

The 1:1 that isn't a status update

The most frequent conversation you have as a manager, and almost nobody was taught how to run it.

You have between twenty and fifty of these a year with each person who reports to you. Over a decade that is more one-to-one time than you will spend with most of your friends. Almost none of it was ever designed.

What actually happens

The meeting is in the diary as a 1:1. It opens with "how's it going", gets a "yeah, good, busy", and then moves to the list. Four items on their side, three on yours. You unblock two of them. They leave with three actions and you leave with one. Twenty-eight minutes, and everything on the agenda was something you could have read in a project tracker.

This isn't laziness. Status is the path of least resistance for both of you: legible, productive-feeling, and never requiring either party to say anything uncomfortable. The drift is structural rather than personal — which is why a different structure fixes it and trying harder doesn't.

The cost shows up late. The person who resigns "out of nowhere" had been telling you for four months, in the gap between the third and fourth agenda item, and there was never anywhere for it to land.

THE DISTINCTION THAT DOES THE WORK

Status is about the work. A 1:1 is about the person doing it. Both are legitimate, and they are not the same meeting. If your team needs a status conversation — and most do — give it its own slot, with more people in the room.

What it is for

A 1:1 is the container the other conversations happen inside. Feedback lands differently when there is an established relationship to land in, and a difficult conversation is less difficult when it isn't the first personal thing you have said in six weeks.

Three things a 1:1 does that nothing else in the week does:

- **It surfaces things early.** Concerns, friction and quiet overload all arrive small before they arrive large, and need a low-stakes place to be said out loud.
- **It calibrates.** You find out whether your read on their world matches theirs. It usually doesn't, and the gap is the useful part.
- **It builds the account you draw on later.** Trust is accumulated evidence that you notice, and that saying something honest costs nothing.

A shape that holds

Thirty minutes, fortnightly at minimum, in the diary as a recurring commitment. Not a rigid agenda — a shape, so the conversation has somewhere to go when it stalls.

MINUTES	WHAT HAPPENS
0–5	Their opening, uninterrupted. They talk first, every time. If you open, the meeting becomes yours and stays yours. “What’s on your mind?” then stop talking. Five minutes feels long. Sit in it.
5–15	The thing underneath. Follow whatever had energy — irritation, hesitation, the thing they mentioned then moved past. One question, then listen. This is the part that gets cut when you are behind, and it is the whole meeting.
15–25	Your side. Context they don’t have, feedback while it is small, a decision they need. Say the difficult thing here, not at 29 minutes with your hand on the door.
25–30	Close deliberately. “What are you taking from this?” — their words, not yours. Then anything you owe them, written down where you will see it.

Four things that change the meeting

1

They go first

Whoever speaks first sets what the meeting is about. If it is you, it is a status update by minute two, regardless of intention.

2

You never cancel it

Move it if you must; cancelling teaches that it is the thing that goes when the week gets hard. That lesson is learned in one instance and takes months to unlearn.

3

No laptop

Notes on paper, or after. Divided attention is visible, and a person who can see they are competing with your inbox will keep the conversation shallow to be kind to you.

4

Silence is allowed

The honest answer usually arrives four or five seconds after the polite one. If you fill the gap, you get the polite one every time.

ON LISTENING — OTTO SCHARMER

Scharmer describes four levels of listening: **downloading** (hearing what confirms what you already think), **factual** (noticing what is new), **empathic** (seeing it from inside their situation), and **generative** (where something neither of you had thought of appears). Most 1:1s never leave the first level. You will know you have reached the third when the meeting changes your mind about something.

Questions that go somewhere

You need about six of these, not sixty. Pick two or three and use them long enough that people know they are coming and start arriving with an answer.

GOES NOWHERE

"How's everything going?"

GOES SOMEWHERE

"What's taken more out of you than it should have this fortnight?"

GOES NOWHERE

"Any blockers?"

GOES SOMEWHERE

"What are you working around rather than fixing?"

GOES NOWHERE

"Are you happy?"

GOES SOMEWHERE

"What part of the job would you do more of, if the rest of it allowed?"

GOES NOWHERE

"Is there anything I can do?"

GOES SOMEWHERE

"What am I doing that makes your job harder?"

When the answer is "all fine"

Sometimes it is. Often it means the question was too broad to answer, or that the last honest answer cost them something. Two moves:

- **Narrow it.** "Fine" cannot be said about a specific thing. "How did Thursday's review go, from where you were sitting?" gets a real answer because the general one doesn't fit.
- **Go first yourself.** Name something you found hard, in one sentence, without turning it into a lesson. You are demonstrating the cost of honesty is survivable. Do it before you need it.

If it is "fine" four times running, that is the finding. Say so plainly and without accusation: "I've noticed we've had a run of short ones. I'd rather know if there's something I'm making it hard to say."

THE TEST

At the end of the meeting, ask yourself one question: *did I learn something I could not have got from a report?* If the answer is no more than twice in a row, you are holding status meetings with one person in the room, and the fix is structural rather than a matter of trying harder.

Five minutes before

Print this side. One per person, filled in on the walk to the room.

PERSON

DATE

WHAT HAS CHANGED IN THEIR WORLD SINCE LAST TIME

Workload, people around them, anything outside work you know about.

WHAT I SAID I WOULD DO LAST TIME — AND DID I

ONE THING I'VE NOTICED AND HAVEN'T SAID

Good or otherwise. If it has been true for more than a fortnight, say it today.

MY ONE QUESTION

Specific enough that "fine" doesn't fit it.

AFTER — TWO LINES, BEFORE YOU OPEN ANYTHING ELSE

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ I learned something I could not have read in a report | ☐ They spoke more than I did |
| ☐ I said the thing I'd been putting off | ☐ I owe them something — it's written down |

WHERE THIS GOES NEXT

1:1s are where feedback and difficult conversations get easier, because the relationship already exists. If the meeting keeps collapsing back into status, the problem is usually somewhere else in how the team runs — see *Why feedback doesn't land* and *The huddle that's worth having*.