



# **THE STRONG LEADER'S GUIDE TO GREAT 1:1 MEETINGS**

---

Take Your Leadership to the Next Level

**RAINMAKER**THINKING®

Copyright RainmakerThinking, Inc., 2021  
All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

For permission requests, please contact Ms. Kimberli Math at 203.772.2002 x104.

**ORDERING INFORMATION**

Bulk orders and individually printed hard copies of electronic and printed materials published by RainmakerThinking, Inc. can be ordered by contacting us:  
mail@rainmakerthinking.com  
or 203.772.2002

**EDITORIAL CREDITS**

Author: Bruce Tulgan  
Editor: Liz Richards

# THE STRONG LEADER'S GUIDE TO GREAT 1:1 MEETINGS

Tips and Tools to Take Your Leadership  
to the Next Level

---

## Not All One-on-Ones Are Equal



At some point, it happens to every manager: the big project you were certain was on track has totally derailed.

Nobody is really sure what happened or who dropped the ball. There may be a lot of finger pointing going on. In the midst of it all you're thinking, "But I was on top of things!"

So, what **did** go wrong? How, as the boss, can you avoid this from happening again in the future?

Most often in these situations—when a manager thinks they have been all over the details, yet something goes wrong—it comes down to **low-substance, low-structure** communication:

- "How's everything going?"
- "Do you need anything from me?"
- "Any problems I should know about?"

The solution is **high-structure, high-substance** dialogue. This *Strong Leader's Guide* contains insight and tools you can use to start having quality conversations with employees right away.

# HIGH-STRUCTURE

---



## Make Time for Managing Every Single Day

Don't rush into your one-on-ones!

It may be tempting to simply take a tour of the office and jump into one-on-ones with each of your team members. Remember, in order to be effective, one-on-ones must be **high-structure**: regularly scheduled and conducted according to a clear agenda.

Start by setting aside **one hour every day** for managing. Think of it as like taking a walk every day—it may not be exciting, but eventually that structure and routine make you stronger.

Use that hour to prepare for the one-on-ones you will have with each person you manage:

- Concentrate on three or four people per day
- Identify the current top priorities for each of those people
- Think about their work in progress and the role you play at the current stage of the process
- Consider any open questions that should be addressed
- **Don't plan to do all the talking**—remember that your direct reports also need this one-on-one time to update you on their work, ask for your support and input, and get the recognition and reward they deserve
- Make sure that your direct reports are preparing in advance of your one-on-ones, too

# HIGH-STRUCTURE

---



## How Many People Can You Manage This Way?

How many one-on-one dialogues can you maintain?

The answer is different for every manager. Be honest with yourself. If you are not able to maintain an ongoing, one-on-one dialogue with an employee, you are not managing that person.

Here are some proven tactics from leaders of large teams:

- **Focus first and foremost on any managers you manage.** Talk to those managers about how they are managing. Coach them on the fundamentals—make sure they are having one-on-ones with their direct reports, too. If you don't, your chain of command is not going to work.
- **Meet with everyone at least once every two weeks.** It is possible, with one hour each day, to manage as many as fifteen or even twenty direct reports each week. However, if you are responsible for managing more than ten people, that pace typically isn't sustainable in the long term.
- **Meet face-to-face whenever possible.** If you manage people who work other shifts or work remotely, the majority of your management will likely happen over phone and email. Make the effort to meet in-person whenever there is an opportunity—remember, all you need is fifteen minutes. In the meantime, conduct your one-on-ones via phone with no less rigor than you would in-person.

# HIGH-SUBSTANCE

---



## Three Basics to Cover in Every One-on-One

What should you talk about in every one-on-one?

The details of your conversations will vary widely depending on your scope of responsibility and the people you manage. But at their core, these should be **high-substance** conversations: rich in immediately relevant content, specific to the person and situation, with a clear execution and focus.

There are **three basics** that should be covered in every one-on-one:

- **Spell out expectations**
  - Remind direct reports of broad performance standards
  - Turn best practices into standard operating procedures
  - Use plans and checklists whenever possible
  - Focus on concrete actions within the control of the employee
  - Provide candid, coaching-style feedback
- **Ask really good questions**
  - What do you need from me?
  - What is your plan? What steps will you follow?
  - How long will each step take?
- **Listen carefully**
  - Evaluate how well the employee understands the requirements of the task at hand
  - Keep asking questions—facilitate and adjust as needed

# HIGH-SUBSTANCE

---



## Five Ways to Track Performance

One-on-ones are not going to be effective on their own—you must also track and document performance every step of the way.

