

The Missing One-to-One – When Managers Stop Managing



Procurement and Supply Chain Management Made Simple.

Foreword – Whatever Happened to the Monthly One-to-One?

At one point, the monthly one-to-one was an ordinary part of management: protected time for a manager and employee to discuss performance, priorities, problems, development, and concerns away from the pressures of the wider team. Gradually, that discipline has faded in many workplaces. Calendars have filled up, communication has sped up, and technology has become more sophisticated, yet more frequent contact does not necessarily mean better or more meaningful management conversations.

Email, Microsoft Teams, dashboards, project meetings, and instant messaging can create the impression that managers communicate with their employees continuously. Hybrid working has reinforced that environment: Office for National Statistics (ONS) data showed that 28% of working adults in Great Britain hybrid worked between January and March 2025, rising to 34% among full-time workers. Digital connectivity has undoubtedly improved accessibility, but accessibility and meaningful individual management are not the same thing.

The management-capacity problem is equally significant. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's (CIPD) 2025 Good Work Index found that only 59% of managers believed they had sufficient time to manage people well. Among employees with a line manager, just 62% said their manager provided useful feedback and 63% said their manager helped them perform well. Constant communication therefore coexists with substantial gaps in fundamental managerial activity.

The disappearing one-to-one matters because management requires more than exchanging information. Managers must understand what drives performance, spot emerging risks, challenge decisions, support development, and hear concerns employees may never raise in a team meeting or electronic message. Sophisticated systems can report what has happened; they cannot replace the conversation that explains why. When protected dialogue disappears, organisations may become increasingly connected while managers become progressively less acquainted with the people they manage.

The Missing One-to-One – When Managers Stop Managing

Management is not simply allocating work and then inspecting outputs. A manager must understand how results are produced, what obstacles are emerging, and whether apparently satisfactory performance conceals risk. Gallup's research attributes 70% of the variance in team engagement to managers. That influence comes less from occasional announcements than from regular, purposeful conversations in which employees can explain what numbers, deadlines, and dashboards cannot show.

A well-run one-to-one creates a recurring point where performance and people management meet. It lets a manager test assumptions, challenge priorities, recognise achievement, and spot deteriorating relationships, unreasonable workloads, or emerging capability problems before they become formal cases. The CIPD's 2025 Good Work Index found only 62% of employees said their manager provided useful feedback, while 63% said their manager helped them perform well in their job.

The public-sector evidence is equally instructive. In the 2025 Civil Service People Survey, based on 343,961 respondents in the published demographic analysis, the overall employee-engagement index was 61%, while the "My manager" score was 76% and learning and development only 56%. Government methodology identifies leadership and managing change as the strongest driver of Civil Service engagement, followed by work and manager-related factors. Individual management therefore sits close to organisational performance, not outside it.

No United Kingdom law requires managers to hold monthly one-to-ones. Their significance lies in the fact that structured conversations can help organisations meet broader responsibilities for health, safety, equality, performance, and fair procedure. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) requires employers to assess and manage work-related stress risks, including demands, support, relationships, role and change. Its guidance specifically recognises one-to-one meetings as a setting in which managers can discuss stressors and possible solutions.

The financial context makes it hard to dismiss neglect as merely a cultural weakness. The HSE estimated that work-related injury and ill health arising from current working conditions cost Great Britain £22.9 billion in 2023/24. During 2024/25, stress, depression or anxiety accounted for 22.1 million lost working days. Regular conversations cannot eliminate those costs, but they can surface workload, role ambiguity, conflict, and insufficient support, and managers can intervene practically.

The proposition is straightforward: when managers stop holding meaningful one-to-ones, they lose one of the few mechanisms that reveal what routine reporting misses. The consequence may be unnoticed underperformance, preventable absence, weak development, misconduct, disengagement or resignation. Management information explains what happened; one-to-ones help explain why. Organisations that keep the first while abandoning the second risk becoming data-rich but managerially blind, with problems surfacing only when they are expensive, formal, or irreversible.

What a One-to-One Is Actually For

A one-to-one is a protected conversation between a manager and an individual employee, normally recurring often enough to maintain continuity. It is not a compressed team meeting or an appraisal divided into smaller pieces. Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) guidance distinguishes regular check-ins from formal performance reviews and recommends continuing informal performance discussions alongside them. The value lies in creating a predictable forum where matters can be raised before urgency decides the agenda.

Its scope should be deliberately broad. Performance and priorities matter, but so do obstacles, decisions, conduct, workload, development, relationships, risk, ideas and concerns. A supplier manager might need to discuss a deteriorating contract relationship; a finance employee may

need to flag an unreconciled control; a nurse may need to describe unsafe pressure; a warehouse supervisor may need to report recurring near misses. The mechanism is identical even when the operational consequences differ substantially.

A team meeting can't do this because its audience changes what people are willing to say. Project reviews usually focus on delivery, appraisals on periodic evaluation, welfare meetings on a known concern, and casual conversations on whatever happens to arise. The one-to-one sits between them. It lets an employee discuss performance and personal context without turning every concern into a formal process or requiring disclosure in front of colleagues.

That distinction matters legally and managerially. If poor performance later becomes a capability issue, Acas guidance says dismissal should be a last resort, and employers need evidence of poor performance and steps taken to support improvement. Regular, fair performance-review records can support that evidence. A one-to-one is not a disciplinary hearing, but good records can demonstrate that expectations were explained, support offered and improvement discussed before escalation.

The strongest one-to-ones also look forward. They identify development needs, succession risks and opportunities that operational meetings rarely accommodate. Chartered Management Institute (CMI) research found that 82% of managers entering management roles received no formal management and leadership training, while half of employees who rated their manager ineffective planned to leave within twelve months, compared with 21% overall. An individual conversation cannot substitute for management competence, but competent management is difficult without one.

Why Have Managers Stopped Holding Them?

One reason one-to-ones disappear is that people management competes with everything else in a manager's diary. In 2025, the CIPD found that only 59% of managers believed they had enough time to manage staff well, up from 52% in 2023. As operational meetings, reporting, recruitment, procurement, compliance, and administration expand, managers often sacrifice the seemingly movable individual meeting first, and restore it last.

Spans of control intensify that pressure. Ten direct reports receiving a monthly forty-five-minute conversation require seven and a half hours of meeting time before preparation, action, or follow-up. Twenty require fifteen hours. That arithmetic explains the temptation to replace individual management with group updates, dashboards, and on-demand availability. Yet wider spans do not remove accountability; they make the organisation choose, knowingly or not, how much management capacity each employee gets.

Hybrid working has further altered the environment. ONS data showed 28% of working adults in Great Britain were hybrid workers between January and March 2025, rising to 34% among full-time workers and 30% among employees. Hybrid work is not inherently a barrier to good management, but it removes incidental observations that alerted managers to confusion, conflict or declining confidence. Scheduled individual contact therefore matters more when physical visibility becomes less reliable.

Some managers assume experienced employees require less attention. Autonomy is appropriate, but seniority does not eliminate workload pressure, development needs, ethical concerns or organisational politics. Experienced staff may carry the most consequential decisions and largest financial responsibilities. The absence of routine management can therefore concentrate rather than reduce risk. A procurement professional controlling millions of pounds of spend may need less task instruction than a newcomer, but more space for challenge, judgement and escalation.

Another explanation is capability. CMI research conducted with YouGov found 82% of managers entering management positions had received no formal management and leadership training, and 52% held no management or leadership qualification. Organisations frequently promote strong technical performers and then assume managerial behaviours will

follow naturally. Running a useful one-to-one requires listening, questioning, challenge, coaching, documentation and judgement; without preparation, managers may experience the meeting as awkward administration rather than productive management work.

The result can be a paradox: organisations become meeting-heavy while management becomes conversation-light. Calendars fill with governance forums, project calls, and cross-functional updates, yet the meeting most directly tied to an individual's performance is repeatedly postponed. That is particularly dangerous for stress. In 2024/25, 964,000 workers suffered work-related stress, depression or anxiety, according to the HSE, with public administration, health and education recording above-average prevalence rates across recent years.

“They Know Where I Am If They Need Me”

“They know where I am if they need me” sounds supportive because it promises access, but it transfers responsibility for management to the employee. Availability is valuable; passivity is not. Employees must decide that a concern is serious enough to interrupt and risk being judged. Many remain silent, especially about mistakes, conflict, workload, questionable behaviour or disagreement with senior decisions. An open door creates an opportunity to speak, not a reliable way to listen.

Silence should never be treated as evidence that everything is satisfactory. The 2025 Civil Service People Survey reported that 9% of respondents had experienced bullying or harassment and 9% discrimination, with higher figures among employees reporting a long-term limiting condition. Such concerns do not automatically reach managers because channels exist. A recurring confidential conversation lowers the threshold for raising an issue and gives managers repeated opportunities to notice hesitation or change.

The legal environment reinforces active rather than purely reactive management. Since 26 October 2024, employers in Great Britain have been required under the Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023 to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment of employees. A monthly meeting is not a statutory requirement and cannot discharge that duty, but arrangements that depend entirely on victims volunteering concerns after misconduct occurs are inherently limited.

