvement.

Third, leaders gain insight into what motivates their people. This is where career goals surface, where managers learn not just what people do but what they want to grow into, and where mentorship turns into meaningful action.

Fourth, these meetings help prevent small issues from snowballing into big problems. When people feel heard, they are more likely to raise concerns early and work collaboratively toward solutions instead of bottling up frustration.

How HR Can Help Managers Run Better One-on-One Meetings

Most managers want to support their teams. They simply have not been given the tools or training to do it well. HR leaders can step into that gap by coaching, modeling, and reinforcing effective one-on-one practices throughout the organization.

Start with expectations. If one-on-one meetings are a priority, they must be scheduled regularly and not cancelled when things get busy. Research shows that regularly cancelling or postponing these meetings erodes trust. When employees see that a manager reprioritizes one-on-ones only when convenient, the message sent is that the employee is not actually a priority.

One practical pattern that many find effective is meeting weekly or bi-weekly for about 30 to 60 minutes. That cadence balances meaningful conversation with operational demands. How often your organization chooses can be flexible, but consistency matters more than frequency alone.

Another common pitfall is wandering through conversations without structure. Preparing a lightweight agenda and sharing it in advance helps keep conversations focused and respectful of both participants' time. HR can support managers by offering templates and coaching on how to invite employees to contribute to that agenda. When employees shape the agenda, the meeting is more likely to be relevant and engaging.

Active listening is also key. Managers should do more listening than talking. One guideline popular with people developers is to let employees lead the conversation. This is where HR can offer training on listening skills, open-ended questions, and how to follow up after the meeting with clear notes and agreed next steps.

Real Risks HR Should Watch For

Embedding one-on-one meetings into a company's practices is a positive step. But without proper guidance and oversight, they can also create legal and compliance risks – not because of the meetings themselves but because of how they are documented and used.

Performance documentation and fairness. When managers take notes during one-on-ones, those notes can become part of a broader performance record. If employees feel discomfort with how their comments or concerns are documented, questions can arise about fairness or bias. HR should provide guidance on what to record and how to safeguard privacy.

Managers should avoid language that could be interpreted as discriminatory, subjective, or personal when documenting performance concerns. Notes should focus on observable behaviour and agreed outcomes, not personality judgments.

Consistency and bias. One-on-one meetings that are more frequent with some employees than others can breed perceptions of favoritism. Canadian employment law does not require identical treatment across all roles, but perceived inconsistencies can show up in complaints or grievances. HR should ensure that meeting cadences are consistent with role expectations and explain any deviations clearly.

Privacy and confidentiality. Conversations in one-on-ones often touch on personal issues. Managers must understand how to manage sensitive personal information. This is not simply good etiquette it is part of respecting employee privacy rights. HR should provide protocols for what stays in the room and what gets escalated if there is a concern that relates to health, harassment, or a protected ground under human rights legislation.

Feedback and corrective action. One-on-ones can surface performance issues. HR must ensure that the process for addressing such issues does not leapfrog proper performance management practices. That means coaching managers to distinguish between a supportive conversation and a formal performance counselling session that has procedural implications.

A casual one-on-one is not the place to initiate disciplinary measures without clarity on process and rights. HR must support managers to escalate through established channels when needed, so employees are treated fairly and documentation is appropriate.

Remote work and accessibility. When one-on-one meetings happen over video or phone with remote employees, HR must ensure that accessibility considerations are respected. This includes providing accommodations such as captioning, platform support, or alternate formats if an employee requests them.

Seeing one-on-ones as merely a managerial tool without thinking about how they fit into broader compliance frameworks can create gaps HR will need to fill.

One-on-One Meetings as Part of a Healthy Performance Culture

When HR leaders support one-on-one meetings effectively, they do more than improve manager skill. They change the culture of the organization. They make performance management ongoing and conversational rather than episodic and punitive. They create a space where employees feel seen, heard, and supported. And in doing so they build a

foundation for higher engagement, better retention, and stronger alignment to company objectives.

That is not wishful thinking. Organisations that prioritize frequent, meaningful manager-employee touchpoints report higher levels of engagement and productivity. Those touchpoints become the engine of fluent communication, where goals are clarified early, concerns are surfaced promptly, and employees feel psychologically safe to share both wins and challenges.

But none of that happens by accident. It happens because leaders are taught how to structure these meetings, because they are given time to prepare, and because HR provides guardrails that protect employees and the organization alike.

Final Thought

One-on-one meetings are an investment. They take time, intention, and support to do well. But the payoff is clear. They strengthen connection between managers and employees, reinforce culture, and improve organizational performance.

For HR directors and practitioners in Canada, embedding one-on-ones into your performance framework also means thinking beyond the meeting itself. It means training leaders, protecting privacy, ensuring fairness, and aligning these conversations with your broader governance and compliance strategy. When you do that, you are not just scheduling meetings you are building a healthier workplace.

And that is something worth the time it takes.