



THE PLAYBOOK

The One-on-One

The meeting people say they want more of, and most teams either skip or waste. How to run it, what to talk about, and why cancelling it costs more than the half hour.

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Contents

The half hour that gets cancelled first

1 The meeting people want more of

2 Whose meeting this is

3 The agenda that survives a bad week

4 What to talk about when nothing is wrong

5 Cancelling, and what it teaches

6 When you are the direct report

7 The four failures

Boring, and it works

The tool: a one-page shared agenda

The half hour that gets cancelled first

Ask people what meeting they would remove and the answers come quickly. Ask what meeting they want more of and there is usually one: time with their manager, one to one.

Steven Rogelberg, who has studied meetings across roughly four thousand knowledge workers, reports exactly that. The one-to-one is the meeting people want more of, and slightly under half of employees have one weekly. That gap is unusual. Most workplace problems are not a case of people asking for something and not receiving it.

So the puzzle is not whether these are worth running. It is why the half hour that people most value is also the first thing cancelled when a week gets busy.

Usually because nobody decided what it was for. A meeting with no defined purpose feels optional the moment something urgent appears, and status can obviously be read in a message instead. If the one-to-one is a status update, it deserves to be cancelled.

This playbook is about making it something else. It is written for the manager running them and for the person on the other side, because roughly half of what makes these work is controlled by the direct report and almost nobody tells them that.

THE TOOL AT THE BACK

The last page is a one-page shared agenda you can copy into a document and use this week. The rest of this explains why it is shaped that way, but the page works without the explanation.

The meeting people want more of

The evidence here is more encouraging than most workplace research, and it is worth being precise about it.

Rogelberg's work, published in Harvard Business Review in 2022 and drawn from studying around four thousand knowledge workers, found that one-to-ones are the meeting people want more of rather than less. It also found that value is highest when the agenda is built collaboratively and when the meeting genuinely serves the direct report rather than the manager.

That last finding is the one that changes how you run it. **The meeting exists for the person being managed.** If it primarily serves the manager's need to know what is happening, it is a status meeting wearing a friendlier name, and the tools for status are better and cheaper.

CADENCE AND HALF-LIFE

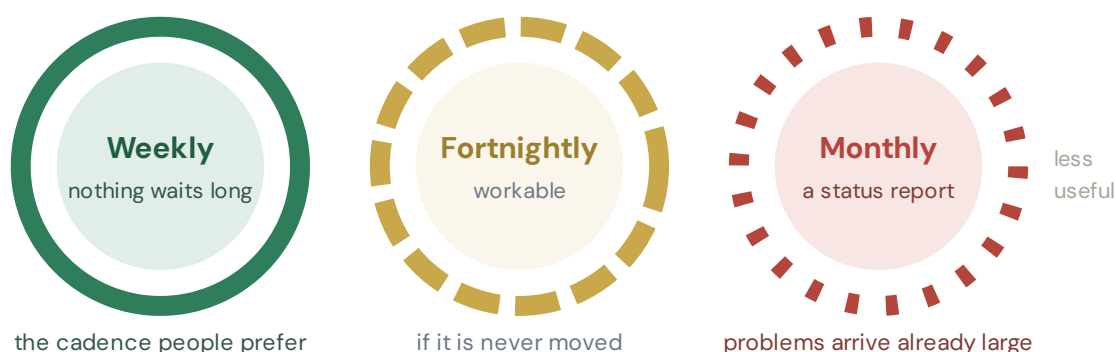


Figure: the gaps between these are not equivalent. A month is long enough for a small problem to become a decision.

On cadence, weekly is what people prefer and it is what I would default to. Fortnightly is workable if it is genuinely never moved. Monthly is where these stop functioning, because a month is long enough for a small problem to become a decision, and by the time it is raised you are managing a situation rather than a question.

Whose meeting this is

The single change that most improves these is deciding, out loud, that the meeting belongs to the direct report.

That sounds like a soft point and it has a hard consequence: **their items go first, every time**. Not after yours, not if there is time. First.