The same principle applies to work-related stress. HSE standards call for systems that let employees raise concerns about demands, support, relationships, role, and change, and emphasise active discussion. A competent manager does not wait indefinitely for a distressed employee to knock. Regular one-to-ones create legitimate opportunities to ask about workload, relationships, and support without implying the employee has failed by needing help or that disclosure must start as a complaint.

The Fear of Being Accused of Micromanagement

Fear of micromanagement has produced a legitimate correction to overly controlling leadership, but the correction can overshoot. Micromanagement involves unnecessary interference in how competent employees do their work, excessive checking, and reduced discretion. A periodic request to explain objectives, risks, decisions and priorities is different. Managers remain accountable for outcomes delivered through their teams. Delegation transfers authority within defined boundaries; it does not transfer responsibility for ensuring those boundaries remain appropriate and understood.

The distinction can be framed as control rather than contact. HSE Management Standards say employees should, where possible, control their work pace, use initiative, and have a say in work patterns. The same standards also expect adequate management support and regular, constructive feedback. Good one-to-ones support both principles: the employee retains operational discretion, while the manager provides a structured point for challenge, resources, clarification, and feedback rather than continuous surveillance.

A useful test is whether the manager is asking for understanding or permission. Requiring

approval for every routine action may be micromanagement; asking why a major supplier relationship is deteriorating is management. Rewriting every email may be control; discussing repeated stakeholder complaints is management. Tracking every minute may be intrusive; asking why deadlines are repeatedly missed is management. The purpose is not to repossess delegated work but to verify that delegation remains controlled and effective.

Gallup's evidence helps explain why disengagement from management is not empowerment. Its research attributes 70% of variance in team engagement to the manager and reports that high-performing managers use regular, meaningful coaching conversations. The CIPD similarly found in 2025 that only 54% of employees said their manager supported longer-term career development. However, 81% said their manager respected them as a person. Respect and autonomy don't have to mean managerial distance.

Procurement and supply chain management illustrate the point well. A category manager negotiating independently may require wide latitude over tactics, but senior management should still probe conflicts, supplier dependency, savings assumptions, contractual exposure and stakeholder pressure. The same applies to planners, engineers, analysts and clinicians whose expertise exceeds their manager's in particular domains. Effective managers need not know more about every task; they need enough structured dialogue to challenge whether expertise is being applied safely.

The Fear of Difficult Conversations

Some managers avoid one-to-ones because protected time increases the probability that something difficult will surface. Managers may need to address underperformance, investigate conflict, challenge an abrasive high performer, or support a capability gap. Once a manager knows, inaction becomes harder to justify. Avoidance can therefore feel convenient in the short term: no meeting means no conversation, no agreed action and no immediate confrontation. The underlying problem, however, keeps accumulating operational and human cost.

Acas guidance on challenging conversations exists precisely because such discussions are part of management. Its performance guidance advises regular feedback and check-ins, while capability dismissal guidance requires support and fair procedure, with evidence of performance problems and steps taken to improve them. A manager who waits until frustration triggers formal action may discover the organisation has weak records, unclear expectations, and little evidence that it previously provided reasonable support.

Avoidance also permits behaviour problems to normalise. CMI research found managers with formal training were more likely to feel comfortable calling out bad behaviour than those without it. Its wider study found one in three workers and managers had left a job because of a negative workplace culture. Difficult conversations protect more than the individual challenged: failing to address intimidation, disrespect, or persistent non-cooperation can effectively make everyone else absorb the consequences.

The Metropolitan Police Service provides a serious institutional example of what weak behaviour management can become, though it should not be reduced to missing one-to-ones. Baroness Casey's 2023 review concluded that the organisation suffered from systemic and fundamental problems in how it was run, tolerated discrimination, and had inadequate accountability. The lesson is broader: when unacceptable behaviour is neither surfaced nor reliably challenged, cultural problems can outgrow individual cases and become organisational characteristics.

Mid Staffordshire National Health Service (NHS) Foundation Trust offers another warning against managerial distance. After catastrophic failures in care and governance, the Francis public inquiry generated 290 recommendations, prompting reforms around openness, accountability, staffing information, and complaints. It would be inaccurate to attribute those failures to absent one-to-ones, but the case demonstrates the danger of organisations becoming detached from frontline reality. Repeated, candid upward conversations defend

against comforting performance narratives becoming stronger than lived experience.

Avoidance also has a financial dimension. CMI modelling estimated that closing the United Kingdom's management-capability gap with Germany could generate approximately £127 billion in economic gains over time. That estimate shouldn't be attributed to one-to-ones alone, but it reinforces a basic point: managerial competence is economically consequential, not an interpersonal luxury. Protected conversations are one practical channel through which management competence becomes challenge, support, and better organisational judgement.

When Informal Conversations Replace Management

Informal contact remains useful. A corridor question can remove a blockage, a Microsoft Teams message can clarify a deadline, and a five-minute catch-up can prevent delay. The mistake is treating these fragments as equivalent to protected management time. Informal exchanges usually arise from immediate events, so urgent operational matters dominate. Development, conduct, workload patterns, relationships and uncomfortable concerns are precisely the subjects most likely to disappear when conversation has no reserved space.

Digital communication can increase frequency while reducing depth. Hybrid employees may exchange many messages with a manager and still receive little meaningful management attention. ONS evidence that more than one-quarter of Great Britain's workforce was hybrid in early 2025 makes that distinction significant. Contact volume is not managerial understanding. A green status indicator, email trail or busy group chat cannot reliably reveal whether an employee is overwhelmed, disengaged or concealing a mistake.

Protected one-to-one time also creates memory and accountability. Acas guidance recommends keeping written records of performance discussions and sharing them with employees. A concise note of priorities, commitments, support and agreed actions creates continuity and reduces later disagreement about what was said. It need not become bureaucratic minutes. The objective is enough structure to ensure issues are revisited rather than repeatedly rediscovered after the day's urgency has passed.

Organisations should retain informal accessibility while refusing to let it replace management. The strongest model combines open-door availability, routine digital contact, team forums, and regular one-to-ones, each serving a different purpose. Occasionally cancelling a one-to-one is normal; repeatedly cancelling it signals hierarchy through behaviour: operational meetings matter, individual management does not. When that pattern becomes permanent, managers haven't merely changed meeting formats; they have removed a core management mechanism.

Why Senior and Experienced Employees Still Need One-to-Ones

Seniority changes what managers manage; it does not remove the need for one-to-ones. Experienced employees may need less instruction on routine tasks, yet exercise greater discretion over expenditure, suppliers, contracts, people, and organisational reputation. Their decisions can therefore carry greater consequences. A structured one-to-one provides proportionate challenge without diminishing autonomy, allowing assumptions, priorities and risks to be tested while preserving the professional latitude that experience should legitimately earn.

The argument that senior employees should be "left to get on with it" confuses independence with absence of oversight. A procurement manager controlling £20 million of annual spend, for example, may need little guidance on tender administration but still warrants challenge over sourcing strategy, supplier concentration, contract extensions and conflicts. The more authority delegated to an individual, the stronger the case for periodically examining how that authority is exercised.

Senior employees also often hold information that doesn't travel naturally through dashboards. They may know that a key supplier is deteriorating financially, a project forecast is optimistic, a director is bypassing controls, or a team is concealing workload pressure. Without protected

individual time, managers can receive polished reports while missing the judgement behind them. One-to-ones give experienced employees space to explain uncertainty rather than merely defend decisions already made.

Carillion demonstrates why senior commercial relationships deserve continuing challenge. When the company entered liquidation in January 2018, it employed around 18,200 people in the United Kingdom and held approximately 420 public-sector contracts. The National Audit Office (NAO) found government needed a stronger understanding of strategic suppliers' financial health and sustainability. The lesson is not that one-to-ones would have prevented Carillion's collapse, but that senior oversight must continuously interrogate dependency, resilience, and warning signals.

Experienced employees also need development conversations. Promotion can create the false impression that learning has ended just as responsibilities become more complex. Senior specialists may need broader commercial exposure, leadership experience, succession planning or preparation for executive accountability. Regular conversations help determine whether expertise is deepening into organisational leadership or becoming confined within an increasingly narrow comfort zone. Management should become more sophisticated as responsibility rises, not quietly disappear once technical competence is established.

The One-to-One as an Early-Warning System

One-to-ones matter because they surface weak signals before they become strong ones. A missed milestone, strained supplier relationship, unexplained overspend or behaviour change may look insignificant in isolation. Repeated conversations let patterns emerge over time. Managers can compare what employees said previously with current evidence, test whether actions were completed, and recognise when apparently separate operational problems begin to form a connected organisational risk that requires intervention.

Supply-chain difficulties illustrate the principle. The United Kingdom's Critical Imports and Supply Chains Strategy identifies resilience as essential to economic prosperity, national security and essential services, covering sectors including energy, health, food, transport, finance and communications. Managers responsible for critical suppliers may notice longer lead times, reduced responsiveness, deteriorating quality, or requests for unusual payment terms before formal risk indicators change. A one-to-one gives those observations a place to be assembled, challenged, and escalated.

