

# The 1:1 Check-in Guide

*Your Most Important Meeting, Done Well*



*Every management skill you're trying to build — feedback, coaching, setting expectations, delegation — lives or dies in one place: your check-in.*

The 1:1 check-in isn't one skill among many. It's the venue where all your other skills get practiced. A manager who gives great feedback but has no regular check-in has nowhere consistent to deliver it. A manager who understands coaching but never creates space for conversation will default to directing.

That's why the quality of your check-ins is one of the strongest predictors of your effectiveness as a manager — and of your team's experience working for you.

## What the Research Says

### 3x

Employees with regular manager check-ins are nearly three times as likely to be engaged at work. Only about 15% of employees without routine 1:1s are engaged at all.

*Gallup, State of the American Manager*

### 33%

Regular 1:1 meetings correlate with approximately one-third lower voluntary turnover — an impact visible even after controlling for other engagement factors.

*Adobe internal research*

### ~50%

Nearly half of all 1:1 meetings are considered suboptimal by employees — and managers consistently overestimate how well their check-ins are going.

*Rogelberg, Glad We Met (2024)*

### Quality > Frequency

Meeting quality — particularly a manager's relationship-oriented behaviors — matters more for engagement than meeting frequency, with the caveat that check-ins must happen at least monthly.

*Rogelberg et al., UNC Charlotte (2022)*

*The gap between check-ins that work and check-ins that don't usually comes down to one thing: whether the manager treats the meeting as a place to track tasks — or as a place to manage, support, and develop a person.*

# Three Modes of a Great Check-in

Most managers default to one mode in their check-ins: managing the work. They ask about status, review priorities, troubleshoot obstacles. This is necessary — but it's not sufficient.

Great check-ins move across three modes. You don't need to hit all three in every meeting. But across your regular cadence, all three need airtime. When one goes neglected, you'll feel the consequences — even if you can't immediately name the cause.



## The Work

*Are we aligned and unblocked?*

Alignment, priorities, obstacles, and accountability. This is where you make sure the right work is getting the right attention — and that your employee has what they need to move forward.

### QUESTIONS FOR THIS MODE

"What's your top priority this week, and does it feel like the right one?"

"Where are you stuck, and what would help?"

"Are there decisions you're waiting on from me?"

"Is there context I have that would be useful to you?"



## The Relationship

*Do you feel supported and seen?*

Trust, well-being, connection, and how you work together. This is where you earn the right to have hard conversations later — and where you catch problems before they become crises.

### QUESTIONS FOR THIS MODE

"How are you doing — really?"

"What's been energizing you lately? What's been draining?"

"Is there anything about how we work together that I could do better?"

"What do you need from me that you're not getting?"



## The Growth

*Where are you headed?*

Skills, development, career, and aspirations. This is the long game — and it's the difference between a manager who keeps the trains running and one people want to work for again.

### QUESTIONS FOR THIS MODE

"What skill are you trying to build right now?"

"What did you learn from how that project went?"

"Where do you want to be in a year, and what would need to happen?"

"Is there a project or opportunity you'd like that you haven't asked for?"

## Signs You're Stuck in One Mode

### ⊙ ALL WORK, NO RELATIONSHIP OR GROWTH

Every check-in feels like a status report. You know what your employee is working on but not how they're doing. Development conversations get pushed to "next time" — and next time never comes.

### ⊙ ALL RELATIONSHIP, NO WORK OR GROWTH

Your relationship is warm but accountability is soft. Deadlines drift without direct conversation. You're well-liked but your team's output doesn't match their potential.

### ⊙ ALL GROWTH, NO WORK OR RELATIONSHIP

You talk about the future but don't address the present. Performance issues go unnamed because you're focused on potential. The employee feels coached but not managed.

*You don't need to hit all three modes in every check-in. You need to hit all three across your check-ins. If it's been three meetings since you asked a growth question — that's your signal.*

# A Check-in Flow

You don't need a rigid ten-item agenda. You need a flexible flow that ensures you're doing more than exchanging status updates. These four moments give your check-in shape without making it feel scripted.

Your employee should drive the agenda. Share a simple template in advance, ask them to add their items, and review it before the meeting. Your job is to create the conditions for a good conversation, then listen more than you talk.

## Connect → Align → Develop → Commit

### 1 Connect

*Check in on the person before the work.*

Start human. This can be thirty seconds. But it signals that you see your employee as a whole person and gives you early signals about energy, stress, and capacity that will shape everything that follows.