There are five strategies for tracking performance:

- 1. Watch employees work.** If someone is struggling with a specific task, shadow them for a few minutes. You'll find out exactly what they are doing and how it can be changed.
- 2. Ask for an account.** In every one-on-one, ask for an account of what that person has done since your last conversation. Listen very carefully and ask more probing questions.
- 3. Help employees use self-monitoring tools.** Engaging your employees in the process can both make things easier for you and motivate them to do even better. Find ways to use checklists, activity logs, and project plans in their work.
- 4. Review work in progress on a regular basis.** You can't keep track of everything an employee does, but you can usually check random samples. Look at drafts. Spot-check records.
- 5. Ask around a little.** Ask customers, vendors, coworkers, and other managers. Always ask about the work, never about the person. Ask for descriptions rather than evaluations.

The key to documenting performance is finding a sustainable method that works for you. Stick to something simple. The last thing you need is a cumbersome system.

# DEBRIEF

---



## Follow Up and Lay the Groundwork for Your Next One-on-One

Maintaining an ongoing record of what was discussed and agreed upon is an essential part of one-on-ones which many managers overlook.

Having a structured debriefing process following your one-on-ones gives both you and the employee in question the opportunity to:

- **Clarify** miscommunications or gaps in understanding
- **Identify** important points that were forgotten or not made
- **Solidify** any next steps that need to be taken, by either you or the employee, before your next one-on-one
- **Establish** a rough agenda for your next one-on-one in advance

Follow up by providing a brief overview of your one-on-one, keeping the above goals in mind, and schedule a date and time for your next one-on-one. Many managers find email is best, as it serves the dual purpose of following up and documenting the highlights of each one-on-one conversation. Whatever form your follow up takes, do not forget to document it in some way! An ongoing record will be invaluable should you ever need assistance from HR.



# GET BETTER RESULTS WITH BETTER 1:1s

---



## Create an Upward Spiral of Performance

There are four basic steps to creating an upward spiral of performance on your team:

1. Define performance standards
2. Spell out expectations
3. Collaborate on next steps
4. Follow up, revise, and adjust

One-on-ones are where the action is. Those are your opportunities to create that upward spiral for every single person you manage. With the tips and tools in this *Strong Leader's Guide* you can start having the kinds of high-substance, high-structure one-on-ones that get you there.

But the method only works if you **make a commitment and stick to it**—don't allow minor difficulties to derail your progress. It may take a bit of time to really start seeing results. After all, you're making a big adjustment, and big adjustments take time. But once that upward spiral gains momentum, the process becomes easier, and performance will skyrocket.

# CALENDAR

---

Look at your schedule for the next four weeks.  
Indicate which hour you will dedicate to one-on-ones  
each day.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday

# DEBRIEF CHECKLIST

---

EMPLOYEE: \_\_\_\_\_

- Previously established goals were met
- Required tasks were completed
- Tasks were completed according to guidelines, specifications, or standard operating procedures
- Deadlines were met
- Employee's performance met expectations
- Employee's performance exceeded expectations
- Employee's performance fell short of expectations

NOTES:

---

NEXT STEPS:

# PEOPLE LIST

---

Use the People List tool to answer the following questions about each person you manage:

- **Who** is this person at work?
- **Why** do I need to manage this person?
- **What** do I need to talk about with this person?
- **How** should I talk with this person?
- **Where** should I talk with this person?
- **When** should I talk with this person?

WHO	WHY	WHAT	HOW	WHERE	WHEN

# ABOUT RAINMAKER THINKING

---



Since 1993, Bruce Tulgan and RainmakerThinking have been helping managers at every level, in every industry, to become strong, highly-engaged leaders.

## What can our team do for you?

We offer a number of services to help you achieve your leadership goals, whether you are a manager, training leader, HR Director, or CEO:

- [Keynote Speeches & Workshops](#)
- [In-person Training](#)
- **Online Video Training for individuals and teams:**  
[RainmakerLearning.com](https://rainmakerlearning.com)
- **Assessment & Consulting**  
[Please contact us](#) to inquire directly about our assessment and consulting services.

## Have questions?

Feel free to drop us an email: [mail@rainmakerthinking.com](mailto:mail@rainmakerthinking.com)