Financial warning signs can be equally subtle. An employee may mention repeated invoice disputes, declining supplier service, unrealistic savings assumptions, accelerating overtime or project costs drifting beyond forecast. None proves serious failure, yet each deserves explanation. The managerial value lies in asking the next question: what has changed, why has it changed, who knows, what is the financial exposure, and what happens if the trend continues? An early challenge is generally cheaper than a retrospective investigation.

Carillion again provides a useful public-sector example. After its July 2017 profit warning, central government organisations announced or progressed contracts and extensions worth around £1.9 billion, while the Cabinet Office's supplier-risk assessment had previously rated Carillion green or amber. The NAO later highlighted limited government visibility into the company's wider financial difficulties. Formal systems existed; the weakness was a lack of understanding. Early-warning management must therefore combine data with probing human conversation.

People risks often surface in the same way. Acas research published in 2025 found that 44% of workers in Great Britain experienced workplace conflict in the preceding year. Among managers who had conflict with direct reports, capability and performance featured in 94% of cases, personal disagreements in 80%, bullying, discrimination or harassment in 44%, and misconduct in 42%. Regular conversations can expose these problems before positions harden.

The important limitation is that a one-to-one is an early-warning mechanism, not a substitute for formal controls. Suspected fraud, safeguarding concerns, serious misconduct, whistleblowing, health and safety risks or material financial irregularities may require immediate escalation through designated procedures. The meeting's purpose is to improve detection and managerial understanding. Its strength lies in creating repeated opportunities for someone to say, "something is not right," while there is still time to investigate proportionately.

The One-to-One as a Governance Control

One-to-ones should be understood partly as a governance control rather than solely as a human-resources practice. Managers can use them to test whether delegated authority is being exercised within policy, whether exceptions are documented and whether decisions remain defensible. This matters most where employees operate with substantial discretion. Controls fail not only because procedures are absent, but because nobody periodically asks whether people follow those procedures in real decisions.

Good governance questioning is simple but powerful. Which approvals were required? Who authorised the exception? Why was competition not used? Has legal advice been obtained? Is the conflict recorded? Are contractual limits being observed? What evidence supports the recommendation? Asking such questions routinely normalises accountability. Employees learn that governance is not an obstacle met at approval but part of professional decision-making. Such conversations can expose misunderstandings before they become breaches or audit findings.

The Procurement Act 2023 provides a clear public-sector example. For covered procurements, contracting authorities must identify and mitigate conflicts of interest and prepare a conflicts assessment before publishing specified procurement notices. Section 82 requires reasonable steps to prevent conflicts from placing suppliers at unfair advantage or disadvantage. A manager's one-to-one cannot replace those statutory processes, but it can test whether employees understand them, whether they have recognised emerging conflicts, and whether mitigation remains effective.

Direct awards offer another useful test. Government guidance states that competitive tendering is the default for most public procurements under the Procurement Act 2023, with direct award available only where statutory conditions permit it. A manager reviewing proposed non-competitive action can therefore ask for the legal basis, evidence, transparency requirements and value-for-money justification. That conversation is governance in practice: not second-guessing every decision, but checking whether discretion remains anchored to lawful authority.

The same principle applies in private-sector organisations through delegated financial authorities, anti-bribery controls, approval matrices, contract-signing limits and segregation of duties. A well-designed control framework can still fail if managers assume compliance merely because a policy exists. One-to-ones create recurring opportunities to see how controls work in reality. Governance becomes conversational as well as procedural, improving the likelihood that questionable decisions are identified while they remain correctable rather than after loss occurs.

Procurement and Supply Chain Management – Where the Conversation Matters

Procurement and supply chain management make the case for structured one-to-ones particularly strong because individual decisions can move substantial value and risk. A buyer may influence supplier selection, a category manager may shape millions of pounds of expenditure, and a contract manager may decide whether to challenge poor performance or tolerate it. Regular conversations let managers examine the reasoning behind seemingly routine actions before preference, convenience, or commercial pressure becomes embedded practice.

Unexplained supplier preference deserves particular attention. Repeatedly favouring one supplier may be commercially justified, but the justification should withstand scrutiny. Managers should ask what alternatives were considered, how pricing was benchmarked, whether conflicts exist and whether performance evidence supports continued preference. Under the Procurement Act 2023, covered public procurements carry explicit duties to identify and mitigate conflicts. In private organisations, equivalent questions support anti-bribery controls, fairness, competition and defensible stewardship of corporate expenditure.

Avoidance of competitive tendering and repeated contract extensions should also trigger discussion. Under current public procurement rules, direct award is an exception to the normal competitive route and must have a lawful basis. A one-to-one lets a manager test whether urgency is genuine, whether poor planning created it, whether modification limits are understood, and whether repeated extensions are preventing market testing. Convenience should not quietly become part of the procurement strategy.

Purchase-order circumvention is another revealing topic. Retrospective purchase orders, invoice splitting, commitments made before approval and repeated “urgent” exceptions can indicate inadequate planning, weak budgetary control or deliberate avoidance of authority limits. The financial amount may initially be small; the behavioural signal can be much larger. Managers who review exceptions with employees can determine whether the cause is training, process design, operational necessity or conduct requiring formal escalation, rather than treating every breach identically.

Supplier dependency should be discussed before it becomes visible as failure. The NAO reported that Carillion held around 420 public-sector contracts when it collapsed, showing how dependency on a strategic supplier can span services and organisations. The Government’s Critical Imports and Supply Chains Strategy similarly emphasises analysis, risk assessment, and resilience. Procurement one-to-ones should therefore cover concentration, substitutability, financial health, geographic exposure, critical components, contingency planning and the consequences of supplier interruption.

Inventory and specification decisions deserve equivalent scrutiny. Excess stock can immobilise cash and lead to obsolescence, while insufficient stock can stop production or essential services. Specifications can protect safety and quality, yet unnecessarily restrictive requirements can suppress competition or favour incumbents. The one-to-one gives managers room to ask why minimum stock levels were chosen, why a particular specification is essential, what alternatives exist and whether the decision balances service, resilience, competition and whole-life cost.

Performance Management Before Performance Becomes a Problem

Performance management works best when employees know where they stand throughout the year. Acas guidance recommends regular performance conversations alongside formal reviews, including feedback, coaching and one-to-one check-ins. An annual appraisal should consolidate understanding, not reveal months of undisclosed dissatisfaction. If an employee first hears in December that their manager has been concerned since March, the failure is managerial because expectations and support were not addressed when improvement remained easier.

Regular feedback improves fairness because it discusses evidence close to the event. Managers can discuss a missed deadline while circumstances are fresh; they can recognise excellent work before its details are forgotten. Managers can distinguish a temporary setback from a developing pattern and agree proportionate support. Written records also reduce later disagreement. Acas recommends keeping records of performance discussions and sharing them with employees to support continuity and clarity.

Continuous performance management also protects against the “surprise capability process”. Before taking formal capability action, managers should clarify expected standards, identify shortcomings, consider training or support, and allow a reasonable opportunity to improve.

Acas guidance stresses that dismissal for capability should be a last resort. One-to-ones create the natural setting for these earlier stages, without turning every performance concern into disciplinary language or letting genuine problems go unspoken indefinitely.

Targets themselves require management. An employee can miss an objective because effort is inadequate, but also because the objective was unrealistic, dependencies failed, priorities changed, or resources were unavailable. Regular conversations make that distinction possible. They protect organisations from rewarding excuses while also protecting employees from being judged against obsolete assumptions. Performance management should therefore test both the employee's delivery and the continuing validity of the conditions under which delivery was originally expected.

The strongest conversations cover behaviour as well as outputs. An employee who exceeds financial targets while damaging colleagues, withholding information or bypassing governance is not necessarily performing well. Acas guidance recognises behaviour as a legitimate component of performance review. Managers should therefore discuss how results are achieved, not merely whether numbers were reached. Sustainable performance combines delivery, judgement, collaboration and conduct; one-to-ones provide the frequency needed to assess that combination properly.

Coaching, Mentoring and Developing the Next Generation

A one-to-one should not become a monthly catalogue of problems. Its developmental purpose is equally important. Managers can explore career aspirations, skills gaps, future roles and the experience an employee needs before taking on greater responsibility. Development becomes more useful when linked to real work rather than generic training. A stretch assignment, supplier negotiation, budget responsibility, or a temporary project lead can build capability while producing organisational value, provided the manager provides appropriate support and feedback.

The CMI reports that 82% of managers entering management roles received no formal management and leadership training. That finding exposes a familiar organisational weakness: organisations promote technically capable employees and expect them to acquire management skills through exposure. Structured one-to-ones can reduce that risk by giving emerging managers a place to discuss delegation, judgement, conflict, prioritisation, and difficult decisions. Experience becomes development when someone helps the individual interpret what it is teaching.

Professional qualifications can form part of the same conversation. In procurement, employees may pursue Chartered Institute of Procurement and Supply qualifications; accountants may seek chartered status; project specialists may pursue recognised project-management credentials. Qualifications should not become automatic entitlements or substitutes for experience, but managers can help employees identify which development genuinely supports organisational capability. Funding decisions measured in thousands of pounds are stronger when connected to succession needs, role requirements and demonstrable application.

