

Tips for Having Better One-on-One Meetings

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By Yvonne Nath and guest author [David Kearney](#), Legal Project Management & Pricing Administrator of Dentons Cohen & Grigsby PC

Meetings reflect your firm's culture.

How internal meetings are managed and their flow reflect a law firm's culture. By observing meetings, we can discern a good deal about a firm, such as: whether a firm's stated values match actual behaviors, the quality of communications, formal and informal bases of power, and the ability of participants to collaborate and achieve a shared goal. This is true for all types of meetings, even one-on-ones between a direct report and a manager.

Improving meetings takes work and courage and requires some cultural adjustments.

If you have experienced meetings you believe are a suboptimal use of time, you may crave changes. It's all too easy to conduct meetings in whichever way your firm has become comfortable. No matter who you are, or your position, trying something new to improve your meetings can feel awkward. It can feel risky to admit meetings are not working well as well as uncomfortable to put yourself out there and attempt change. Change works best when someone not only wants to effectuate change but also when those around them allow the change to occur. Trying to improve meetings requires people to step outside traditional roles and comfort zones, and inertia can be a powerful hindrance to change. From the perspective of someone lower on the organization's hierarchy, trying to speak up to improve meetings with those in management or leadership can feel particularly daunting.

In this period of abrupt change, we have the opportunity to improve our firm's culture and our meetings.

The abrupt shift to remote working has forced us out of many familiar office routines. Our meetings have changed. In some ways, our meetings have improved. In other ways, they may be equally or less effective than they were before. However, now that familiar routines are being broken, now is a perfect time to evaluate our meetings and take action to improve them.

Here, we discuss how to improve the working relationship between manager and direct report as well as one-on-one meetings – those formal and (hopefully) regularly occurring meetings between manager and direct report.

Our backgrounds: David Kearney, Legal Project Management & Pricing Administrator of Dentons Cohen & Grigsby PC, has worked on both sides of the fence during his career, from being managed to being a manager. Yvonne Nath is a strategy and culture consultant with LawVision where she focuses on structuring law firms to be resilient and standout. She has her master's degree in law firm management and is accredited in organizational culture.

David: It is so important to view your relationship with your supervisor(s)/boss(es) or your direct reports as truly bi-directional, not just a "boss-to-subordinate" or "subordinate-to-boss" unidirectional one. This is assuming your goal is to be a part of a well-oiled team. To benefit the most from work relationships and to be unencumbered by traditional boss/subordinate roles requires a unique one-to-one relationship with your team members, including your team leader(s).

A high quality bi-directional one-to-one relationship requires collaboration, leadership, emotional intelligence, and a degree of customization. This requires work.

Having been in various subordinate roles, managerial roles, and leadership roles, one of the most important things that I have learned as a manager/leader is that I need to meet reports where *they are*...and not where *I am*. I generally brought out the best in people when I understood their motivators, their interests, and approaches to their work. Those above me got the best out of me when I was treated with the same approach. I would always move mountains for those that knew how best to get me to move those mountains. I look back to times where things did not work as well and now see where I could have done better either as a leader or as a report to others. If only I knew then what I know now.

Improving the manager-report relationship can be pretty easy and summed up in a few bullets:

1. Have an open discussion on how to maximize the relationship.
2. Have regular one-on-ones.
3. Be open to hearing the ways you are being told, verbally and non-verbally, to be a better version of yourself in your role as leader or report.
4. Adjust to feedback.

Once you have built a great relationship, your meetings can be much more collaborative and effective and other values such as dedication, loyalty, high performance, and trust will fall into place.

Yvonne: David, well said and those are excellent points.

In addition, for both parties, as you try to have more open discussions, I'd add: be your authentic self. Navigate one-on-ones carefully, at first, revealing a little about yourself at a time and see how the other person accepts and reacts to this information. From here, you can determine how much you can reveal over time. It is a learning process. When offering feedback, use non-violent communication. (If you are not familiar with "non-violent communication" techniques, [here is a book I recommend](#) under the same name.)

Here are some ideas for direct reports to consider:

- Try not to use this valuable time for status updates that can be achieved through other communication forums; these one-on-ones should be treated as forums to discuss those matters that would benefit from more individualized attention.
- Prepare for these meetings by determining what you want to discuss and share an agenda with your manager in advance of the meeting. This way, they will have time to prepare their thoughts and add any other topics they wish to cover.
- Here are some ways to leverage these one-on-ones:
 - Your professional development. What do you want to learn more about, what questions can your manager answer for you, where could you use more support, where do you have extra support to offer them?
 - Navigating firm politics. You may want their opinion and advice about how to handle frustrating experiences with other employees.
 - Sharing some personal information that will help the two of you create a stronger human connection.
 - Taking the time to review completed work, what was learned, what was done well, what could have been

done better.

Lastly, for managers, here are some tips to keep in mind: stay open-minded, be a good listener, take genuine interest in your report, and treat this time as a top priority (the best way to do this is to honor the routine; do not cancel or reschedule the meeting unless you absolutely must, and if you must cancel, don't do it often).