The reason is arithmetic rather than sentiment. Manager items expand to fill whatever space they are given, and a manager is rarely short of things to raise. If your agenda leads, theirs gets whatever is left, which in a compressed week is nothing. Do that four times and they stop preparing anything, because preparing has stopped being worth it.

If your items always come first, you do not have a one-to-one. You have a status meeting with a nicer name.

The practical version. Ask them to add their items to a shared document before the meeting. Do not require it, because a busy week will happen and a rule that produces guilt will produce avoidance instead. Open by asking what they want to start with. Then be quiet for longer than is comfortable.

The silence matters more than it sounds. Most people need a few seconds to decide whether to raise the real thing, and a manager who fills that gap with their own agenda never finds out what it was.

The agenda that survives a bad week

An agenda that needs preparation will not survive a bad week, and bad weeks are when these meetings matter most. So the structure has to work with nothing prepared at all.

FOUR SECTIONS

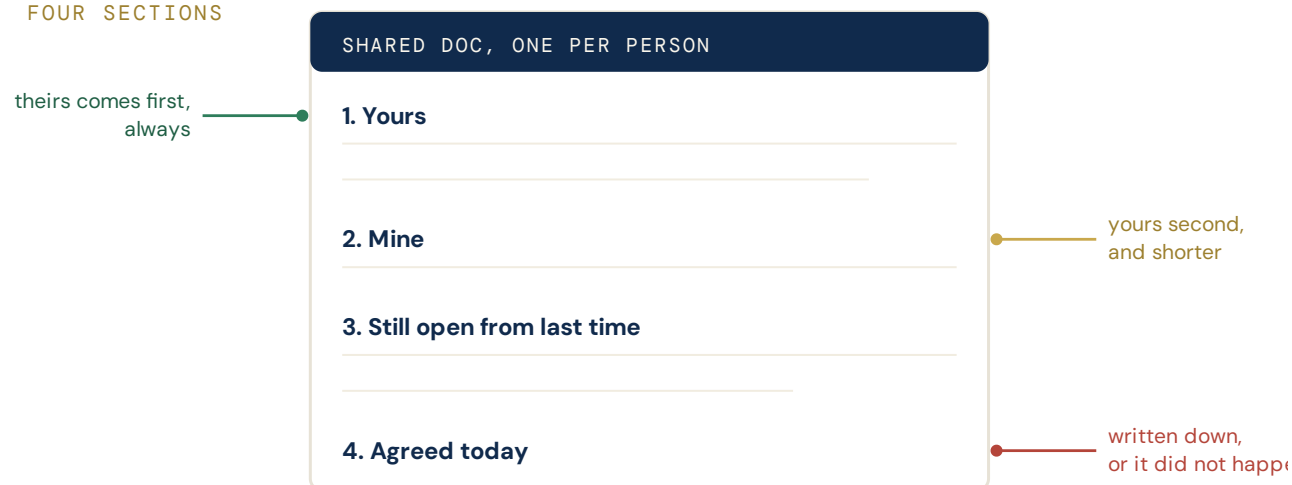


Figure: the order is the design. Putting their items first is what stops it becoming a status report.

Four sections, in a single rolling document that never resets. The rolling part matters: a new blank agenda each week loses the thread, and the thread is most of the value in a relationship measured over months.

Section three is the one that does the quiet work. Items agreed last time, still open, sitting where both people can see them. Nobody has to chase anything. The discomfort of reading the same line three weeks running does more for follow-through than any reminder system, and it applies equally to the manager, which is the point.

WRITE IN IT DURING THE MEETING

Not afterwards. What was agreed goes into section four while you are both there, in the words you both used. Ten seconds, and it removes the entire category of disagreement that begins with the phrase "I thought we said".

What to talk about when nothing is wrong

Most one-to-ones fail quietly rather than badly. Things are fine, there is nothing pressing, so it becomes a status update and then it becomes cancelled.

Have four or five questions you can fall back on, and rotate rather than asking all of them.

01 What is taking longer than it should?

Surfaces friction people have stopped noticing, and it is usually a process problem rather than a person problem.

02 What are you unsure you are allowed to decide?

Almost always there is something. Answering it releases capability that has been sitting idle, sometimes for months.