Delegation is itself a developmental instrument. Giving an employee responsibility for a £500,000 sourcing exercise, a difficult supplier recovery plan or a cross-functional improvement project can reveal judgement and leadership more effectively than classroom learning alone. The manager's role is to set boundaries, define escalation points and review decisions without taking the work back. One-to-ones then become the coaching mechanism that turns delegated responsibility into learning, confidence, and readiness for larger assignments.

Succession planning also depends upon information that spreadsheets rarely capture. A performance rating may show who delivers today, but not who wants promotion, who would relocate, who needs broader exposure or who intends to leave. Regular conversations allow managers to build a realistic view of organisational depth. They can identify critical roles

without credible successors and take development action early enough to matter, reducing dependence on expensive external recruitment after vacancies have become operational emergencies.

Development should include people who do not seek promotion. Expert careers matter in procurement, engineering, information technology, law, finance and many other disciplines. A senior specialist may create greater value by deepening expertise than by becoming a line manager. One-to-ones allow managers to distinguish ambition from hierarchy, ensuring development reflects capability and organisational need rather than assuming every talented employee should eventually manage people. Sustainable succession requires stronger specialists as well as stronger future leaders.

The Conversation About Behaviour That Nobody Wants to Have

Technically productive employees can still damage an organisation through behaviour. Arrogance, bullying, exclusion, disrespect, manipulation, inappropriate relationships, or persistent resistance to governance can coexist with excellent sales, technical output, or commercial savings. Managers sometimes tolerate the behaviour because the individual appears indispensable. That trade-off is dangerous. When results excuse misconduct, colleagues learn that standards depend upon status and output, weakening trust while increasing the likelihood that capable employees disengage or leave.

Current evidence shows how frequently conduct reaches formal attention. In 2026, Acas research involving 1,050 senior decision-makers in British businesses found that 30% identified bullying among the worst behaviours they had witnessed as leading to disciplinary action; 30% cited rudeness to colleagues or customers, and 20% cited sexual harassment. These figures do not measure overall prevalence, but they show that behavioural failures are substantial management issues, not marginal interpersonal irritations.

A one-to-one allows managers to address behaviour before it becomes a disciplinary case. The manager can describe specific conduct, explain its impact, restate expectations and allow the employee to respond. Precision matters. Labelling somebody “narcissistic” is rarely useful and may be inappropriate; describing repeated interruptions, humiliation of colleagues, withholding information or refusal to follow approval processes creates something observable and manageable. Managers should address conduct they can evidence rather than attempt amateur psychological diagnosis.

The legal context also matters. Employers must handle disciplinary and grievance issues fairly, and discrimination, harassment or victimisation may engage the Equality Act 2010. Since October 2024, employers have additionally been required to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment of employees. An informal management conversation may suit some concerns, but serious allegations may require a prompt formal investigation. One-to-ones support early detection; they must never be used to minimise conduct requiring formal action.

High performance should increase, not reduce, behavioural accountability because influential employees shape norms around them. If a senior buyer openly bypasses procurement controls, a respected engineer humiliates junior staff, or a successful salesperson treats compliance as optional, others observe what leadership tolerates. Managers who challenge behaviour consistently make organisational values operational. Those who look away effectively create an unofficial exception policy, in which commercial value buys permission to impose costs on colleagues and culture.

Psychological Safety – Creating Somewhere to Say the Difficult Thing

Psychological safety does not mean employees are protected from challenge, disagreement or accountability. It means they can raise concerns, admit uncertainty, ask questions and challenge prevailing assumptions without fearing disproportionate personal consequences. A structured private one-to-one helps because it creates a predictable opportunity to speak

outside a group's social pressures. Employees who remain silent in a meeting may disclose far more when they know the conversation is confidential, expected and genuinely listened to.

The issue has direct governance significance. Government whistleblowing guidance published in 2026 states that workers can raise information that identifies issues early, supports good practice, and reduces harm. The Employment Rights Act 1996 protects qualifying workers in Great Britain from detriment and dismissal for protected disclosures where statutory conditions are satisfied. A one-to-one is not a whistleblowing procedure, but it may be the point at which an employee first decides to speak.

Managers must understand the limits of confidentiality. They should not promise absolute secrecy when information concerns safeguarding, serious misconduct, fraud, harassment, safety, or other matters that require escalation. Instead, they should explain what can remain private and what may need sharing. Trust is strengthened by clarity. Employees are more likely to speak when they know how concerns will be handled than when organisational duties later break promised secrecy.

The NHS provides a useful institutional example. The National Guardian's Office supports Freedom to Speak Up Guardians across England because concerns cannot safely depend upon line management alone. Its existence reflects an important principle: employees require alternative routes when the concern involves their manager or when confidence in local handling is weak. Effective one-to-ones should complement, never compete with, whistleblowing, grievance, safeguarding, ethics and independent speaking-up channels.

The Post Office Horizon scandal demonstrates the catastrophic consequences that can arise when challenge is discounted, and institutional assumptions resist contrary evidence. The statutory inquiry has examined failures that led to wrongful suspension, termination and prosecution of sub-postmasters over more than two decades. By September 2026, government records showed hundreds of Horizon-related convictions. The case is exceptional, but its governance lesson is universal: organisations must create credible routes for uncomfortable evidence.

Psychological safety ultimately depends upon managerial behaviour after somebody speaks. Asking for candour and then punishing disagreement teaches silence more effectively than any written policy. Managers should thank employees for raising legitimate concerns, test evidence objectively, distinguish challenge from disloyalty, and, where possible, report back on action taken. The one-to-one becomes valuable not because a calendar invitation exists, but because employees learn through experience that difficult information will be heard, examined and handled fairly.

Case Study – Adobe: Replacing the Annual Review with Continuous Conversation

Adobe provides one of the clearest examples of an organisation deliberately replacing retrospective annual performance management with continuing managerial conversation. In 2012, it abandoned traditional annual performance reviews and ratings and introduced its Check-in approach. Adobe describes Check-in as an ongoing, two-way conversation in which employees and managers discuss performance, career growth, real-time feedback, what is working well, what needs improvement and what should receive attention next.

The change addressed a recognisable weakness in conventional appraisal systems. Adobe said employees saw annual reviews as cumbersome and bureaucratic, and that ratings and stack-ranking tied to compensation could leave people feeling undervalued and create barriers to teamwork. Adobe therefore replaced year-end feedback exchanges with ongoing discussion. The philosophy directly applies to one-to-ones: useful management information loses value when managers hold onto it for months before discussing it with the employee concerned.

Adobe subsequently reported that voluntary employee attrition fell and morale increased, with employees feeling better supported and managers more empowered. Those claims should be

understood as Adobe's own assessment rather than as evidence that Check-in alone produced every improvement. Nevertheless, they demonstrate an important organisational principle: removing an annual process did not mean reducing management. Adobe replaced episodic evaluation with a model requiring managers and employees to communicate more frequently about performance and development.

There was also a substantial efficiency argument. In 2014, Adobe reported that eliminating the traditional review process would save managers about 80,000 hours. The important lesson is what happened to that capacity. The organisation did not conclude that performance management itself was unnecessary; instead, it redirected attention towards continuing conversations. Administrative simplification therefore supported more immediate management rather than letting performance dialogue disappear with the paperwork it replaced.

Adobe's example is particularly useful because Check-in combines performance and development rather than treating them as competing conversations. Employees discuss results, improvement, career growth and future business impact together. That provides a useful model for procurement and supply chain teams, where an employee might simultaneously need challenge on supplier performance, recognition for delivering savings, and development toward greater commercial responsibility. Good one-to-ones connect what somebody delivers today with what they could contribute tomorrow.

Case Study – GitLab: Making the One-to-One Part of Management Infrastructure

GitLab offers an unusually transparent example because it publicly documents its management practices. Its handbook advises managers to schedule one-to-ones at least weekly, allowing synchronous or asynchronous formats depending upon circumstances. Crucially, it recommends at least two regularly scheduled synchronous conversations each month, excluding leave periods, to prevent prolonged periods without direct communication. The expectation therefore treats one-to-ones as recurring management infrastructure rather than meetings arranged only when somebody reports a problem.

The agenda is equally revealing. GitLab recommends a consistent format and says both parties should contribute topics, preferably with the majority coming from the employee. Its handbook suggests that where the manager supplies more than half of the agenda items, something may be wrong. That shifts the meeting away from managerial broadcasting. Employees get protected space to raise issues that matter to them rather than merely responding to the manager's operational checklist.

GitLab also recommends keeping a shared agenda document between the manager and employee, while keeping performance feedback private. An ongoing agenda creates continuity between meetings because issues no longer depend on someone remembering them. Questions, concerns and topics can accumulate as work progresses. The meeting consequently becomes part of a management cycle: issues are captured, discussed, assigned actions and revisited rather than repeatedly disappearing beneath whatever operational matter happens to be most urgent.

The employee-led principle is particularly significant. GitLab's handbook draws on the idea that the one-to-one belongs largely to the direct report, who shapes its agenda and tone around their priorities. This does not remove managerial responsibility for challenge. Instead, it prevents the manager from occupying every available minute with instructions. A useful conversation combines what the employee needs to discuss with what the manager must understand and test.