"How are you doing — really?"

"How's your workload feeling this week?"

"Anything on your mind before we dig in?"

**TRAP TO AVOID:** Skipping this because it feels "soft." When you skip connection, you train your employee to only bring you work problems.

### 2 Align

*Make sure the right work gets the right attention.*

Let your employee walk through their priorities. Surface obstacles, share context they don't have, make decisions they're waiting on. The goal isn't to review every task — it's to align on what matters most right now.

"What's your focus this week, and is it the right priority?"

"Where are you stuck, and what would help?"

"Is there context I have that would be useful?"

**TRAP TO AVOID:** Going line-by-line through a task list. Status updates belong in async tools. The check-in is for ambiguity, trade-offs, and decisions.

### 3 Develop

*Invest in the person behind the work.*

This is the part most managers skip. It doesn't have to be a big career conversation every week — a quick piece of feedback, a reflection on a stretch project, a question about what they want to learn. The point is regularity.

"What did you learn from how that went?"

"I noticed [specific thing]. Here's my read — what's yours?"

"What's one skill you'd like to build this quarter?"

**TRAP TO AVOID:** Saving development for review season. If your employee hears growth feedback for the first time in a formal review, that's a failure of your check-in practice.

### 4 Commit

*Leave with clarity on what happens next.*

End by restating commitments — yours and theirs. This takes sixty seconds and prevents the most common check-in failure: a good conversation that leads to nothing.

"What are you taking away from this conversation?"

"What did I commit to, and by when?"

"Anything we should start with next time?"

**TRAP TO AVOID:** Ending without this step. It's the difference between a conversation and a management practice.

#### The skill that makes every moment work

*It's not asking the right question — it's staying quiet long enough to hear the real answer. When you catch yourself formulating a response while your employee is still talking, stop. Ask "And what else?" before offering your take. The first answer is rarely the complete one.*

## Setting Up Your Practice

### 🕒 Cadence

Weekly for new team members, employees in new roles, or anyone navigating a challenge. Bi-weekly for experienced, high-performing employees in stable roles. Less than monthly is not a check-in practice — it's occasional conversation.

### 📄 Ownership

The employee owns the agenda. They draft it in a shared document at least 24 hours in advance. You review it before the meeting and add your items. This shared doc becomes a running record of priorities, decisions, and commitments.

### 📅 Duration

30 minutes is the standard. Expand to 45–60 for employees who manage others or hold complex roles. If you're consistently running out of time, tighten your focus or increase duration — don't skip development.

### 🛡️ Protection

Treat check-ins as high-priority. Canceling or constantly rescheduling tells your employee — whether you intend it or not — that they're not a priority. If you must move it, do it yourself, do it promptly, and offer an alternative.

### ✅ Check-in Health Check

If you answer "no" to more than one, your check-in practice needs attention.

- 1 Does my employee drive the agenda — or do I?
- 2 Have I asked a relationship or growth question in the last two check-ins?
- 3 Could my employee predict that I'll show up prepared and on time?
- 4 Do I know what's energizing my employee right now? What's draining them?
- 5 When I committed to something in our last check-in, did I follow through?

## Common Traps

### The Status Trap

Your check-in has become a verbal project tracker.

*Fix: Move status updates to async. Reserve the check-in for items that require dialogue — ambiguity, decisions, feedback.*

### The Cancellation Trap

You protect check-ins in theory but bump them whenever something "urgent" comes up.

*Fix: Track how often you cancel over a month. More than once is a pattern, not an exception.*

### The Avoidance Trap

You have a comfortable rhythm, so the hard stuff — performance concerns, unmet expectations — never gets discussed.

*Fix: Ask one uncomfortable question per month. Discomfort is a feature, not a bug.*

### The Monologue Trap

You do most of the talking. Your employee nods. You leave feeling productive; they leave feeling talked at.

*Fix: Aim for your employee to speak at least 60% of the time. When you catch yourself advising, try asking "What do you think?"*

## Further Reading

**Steven Rogelberg, *Glad We Met: The Art and Science of 1:1 Meetings (2024)*** — The most comprehensive research-based treatment of 1:1 meetings available. Start here if you want to go deep on the evidence.

**Michael Bungay Stanier, *The Coaching Habit (2016)*** — Seven questions that will change how you show up in every conversation, not just check-ins.

**The Management Center, *Check-in Meeting Agenda Template*** — A practical, detailed agenda template widely adapted across organizations. Available at [managementcenter.org](https://managementcenter.org).