

The Rituals of Management

Turn the meetings already on your calendar into moments that build trust.

Every manager has the same meetings on the calendar: a one-on-one, a team meeting, a performance review. Some build trust. Others feel like a box to check. The difference is whether the meeting is a **habit** or a **ritual**.

A habit

is the task itself. You do it, and it's done.

Shuffle the order or skip a step, and nobody notices.

vs

A ritual

serves something bigger. It carries meaning and feeling.

Skip a step, and it feels wrong. People leave with a feeling, not just information.

"It's more than just getting the thing done. It's how you do it and how you feel about it."

Michael Norton, Harvard Business School, author of *The Ritual Effect*

What turns a meeting into a ritual

Norton's research points to three ingredients. Ask yourself one question for each before your next meeting.

Meaning

What is this meeting really for?

Name the bigger job it does for the person or team, beyond the agenda.

Emotion

How should people feel when it ends?

Write it as a sentence they might say afterward. Design toward it.

Intention

What do we do, and in what order?

Give it a set opening, core, and close. Norton's test: if the order doesn't matter, it's a habit.

Four rituals at a glance

Each has a job to do, and a feeling it should leave behind.

 **The one-on-one**
Sees and supports the person

"My manager helps me get unstuck."

 **The team meeting**
Aligns the group

"We know what matters, and I can speak up."

 **Performance conversations**
Clarify the bar

"I know how I'm doing, and what to work on."

 **The career conversation**
Helps people grow

"My manager knows where I want to go, and is helping me get there."



The one-on-one

Its job: see and support the person.

THE FEELING IT LEAVES

"My manager helps me get unstuck."

 **Rhythm:** weekly or every other week, 30 minutes. Protect it. It's the last meeting you should move.

OPEN

Start with the person, not the project. Use the same first question every time so they know this time is theirs.

CORE

Their agenda comes first. Find what's in the way, and ask what help would look like before you offer it.

CLOSE

Name one thing you'll do for them and by when. Do it before the next one-on-one.

Signs it has slid into a habit

- It's a status update you could have read in a message.
- It's the first thing you cancel when the week gets busy.
- You do most of the talking.

Questions that make it a ritual

- "What's on your mind this week?"
- "What's getting in your way?"
- "What's one thing I could do to make your work easier?"

Steven Rogelberg's research on one-on-ones finds they work best when the meeting centers on the employee's needs, with the agenda built together and the employee's items first.



The team meeting

Its job: align the group.

THE FEELING IT LEAVES

"We know what matters, and I can speak up."

 **Rhythm:** weekly, same day and time. Send written updates ahead so the meeting is for talking.

OPEN

A quick round where everyone speaks early, like one win from the week. Voice early makes voice later easier.

CORE

Restate what matters most right now. Spend the time on decisions and problems, and ask out loud who sees it differently.

CLOSE

Recap decisions and owners. End by calling out something a teammate did well.

Signs it has slid into a habit

- It's a round of status reports, one person at a time.
- The same two or three people do all the talking.
- People leave unsure what was decided.

Questions that make it a ritual

- "What's the most important thing for us this week?"
- "Who sees this differently? What are we missing?"
- "Who helped you this week?"



Performance conversations

Their job: clarify the bar.

THE FEELING THEY LEAVE

"I know how I'm doing, and what to work on."



Rhythm: a focused check-in each quarter, with in-the-moment feedback between. No surprises at review time.

OPEN

Say why you're meeting and how it will go. Then ask for their view first: how do they think it's going?

CORE

Hold up the work against clear, shared expectations. Use specific examples of what's working and what isn't.

CLOSE

Agree on one or two things to work on and how you'll both know it's improving. Ask how the conversation landed.



Signs it has slid into a habit

- The review is the first time they hear it.
- The conversation is about the form or the rating.
- Feedback is vague, like "keep it up."



Questions that make it a ritual

- " How do you think it's going?
- " What does great look like in your role right now?
- " What support would help you get there?

Gallup finds only 21% of employees strongly agree their performance is managed in a way that motivates them to do outstanding work. The gap is rarely the form. It's the conversation.



The career conversation

Its job: help people grow.

THE FEELING IT LEAVES

"My manager knows where I want to go, and is helping me get there."



Rhythm: twice a year, on its own calendar invite, with a check on progress in a one-on-one each quarter.

OPEN

Make clear this is about them, not the job. Look back first: what work gave them energy this year?

CORE

Explore where they want to go: skills, experiences, impact, not only titles. Link it to real chances to grow now.

CLOSE

Agree on one next step for each of you, such as a stretch project or someone to meet. Write it down.



Signs it has slid into a habit

- It only happens when someone hints they might leave.
- It's all about the next promotion.
- Nothing changes afterward.



Questions that make it a ritual

- " What work makes you lose track of time?
- " Where would you like to be in two or three years?
- " What would you like to learn next?

1 Audit your calendar

For each recurring meeting with your people, name its job and the feeling it should leave. Then be honest about what it is today.

Meeting	Its job	The feeling it should leave	Today it's a...
One-on-ones			Habit Ritual
Team meeting			Habit Ritual
Performance			Habit Ritual
Career			Habit Ritual
			Habit Ritual

2 Redesign one meeting

Pick the meeting where a small change would matter most. Work through the three ingredients, then sketch its shape.

The meeting I'll redesign: _____

 Meaning <i>What is it really for?</i>	 Emotion <i>What will people say about it afterward?</i>	 Intention <i>What will I do differently, on purpose?</i>
OPEN <i>How will it start, every time?</i>	CORE <i>Where will we spend the time?</i>	CLOSE <i>How will it end, every time?</i>

Make it stick

Build it together

Rituals handed down from the top tend to get eye rolls. Ask your team what they'd keep, cut, or add.

Keep it simple

One consistent opening or closing move is enough to start. Small and repeated beats big and occasional.

Give it time

Meaning builds as a ritual repeats. Keep it going for a month before you judge it, then ask how it's landing.

Sources: Michael I. Norton, *The Ritual Effect* (Scribner, 2024), "Why Work Rituals Bring Teams Together and Create More Meaning," HBS Working Knowledge; and "How Everyday Rituals Can Add Meaning to Your Life," Greater Good Magazine (May 2024). Steven G. Rogelberg, *Glad We Met: The Art and Science of 1:1 Meetings* (Oxford University Press, 2024). Gallup workplace research on manager coaching and performance (gallup.com).