GitLab's approach also suits geographically dispersed work because it distinguishes between communication quantity and meaningful synchronous contact. Organisations can generate thousands of messages while managers still lack genuine understanding of employees' priorities, concerns and judgement. By preserving scheduled individual conversations in an organisation built heavily around asynchronous work, GitLab shows that remote or distributed

structures don't make one-to-ones obsolete; they can make them even more important to create deliberately.

The broader lesson is not that every organisation should copy GitLab's exact frequency. Work complexity, span of control and employee experience legitimately affect cadence. The stronger principle is that one-to-ones are designed, not improvised. Frequency, ownership, privacy, agenda management and follow-up are considered explicitly. Organisations that expect managers merely to "keep in touch" leave critical management activity to individual preference, whereas GitLab embeds the conversation within management's operating architecture.

Case Study – Mid Staffordshire: When Leaders Stop Listening

The Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust Public Inquiry provides a profoundly serious example of organisational listening failure. Robert Francis concluded that a serious failure of the Trust Board primarily caused appalling patient suffering. It did not listen sufficiently to patients and staff or correct identified deficiencies. At the same time, an insidious negative culture tolerated poor standards and reflected disengagement from managerial and leadership responsibilities.

The failure cannot responsibly be reduced to missing one-to-one meetings. Francis identified systemic weaknesses involving the Trust, commissioners, regulators, professional bodies and wider NHS structures. Its relevance lies instead in what happens when formal governance mechanisms disconnect from what employees and service users experience. Many organisations had information, oversight functions, or responsibilities, yet warning signals failed to produce sufficiently effective challenge and corrective action over an extended period.

Evidence on staff sentiment is particularly striking. In a 2006 staff survey, only about one quarter of employees said they would want a relative to receive treatment at the hospital where they worked. Bereaved relatives and campaigners subsequently raised repeated concerns. Those signals existed before the eventual public reckoning, showing why leaders cannot rely solely on headline performance measures when those closest to service delivery describe a substantially different reality.

The government response itself emphasised listening. Immediately after the Francis report was published in February 2013, the Health Secretary and NHS Chief Executive asked leaders across the service to hold staff listening events. The intention was to understand the report and support a safer, more open and compassionate health service. That response recognised a fundamental governance truth: reliable organisational intelligence requires leaders to create opportunities for frontline experience to travel upwards.

For managers, the lesson is not that a diary appointment prevents institutional failure. It is that listening must have infrastructure. One-to-ones are one component alongside incident reporting, whistleblowing, complaints, audits, surveys and independent escalation channels. Their distinctive value is proximity: managers repeatedly hear from individuals who experience processes directly. When those conversations disappear, organisations lose a routine opportunity for uncomfortable information to contradict reassuring reports before problems become embedded.

Case Study – Wells Fargo: When Performance Pressure Overwhelms Management Challenge

Wells Fargo demonstrates the danger of management conversations becoming overwhelmingly target-driven. Following its retail banking sales-practices scandal, the company's independent directors commissioned an extensive investigation assisted by Shearman & Sterling. The investigation involved 100 interviews, reviewed material from hundreds of additional interviews and searched more than 35 million documents. Its findings identified cultural, structural, and leadership weaknesses behind improper sales practices, rather than treating misconduct as isolated behaviour by frontline employees.

The investigation concluded that a distorted sales culture and performance-management system, combined with aggressive sales management, created pressure for employees to sell unwanted or unnecessary products and, in some circumstances, open unauthorised accounts. This distinction matters for performance management. Targets were not the only problem; organisational systems reinforced how employees pursued them. Managers therefore need to ask not merely whether performance objectives are being achieved, but through what behaviours and decisions.

The investigation also highlighted excessive autonomy within the Community Bank and resistance to outside scrutiny. Senior leadership was unwilling to recognise the sales model as the underlying problem, while minimising issues reported upwards. That combination is particularly dangerous: decentralisation without effective challenge can shield local assumptions from contrary evidence. Delegation requires counterweights, including managers prepared to ask questions that operational leaders would rather not answer.

Wells Fargo therefore provides a powerful warning about badly designed one-to-one conversations. Frequent meetings would have achieved little if every conversation merely reinforced sales quotas. A manager repeatedly asking “Have you reached the number?” can intensify dysfunction rather than prevent it. Effective one-to-ones must also ask whether targets remain reasonable, whether customers are being treated properly, whether employees feel pressured to compromise standards, and whether incentive arrangements are generating behaviour the organisation would publicly reject.

The case also demonstrates why conduct and performance cannot be separated mechanically. An employee generating exceptional numerical results through unsuitable selling, manipulated records or pressure on customers is not performing effectively merely because a dashboard is green. Performance includes how results are produced. Procurement organisations face the same risk: savings targets can encourage questionable baselines, supplier pressure, specification manipulation, or inappropriate contract decisions. Quantitative success requires qualitative challenge if management information is to remain trustworthy.

Wells Fargo’s investigation ultimately concerned corporate culture, governance, incentive design, and leadership rather than a single defective meeting process. That distinction strengthens its relevance. One-to-ones are only useful when they let reality travel upward and challenge travel downward. When the conversation exists merely to enforce predetermined numbers, it stops being a control. It can become part of the pressure system that prevents employees from explaining what those numbers are actually causing.

Case Study – Carillion: When Challenge Disappears at the Top

Carillion shows why the need for challenge cannot stop at the executive floor. When the construction and facilities-management group entered compulsory liquidation in January 2018, it had liabilities approaching £7 billion and only £29 million in cash. Yet the company paid a record £79 million dividend for 2016 and awarded substantial executive bonuses. Parliament subsequently examined how apparently positive corporate reporting could precede such a dramatic collapse.

The parliamentary inquiry, conducted jointly by two House of Commons select committees, was unequivocal about board accountability. It concluded that Carillion’s board was responsible and culpable for the company’s failure and described longstanding problems and a deeply defective corporate culture. Contract values deteriorated sharply: a July 2017 profit warning reduced contract valuations by £845 million, which rose to £1.045 billion by September, equivalent to the company’s reported profits over the preceding seven years.

The consequences travelled far beyond shareholders and directors. Parliamentary debate following the collapse recorded approximately 42,000 employees worldwide, more than 19,000 of them in the United Kingdom, alongside roughly £2 billion owed to around 30,000 suppliers and subcontractors. Projects were disrupted, and smaller suppliers faced severe exposure. Executive challenge therefore has a supply-chain dimension: weak scrutiny at the

top of one large organisation can transmit financial harm through thousands of dependent businesses.

Carillion should not be described as having failed because directors lacked conventional one-to-ones. Its relevance is the principle of structured challenge. Senior executives, finance directors, non-executive directors and board committees must examine assumptions rather than receive reassurance. A director responsible for major contracts should be challenged on deteriorating margins, cash conversion, disputed balances, supplier exposure, and forecasting assumptions with at least the same seriousness they apply when questioning managers further down the organisation.

The case makes the hierarchy problem visible. Organisations often become progressively less comfortable challenging people as seniority rises, even though the financial consequences of their decisions increase. A junior buyer may require approval for a £50,000 transaction while a director influences commitments worth millions of pounds with comparatively little individual scrutiny. Carillion illustrates why executive authority must not become managerial immunity. Greater delegated power strengthens the case for informed, independent and recurring challenge.

The Director Needs a One-to-One Too

The discipline of individual accountability should run through an organisation. Directors may manage departments containing hundreds of employees and control budgets, contracts or assets worth millions of pounds, yet sometimes receive less structured management than junior employees. Seniority does not remove human tendencies towards overconfidence, avoidance, selective reporting or poor prioritisation. Directors need a place to examine performance, judgement, relationships, risks, and personal development without relying exclusively on board meetings.

The appropriate relationship depends upon governance structure. An executive director may have structured conversations with the chief executive, while the chair and board should challenge the chief executive. Group structures may create divisional managing directors reporting to executive leadership. The label matters less than the principle: every person exercising substantial delegated authority should have an identifiable source of accountability capable of asking searching questions about how that authority is being exercised.

For United Kingdom companies, the legal responsibilities remain personal. Section 173 of the Companies Act 2006 requires directors to exercise independent judgement, while section 174 requires reasonable care, skill and diligence. Those duties are not satisfied merely because a board collectively receives reports. A recurring individual conversation cannot replace statutory duties or formal board governance, but it can reinforce the disciplined enquiry required from people exercising significant corporate power.

Listed-company governance strengthens the same principle. The United Kingdom Corporate Governance Code 2024 states that chairs should promote openness and debate, facilitate effective board relationships and ensure directors receive accurate, timely and clear information. It also expects non-executive directors to provide constructive challenge, strategic guidance and specialist advice while holding management to account. Challenge is therefore not evidence of mistrust between senior leaders; in well-governed organisations, it is part of the job.

A director's one-to-one should consequently reach beyond operational updates. It might examine cash flow, forecast accuracy, contract exposure, succession, team capability, unresolved audit recommendations, employee relations, supplier dependency and decisions awaiting escalation. It should also test what the director is not reporting. Asking "what worries you that is not on the dashboard?" may produce more useful governance intelligence than spending another thirty minutes discussing information already contained within the monthly performance pack.

Directors also require coaching. Executive status does not confer perfect judgement, and senior roles can become unusually isolated because employees beneath them hesitate to challenge. A strong chief executive, chair, or managing director can therefore use individual conversations to test assumptions, discuss difficult relationships, and identify behaviours colleagues may be reluctant to confront openly. Leadership development should not end at promotion to director; that is often precisely when candid external perspective becomes harder to obtain.