03 What would you want to be doing more of in six months?

Career progression is the most consistently cited reason people leave. Pew Research found 63 percent of those who quit in 2021 named no opportunities for advancement. This question, asked regularly, is most of what you can do about that.

04 What do you need from me that you are not getting?

Uncomfortable, and the most useful. Ask it plainly and then do not defend the answer.

What to avoid: asking for a project update, which the tracker already answers, and asking how things are going, which produces the word fine and nothing else.

Cancelling, and what it teaches

Every cancelled one-to-one communicates something, and it is never the thing you intended.

You intended: this week is unusually busy. They heard: this is the thing that goes when something real comes up.

Move it rather than cancelling it. The difference is small in effort and large in meaning. A moved meeting says the time still matters. A cancelled one says the opposite, and repeats it.

If you must cancel, say why and rebook in the same message. Not later, not when things calm down, which never arrives. A specific replacement slot in the same sentence.

And watch the pattern rather than the instance. One cancellation is a week. Three in a quarter is a message, and the person on the receiving end has already read it, whatever they said at the time.

There is a version of this that is worse than cancelling: keeping the meeting and spending it on your own agenda because you are behind. That teaches the same lesson while also consuming their half hour.

When you are the direct report

Roughly half of what makes these work is on your side of the table, and almost nobody says so. If your manager runs a weak one-to-one, you have more influence over it than you think.

Bring three items, written down. A manager with no agenda will default to status. Arriving with items removes that default and quietly changes whose meeting it is, without anybody having a conversation about whose meeting it is.

Lead with what you need, not with what you did. What you did is available elsewhere. A decision, a blocker, an introduction, or an opinion is something only they can give you, and it is what the half hour is actually for.

Raise small things early. The temptation is to wait until something is serious enough to justify the time. That reasoning produces a conversation about a problem instead of a question about a situation, and problems are more expensive for everyone.

Write down what was agreed and send it. Two lines afterwards. This is unglamorous, takes a minute, and over a year it is the single most valuable professional habit in this playbook, because it converts conversations into a record.

A manager who is disorganised is not going to become organised. You can still have a useful half hour with them.

The four failures

These go wrong in a small number of predictable ways.

It becomes a status meeting. The most common by a distance. The fix is structural rather than behavioural: their items first, and status handled in writing before the meeting so it does not need to be spoken.

It becomes therapy without progress. Genuinely useful conversation that resolves nothing, repeated weekly. The fourth section of the agenda is the countermeasure. If nothing was agreed, notice that, and notice it again if it happens twice.

It becomes performance review. If the only feedback anyone receives arrives in the one-to-one, people start attending defensively and stop raising anything real. Feedback belongs closer to the work than a weekly slot.

It becomes the only channel. If everything waits for the one-to-one, urgent things sit for six days. The meeting is for the conversation that benefits from being a conversation, not a queue for everything.

A NOTE ON DOCUMENTING

Write what was agreed, not what was said. A one-to-one where somebody speaks candidly about something difficult should not produce a record that makes them regret it. The agreement is the artefact; the conversation is not.

Boring, and it works

There is no technique here. A recurring half hour, a document with four sections, their items first, and something written down at the end.

What makes it work is that it happens when there is nothing to discuss. That is when the relationship is built, and it is precisely when it feels most skippable. The weeks with something difficult in them are not the weeks you can start.

If you are a manager and you take one thing: **let their items go first, and be quiet after you ask.**

If you are the direct report and you take one thing: **bring three items and write down what was agreed.** Do that for six months and you will have both a better relationship and a record of it, and the second one turns out to matter at review time.

The page that follows is the agenda. Copy it into a shared document, one per person, and do not start it again each week.

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Shared one-to-one agenda

One page · rolling document · v1

Section	Notes
1. Yours added before we meet, discussed first	
2. Mine shorter than section one	
3. Still open carried from last time, with owner and date	
4. Agreed today written during the meeting, not after	

Fallback questions, rotate one: What is taking longer than it should? · What are you unsure you are allowed to decide? · What would you want to be doing more of in six months? · What do you need from me that you are not getting?

Weekly if you can, fortnightly if you must, and moved rather than cancelled. Do not start a new document each week; this one rolls.