When a One-to-One Becomes a Tick-Box Exercise

Scheduling a one-to-one does not mean management has occurred. Repeatedly shortening, moving, or cancelling a meeting tells employees something about priority, regardless of what the organisation's management handbook says. Occasional disruption is inevitable; habitual cancellation is different. When project reviews and senior meetings are protected while employee conversations are endlessly displaced, the practical message is that immediate operational activity matters more than managing the people expected to deliver it.

Manager domination creates another failure mode. If 90% of the conversation consists of instructions, project updates, and questions already answered in reporting systems, the meeting becomes another status review. GitLab's handbook deliberately encourages employees to supply most agenda items, because direct reports need space to surface what occupies their attention. Management challenge remains necessary, but useful one-to-ones alternate questioning with genuine listening rather than converting individual access into a private briefing session.

Distraction can undermine the meeting just as effectively. A manager answering emails, monitoring Microsoft Teams or checking a telephone while somebody discusses workload or conflict signals that attention is conditional. Employees tend to withdraw difficult subjects when the manager seems only partially present. Thirty focused minutes can provide greater managerial intelligence than an hour punctuated by interruptions. Protected time should mean protected attention, not merely an appointment occupying a calendar slot.

Rigid agendas can create similar problems. Consistency helps because important areas shouldn't disappear, yet asking the same questions mechanically every month encourages rehearsed answers. Managers should follow emerging evidence. A worsening supplier, unexpected resignation, disputed invoice, unusual absence pattern or stakeholder complaint may deserve more time than the standard agenda anticipated. Structure should ensure coverage without preventing curiosity. The meeting is a control process, not a questionnaire whose completion proves effectiveness.

Follow-up ultimately determines credibility. If an employee raises the same barrier repeatedly and nothing changes, the one-to-one teaches them that speaking up achieves little. Actions should therefore identify responsibility and, where appropriate, completion dates. Managers need not personally solve every concern, but they should explain what was done, what cannot be done, and why. A conversation without follow-through becomes ceremonial; a conversation that produces visible action encourages employees to bring meaningful information earlier next time.

What Should Actually Be Discussed?

A useful one-to-one should start with performance against agreed objectives and current priorities, but it shouldn't stop there. The manager should understand what has progressed, what has slipped and why. Make changes in priorities explicit so employees are not later criticised against objectives that management quietly displaced. Where performance data already exists, meeting time should focus on its meaning rather than simply rereading numbers both participants could have reviewed beforehand.

Obstacles and decisions form the next layer. What is preventing progress? Which decisions remain unresolved? Where does the employee require authority, resources or escalation?

Managers should distinguish obstacles that require organisational intervention from problems the employee can reasonably solve independently. This balance preserves accountability while preventing employees from carrying structural problems indefinitely. Recurring blockers matter because they may expose defective processes, conflicting priorities, insufficient capacity, or decisions senior management has repeatedly avoided.

Also explore stakeholder and people relationships. In procurement, that means internal customers, suppliers, contract managers, and budget holders; elsewhere, it may involve colleagues, service users, or regulators. Managers should ask where relationships are deteriorating, where conflict is emerging and where important stakeholders have become resistant. Interpersonal problems often affect delivery before they show up in quantitative measures, so individual conversations are an important source of intelligence about how organisational networks actually function.

Governance, finance and risk deserve explicit attention. What expenditure has been committed? Are budgets and forecasts credible? Have delegated authorities been observed? Are contract variations justified? Have conflicts been declared? Which risks have changed since the previous meeting? For procurement and supply chain employees, the discussion might extend to supplier solvency, inventory exposure, contract expiry, tender compliance, purchase-order exceptions, specification decisions and concentration risk. These questions turn the one-to-one into a practical governance mechanism.

Development should then look beyond immediate delivery. Managers should discuss skills, career aspirations, qualifications, succession, delegation and experiences that would prepare employees for greater responsibility. Development actions don't have to mean expensive courses. Leading a negotiation, presenting to executives, managing a supplier recovery plan or mentoring a colleague may develop capability more directly. Revisit progress rather than letting development objectives appear once at appraisal and disappear beneath operational work for another year.

Finally, always leave room for what was not anticipated: ideas, concerns, and questions the employee has hesitated to raise. Previous actions should be reviewed and new commitments captured clearly. The strongest closing question may be, "What have we not discussed that I ought to know?" A disciplined agenda provides coverage, but curiosity creates insight. The objective is not to complete every heading; it is to leave both people better informed than when they entered.

The 80:20 Principle – Managers Need to Listen

A one-to-one should not become a management broadcast with occasional pauses for acknowledgement. GitLab's published leadership handbook recommends that the manager should strive to do around 20% of the talking while the direct report does 80%. The ratio isn't a mathematical rule for every meeting, but it captures an important discipline: managers learn more when they create space for employees to explain, reflect, question, and challenge.

Listening does not mean managerial passivity. The manager still needs to probe vague answers, test assumptions, clarify expectations and challenge weak reasoning. The difference is that questions should open discussion rather than close it. Asking "What concerns you most about this supplier?" produces richer intelligence than asking "Everything under control?" GitLab similarly recommends open-ended questions because superficial yes-or-no exchanges rarely reveal why an employee feels or behaves as they do.

The 80:20 principle is especially valuable where employees possess specialist expertise. A procurement manager may know less about a particular market than a category specialist, while a director may know less about a technical failure than an engineer. The manager's contribution is therefore not to demonstrate superior knowledge but to elicit information, connect it to wider organisational priorities and challenge whether conclusions, risks and proposed actions are sufficiently robust.

Active listening also improves psychological safety because employees can tell whether a manager is genuinely curious or simply waiting to speak. Repeatedly interrupting, answering one's own questions, or steering every topic back to predetermined conclusions discourages candour. Managers should summarise what they have heard, check understanding and allow silence when necessary. A short pause may produce the concern that a rapid succession of managerial questions would otherwise suppress.

The practical test is simple: after a good one-to-one, the manager should normally know something important that was not obvious beforehand. That information may concern performance, workload, risk, motivation, a supplier, a colleague or the employee's ambitions. If managers leave every meeting having delivered instructions but learned nothing new, the conversation is probably functioning as a briefing rather than as the two-way management mechanism it was intended to be.

Monthly, Fortnightly or Weekly?

There is no universally correct frequency for one-to-ones. Role complexity, employee experience, organisational risk and the pace of change all matter. Monthly meetings may be an appropriate minimum for established employees in relatively stable circumstances, while new starters, employees facing capability concerns, or people managing rapidly changing projects may need weekly or fortnightly conversations. Frequency should reflect management need rather than an arbitrary preference for more or fewer meetings.

GitLab illustrates one approach, not a universal standard. Its handbook recommends frequent one-to-ones and says managers should hold at least two synchronous one-to-one meetings each month, excluding periods of leave. The significance lies less in copying that cadence than in recognising the need for predictable direct contact. Distributed working does not remove the need for management; it increases the importance of deliberately deciding how and when individual conversations will occur.

Monthly meetings can work well where employees are experienced, objectives are clear and informal communication remains strong between scheduled conversations. Four weeks is usually short enough to maintain continuity while allowing meaningful progress between discussions. However, a monthly cadence should not be used to defer urgent concerns. Serious conduct, health and safety, financial, safeguarding or supplier issues require prompt escalation rather than waiting for the next diary appointment.

Fortnightly conversations provide greater continuity where workloads or priorities change quickly. They may suit project environments, developing managers, procurement teams running complex competitions or employees taking on unfamiliar responsibilities. Shorter intervals make it easier to spot slippage while corrective action remains relatively inexpensive. They also reduce the temptation to overload each meeting with a month's worth of accumulated issues, allowing deeper attention to the matters that genuinely require managerial judgement.

Weekly one-to-ones can be appropriate during onboarding, organisational change, major negotiations, performance improvement or periods of exceptional operational pressure. Frequency should then reduce when circumstances stabilise rather than becoming permanent simply through habit. The objective is proportionate management attention, matched to risk, complexity and individual need. An experienced employee should not face unnecessary meetings, but autonomy should not become an excuse to leave complex or high-risk work unexamined for extended periods.

Regularity and predictability matter more than theoretical perfection. Employees should know when they will next have protected access to their manager and should trust that the meeting will usually happen. A perfectly designed monthly framework that is constantly postponed is weaker than a straightforward fortnightly conversation that occurs consistently. The cadence should therefore be realistic enough for managers to protect, while flexible enough for additional conversations when risk, development or performance requires them.

Thirty Minutes That Cannot Be Continually Cancelled

Thirty minutes can seem insignificant beside board meetings, project reviews, and operational crises, yet repeated cancellations carry symbolic weight. When a manager routinely sacrifices an employee's one-to-one for supposedly more important work, the employee receives a clear message about hierarchy of attention. The manager may intend only to solve an immediate problem, but the cumulative effect is to communicate that managing the individual is secondary to almost every competing demand.

Occasional cancellation is unavoidable. Senior managers face emergencies, customer incidents, safety issues and unforeseen executive demands. The relevant question is what happens next. A credible manager reschedules promptly rather than allowing the conversation to disappear. Cancelling without replacement converts exceptional disruption into managerial neglect. Over time, employees learn not to prepare topics because experience tells them the appointment may vanish whenever somebody or something more senior enters the manager's diary.

The CIPD identifies making time for people, providing one-to-one opportunities to speak, and following up on actions as features of effective line management. These behaviours matter because accessibility cannot be measured only by whether a manager responds to messages. Protected individual time shows that understanding employees, supporting development, and resolving concerns are expected parts of the role, not discretionary activity undertaken only when operational work is quiet.

Repeated cancellations can also distort information flows. Employees who expect a meeting to disappear may stop saving complex subjects for proper discussion and either remain silent or raise them hurriedly through email or messaging. Nuance is then lost, particularly where issues involve judgement, relationships or uncertainty. The apparent saving of thirty minutes can therefore create greater downstream cost if unresolved problems later require formal investigation, supplier recovery, grievance handling or performance intervention.

Organisations should consequently treat habitual cancellation as a management signal rather than an individual diary quirk. If managers genuinely cannot protect thirty minutes for direct reports, the underlying problem may be excessive spans of control, unrealistic workloads or poor meeting discipline. The answer is not to pretend one-to-ones remain important while structurally preventing them. Leadership should decide whether managing people is part of the job and allocate managers sufficient capacity to do it.

Recording Actions Without Creating a Bureaucracy

One-to-ones need enough documentation to create continuity, but not so much that every conversation feels like formal proceedings. Acas guidance recommends keeping written records of performance discussions and sharing them with employees. A proportionate note might capture key decisions, agreed actions, objectives, development commitments and material concerns. The purpose is memory and accountability, not constructing a transcript of everything said or turning routine management into evidential theatre.

A simple running document can often be sufficient. The previous meeting's actions appear first, followed by current priorities, significant discussion points and new commitments with owners or dates where useful. GitLab similarly recommends a shared ongoing agenda for one-to-ones, allowing issues to be added as they arise rather than recreated immediately before each meeting. Continuity improves because unresolved matters remain visible until they are completed, consciously deferred or formally escalated.

Managers should distinguish between developmental notes and records that may later support formal processes. A discussion about career aspirations or a difficult stakeholder need not read like disciplinary evidence. Conversely, repeated underperformance, serious conduct concerns or agreed reasonable adjustments may require clearer documentation and appropriate handling under organisational procedures. Tone matters: concise factual

language protects both parties better than speculative labels, subjective character judgements or attempts to record every conversational nuance.

Data protection also requires judgement. Records should be relevant, accurate, appropriately secured and retained in accordance with organisational policies and applicable law. Managers should avoid casually recording sensitive personal information that is unnecessary for legitimate management purposes. Where health information, allegations or protected disclosures arise, specialist procedures may apply. A shared one-to-one note should never become an uncontrolled repository for material that properly belongs within restricted human-resources, safeguarding or whistleblowing systems.

Documentation becomes counterproductive when completing the record consumes more effort than the conversation itself. Five minutes capturing decisions and actions may add significant value; twenty minutes producing narrative minutes from a thirty-minute discussion rarely does. The correct level is enough to answer four questions later: what mattered, what was agreed, who was responsible and what happened next? Anything beyond that should exist only for a specific management, legal, or governance reason.

Proportionate records also protect employees from managerial memory changing over time. If priorities shifted, support was promised, or an objective was deferred, a short contemporaneous note provides a shared reference. That matters particularly during appraisal or capability discussions, when recollections can diverge. Documentation should therefore reinforce trust rather than suspicion: both parties can see what was agreed, correct misunderstandings early and carry actions forward without repeatedly reconstructing previous conversations from memory.

From Individual Conversations to Organisational Intelligence

A single one-to-one produces local knowledge; dozens of good one-to-ones can produce organisational intelligence. Managers may hear about supplier delays, workload pressure, recurring system failures, customer complaints, or confusing policies in one team, and see them as insignificant. When similar observations are aggregated, a systemic pattern can become visible. Organisations therefore need mechanisms that let managers escalate themes without breaching legitimate confidentiality or turning every private conversation into an automatic corporate report.

The HSE's Management Standards illustrate the principle. They encourage employers to use existing data, surveys and active discussion with employees to identify underlying causes of work-related stress. Its guidance specifically recognises one-to-one discussions as useful sources of information alongside appraisals, team meetings and informal conversations. Individual dialogue therefore contributes most when organisations can connect what managers hear locally with broader patterns in workload, support, relationships, role and organisational change.

Procurement and supply chain functions can apply the same logic commercially. One category manager may report longer supplier lead times, another unusual advance-payment requests and a third declining service quality. Individually, each issue may be manageable. Together, they may indicate financial distress within a strategic supplier or market constraint. Management forums should therefore review recurring themes emerging from one-to-ones alongside formal supplier performance, risk registers, and financial intelligence, rather than treating each conversation in isolation.

Organisational intelligence requires escalation rules. Employees need confidence that personal matters will not be casually circulated. In contrast, managers need clarity on what must move upward because it concerns safety, fraud, harassment, financial exposure, or systemic operational risk. The challenge is to aggregate themes without unnecessarily identifying individuals. For example, a director may need to know that several teams report unsustainable workloads, without receiving private details about every employee who described it.

The strongest organisations create a feedback loop rather than a one-way reporting channel. Managers surface recurring issues, senior leadership decides what requires action, and the outcome travels back through management layers. Without that return flow, employees repeatedly raise the same problems and conclude that speaking achieves nothing. One-to-ones then become extraction exercises rather than meaningful management. Organisational intelligence has value only when the organisation shows that it can influence priorities, controls, and resource decisions.

Holding Managers Accountable for Managing

If an organisation's stated management framework includes meaningful one-to-ones, repeatedly failing to hold them should be treated as a management-performance issue. The reasoning is straightforward: managing people is part of a manager's job, not an optional activity undertaken after operational work is complete. An individual who consistently delivers technical outputs while neglecting direct reports may succeed as a specialist but fail at an important part of managerial responsibility.

This does not justify crude compliance targets. Counting calendar invitations can encourage managers to hold superficial meetings merely to satisfy a dashboard. Accountability should focus on whether employees receive regular management attention, objectives are clear, actions are followed up, development occurs, and concerns can be raised. Attendance may provide useful assurance, but it shows activity rather than quality. Management should assess performance through outcomes and behaviours, not just frequency.

The CIPD describes helping employees perform well as a central responsibility of line managers and emphasises that performance management should be continuous, open and supportive. It also identifies making time for employees, giving feedback, supporting development and following through on actions as important management behaviours. When an organisation makes those expectations explicit, persistent failure to meet them should logically influence appraisal, development, and, where necessary, performance management for managers themselves.

Accountability should extend upward. If a director repeatedly cancels meetings with managers beneath them, leaves objectives unclear or avoids difficult conversations, seniority should not insulate that behaviour from scrutiny. Chief executives and boards frequently demand evidence that operational managers are managing properly; the same standard should apply to executive leadership. A management framework loses credibility when organisations rigorously expect compliance at lower levels but treat it as discretionary once someone reaches the executive floor.

Before judging an individual manager, organisations should examine whether the system makes compliance realistic. A manager with thirty direct reports, excessive operational duties and continuous mandatory meetings may genuinely lack capacity for meaningful one-to-ones. In that case, leadership shares responsibility. Holding managers accountable requires reasonable spans of control, training and diary capacity. Performance expectations become hollow when organisations require high-quality people management while designing roles that make sustained individual attention practically impossible.

The answer is yes, with appropriate safeguards: persistent failure to hold meaningful one-to-ones should count as a management-performance failure when regular conversations are part of the expected framework, and managers have reasonable capacity to deliver them. The purpose is not punishment for missed meetings. It recognises that management includes listening, challenging, developing, and supporting people. An organisation that never evaluates those behaviours quietly signals that operational output matters more than management quality.

Rebuilding the One-to-One Discipline

Rebuilding one-to-one discipline starts with a clear organisational expectation. Leadership

should define a minimum cadence appropriate to its context while allowing managers to increase frequency when circumstances require it. The policy need not dictate identical schedules for every employee. Its purpose is to establish that individual management conversations are normal, expected and protected. Without a minimum expectation, practice tends to depend upon each manager's preference, creating inconsistent employee experience and uneven organisational oversight.

Diary protection should follow. Book recurring appointments well in advance, allow realistic duration, and reschedule promptly when genuine emergencies intervene. Managers with large teams need capacity built into their roles, not told to find time. Thirty minutes monthly for twelve direct reports already equals six meeting hours, plus preparation and follow-up. Organisations must acknowledge that good people management takes time; pretending otherwise shifts the cost into neglected management.

A simple agenda should create consistency without rigidity. Previous actions, current priorities, performance, obstacles, stakeholder relationships, risks, governance, development and employee-raised matters provide a useful foundation. Both parties should prepare, although preparation need not be burdensome. GitLab recommends maintaining an ongoing shared agenda and adding items as they arise. That approach reduces last-minute preparation while ensuring important topics survive the operational noise between scheduled conversations.

Managers also need training in listening, questioning, feedback and difficult conversations. The CIPD stresses the central role of line managers in continuous performance management. At the same time, its research links management quality to employee health, performance, and commitment. Training should therefore move beyond explaining the meeting template. Managers need practice challenging weak performance, discussing behaviour, supporting development and recognising when information requires formal escalation rather than informal handling.

Finally, implementation requires assurance. Human resources or senior leadership can periodically examine whether one-to-ones occur, whether repeated cancellations cluster in particular teams, and whether employee surveys indicate useful managerial contact. Assurance should remain proportionate and should not require access to confidential meeting content. The objective is to verify that the management system exists in practice while preserving enough privacy for employees to raise concerns, uncertainties and developmental ambitions with confidence.

Measuring Whether One-to-Ones Are Working

Attendance is the easiest measure and one of the weakest. A business can report 98% completion while employees experience repetitive, manager-dominated meetings that produce no decisions or development. Measurement should therefore distinguish activity from value. Completion data may identify managers whose meetings consistently disappear, but it should be paired with evidence of whether agreed actions are completed, objectives are understood, problems are escalated earlier, and employees find conversations useful.

Performance indicators can include the proportion of agreed actions completed by the next meeting, unresolved objectives, repeated barriers and the time taken to escalate material risks. Procurement teams might also examine whether they identify supplier concerns, contract expiries, or governance exceptions earlier. The aim is not to claim that one-to-ones directly caused every improvement, but to test whether conversation insights translate into earlier intervention and more disciplined managerial follow-through.

Development provides another measure. Organisations can examine internal progression, participation in stretch assignments, completion of agreed qualifications and whether succession plans contain credible internal candidates. Interpret these indicators carefully because promotion opportunities vary between teams. The relevant question is whether managers convert developmental discussion into action. A one-to-one that repeatedly records the same aspiration without exposure, coaching or opportunity may create the appearance of

development while delivering none.

Employee perception is equally important. In a CIPD-reported Civil Service field study, interventions around strengths-based performance conversations increased agreement that line-manager meetings supported professional development by 9.7% and improved performance by 7.4%. Surveys can therefore ask whether employees receive useful feedback, understand expectations, can raise concerns and receive support, providing evidence about conversational quality that attendance statistics cannot capture.

Organisations should also watch for unintended consequences. If measurement becomes too rigid, managers may optimise the metric rather than the conversation, scheduling unnecessary meetings or documenting trivial actions to improve compliance scores. A balanced approach combines cadence, employee experience, follow-through, development and risk outcomes. Measurement should show whether management is improving, not create another administrative system that eats up the time managers should spend talking to people.

Ultimately, success should show up as fewer surprises. Performance concerns are discussed before appraisal, supplier risks are escalated before failure, development actions occur before employees disengage, and interpersonal issues are addressed before grievances become entrenched. Not every problem will be prevented, and causation will rarely be neat. The strongest evidence is a management culture in which difficult information surfaces earlier, decisions improve, and employees know speaking to their manager can lead to meaningful action.

Summary – Management Requires Conversation

Sophisticated dashboards, human-resources systems, collaboration platforms and performance metrics can tell leaders a great deal about organisations, but none can replace direct managerial engagement. Data records outputs; conversation reveals context, judgement, uncertainty and behaviour. A manager who knows every key performance indicator yet rarely speaks meaningfully with individual employees has only part of what they need to manage. Sustainable performance therefore depends upon combining measurement with disciplined human attention.

The one-to-one matters because management is broader than allocating work. Managers must understand how objectives are being achieved, what risks are developing, where employees need challenge and where organisational systems are failing them. The conversation may concern performance, supplier risk, conduct, workload, development, financial exposure or an uncomfortable ethical concern. Its subject changes, but its function remains constant: converting individual experience into informed managerial judgement and appropriate action.

Regular conversations also distribute accountability in both directions. Employees explain decisions, progress, and concerns; managers clarify expectations, provide support, and accept responsibility for actions above the employee's authority. The relationship is therefore neither surveillance nor counselling. It is a practical management control that preserves autonomy without confusing it with a lack of oversight. Experienced employees, senior specialists, and directors need that challenge just as much as newly appointed staff.

The discipline succeeds only when organisations protect it. Meetings must occur predictably, managers must listen more than they broadcast, actions must be followed through, and difficult subjects must not be repeatedly deferred. Senior leaders must model the same behaviour they expect from line managers. When capacity is insufficient, organisations should address spans of control and workload rather than maintain the fictional expectation that meaningful people management can be delivered without time for it.

Management excellence ultimately requires conversation, including conversations neither participant particularly wants. Managers must name underperformance, challenge poor behaviour, question unrealistic targets, surface emerging risks, and develop ambition.

Software can schedule the meeting, and dashboards can inform it, but neither can conduct it. Organisations remain dependent upon managers who know their people well enough to listen, challenge, develop and act. When that discipline disappears, management itself begins to disappear.

Additional articles can be found at [Procurement and Supply Chain Management Made Simple](#). This site looks at procurement and supply chain management issues to assist organisations and people in increasing the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of their product and service supply to the customers' delight. © Procurement and Supply Chain Management Made Simple. All rights reserved.

Further Reading

The sources below allow readers to examine the evidence behind the preceding arguments in greater depth. They combine national workforce data, practical guidance on managing performance, primary reports on the organisational failures discussed, and the legislation and governance codes that frame managerial accountability in the United Kingdom. The inquiry and committee reports merit examination in full, as their detailed findings demonstrate how warning signs were overlooked long before each collapse or scandal became public.

Management Practice and Workforce Evidence

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2025). *Good Work Index 2025*. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. Annual survey of job quality across the United Kingdom, including the data on managerial time, feedback and support cited in the Foreword.

Office for National Statistics (2025). *Who Has Access to Hybrid Work in Great Britain?* Released 11 June 2025. Source of the hybrid-working figures for January to March 2025, showing how access varies between different groups of workers.

Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service. *Reviews and Appraisals – Performance Management*. Online guidance. Distinguishes regular check-ins, sometimes known as one-to-ones, from formal performance reviews, and advises sharing written review records with employees.

Gallup (2015). *State of the American Manager: Analytics and Advice for Leaders*. Gallup. Origin of the widely quoted finding that managers account for at least 70% of the variance in employee engagement scores.

Chartered Management Institute (2023). *Better Management Report: Take Responsibility, Take Action*. London: Chartered Management Institute. Examines “accidental managers”, including the finding that 82% of people entering management roles have received no formal management and leadership training.

Grove, A. S. (1995). *High Output Management*. Revised edition. New York: Vintage Books (first published 1983). The former Intel chief executive's classic account of the one-to-one as a core management discipline rather than an administrative courtesy.

Edmondson, A. C. (2018). *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley. The leading account of psychological safety, explaining why employees withhold concerns and how leaders can make candour feel safe.

Case Studies and Inquiry Reports

Adobe. *How Adobe Continues to Inspire Great Performance and Support Career Growth*. Online. Adobe's own description of Check-in, the continuous-conversation model that replaced annual reviews and ratings in 2012.

GitLab. 1-1, *The GitLab Handbook*. Online. Publicly documented guidance on one-to-one frequency, agendas and synchronous meetings, offering a practical template that managers

in any sector can adapt.

Francis, R. (Chair) (2013). Report of the Mid Staffordshire National Health Service Foundation Trust Public Inquiry. House of Commons Paper 898. London: The Stationery Office, 6 February 2013. The three-volume report whose 290 recommendations reshaped expectations of openness, candour and listening across the health service.

Independent Directors of the Board of Wells Fargo & Company (2017). Sales Practices Investigation Report. 10 April 2017. The board's own investigation into how aggressive sales targets and a decentralised structure allowed widespread misconduct to persist.

House of Commons Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and Work and Pensions Committees (2018). Carillion. Second Joint Report of Session 2017–19, House of Commons Paper 769, 16 May 2018. Found the board "both responsible and culpable" for the company's failure and examined the £1,045 million contract write-down.

National Audit Office (2018). Investigation into the Government's Handling of the Collapse of Carillion. 7 June 2018. Examines public-sector exposure, contingency planning and the monitoring of strategic suppliers' financial health.

Williams, Sir W. (Chair) (2025). Post Office Horizon Information Technology (IT) Inquiry: Final Report, Volume 1. 8 July 2025. The first volume of the final report, focusing on the human impact of the scandal and on redress, with 19 recommendations.

Law, Regulation and Governance

Financial Reporting Council (2024). United Kingdom Corporate Governance Code 2024. London: Financial Reporting Council. Sets expectations for board openness, debate and constructive challenge, applying to financial years beginning on or after 1 January 2025.

Health and Safety Executive. Management Standards for Work-Related Stress. Online guidance. A practical framework covering demands, control, support, relationships, role and change, each of which regular one-to-ones help managers monitor.

Procurement Act 2023, sections 81 to 83. The statutory duties on contracting authorities to identify and mitigate conflicts of interest and to prepare conflicts assessments for covered procurements.

Employment Rights Act 1996, as amended by the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998. Protects qualifying workers from detriment and dismissal for making protected disclosures, underpinning effective speaking-up arrangements.

Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023. Since 26 October 2024, requires employers to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment of their employees in the course of employment.