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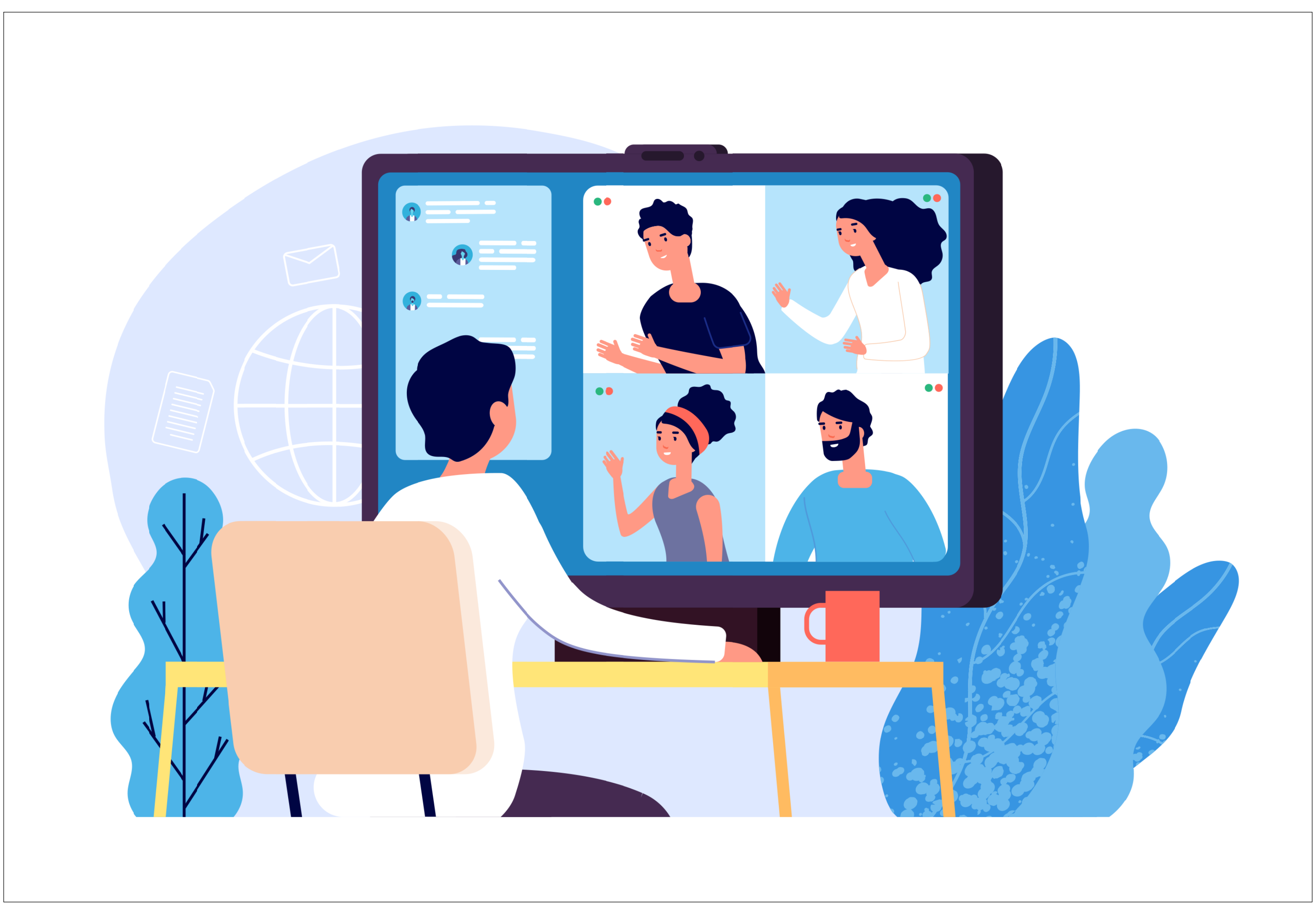
How To Start One-on-Ones with your Research Computing Team

A Four-Week Plan of Action



Preface

One of the most important things a manager can do with their teams is to have regular one-on-one meetings with each of their team members. They work very well in research computing contexts - which makes sense, because they are almost ubiquitous in tech companies. The fact that there are tools, websites, podcasts, and videos about it might lead you to think they're complicated; they're not. They're super simple.

What follows is a one-month plan to get started doing one-on-ones with your newly-remote research computing team. For two-to-four days a week, there's about 10 minutes of reading and another 10-15 minutes of homework to do to get you started doing one-on-ones with your team starting two weeks from when you begin. There's follow-up activities in weeks three and four to take stock, make tweaks, and start thinking about tools that will help.

The Research Computing Teams Newsletter might also be of use to you; items like this are posted occasionally, along with a weekly roundup of management, community, and technology news relevant to you as the manager of a research computing team.

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One-on-ones are a time tested technique for learning about your team members, hearing early about any problems, building trust, and helping your team members advance their skills and career goals.

One-on-ones are just meetings with each individual team member and you; they get a half hour of your completely undivided attention, every week (or at worst, every other week). The basic principles of successful one-on-one meetings are:

- The meeting is scheduled and at a regular time every week.
- This is about building working relationships.
- This isn't a status update: the meeting is about your team member, not you.
- So, the the team member and their agenda goes first, every time.
- Take notes in a way that shows you're paying attention.
- Followup is crucial.
- When in doubt, imagine having one-on-ones with someone you report to.

And that's it. There's no tricks or particularly hard parts! If you follow the principles above when making decisions, and are disciplined enough to keep the meetings going even (especially) when things are busy, pay attention to what you're hearing, and follow up, you're going to to have successful one-on-ones.

Simple as they might be, these meetings are going to be most effective way to achieve four important things:

- Understand your team member better and so build solid working relationships.
- Build trust with your team member.
- Make your team member feel more important and engaged, and likely to raise issues with you.
- Learn much more about what's actually going on with the work your team is doing.

On top of those benefits, most managers find that these meetings actually save them time - people will save up questions they have for the one-on-ones rather than asking them as they come up, you'll be able to better match people to tasks (and be able to find out how better to direct them on those tasks), and if anything starts to go sideways you'll find out about it faster.

Your Assignment

Let's get things started by finding potential one-on-one slots on your calendar starting two weeks from today; in a couple of days you'll be sending the list of those timeslots out to your team members to sign up for their one-on-ones. Look for a few more slots than team members - if you have 8 team members, aim to find say 12 slots. Identify 30-minute slots on your calendar for that week, ideally with a bit of padding on either side to prepare and review your notes. Prioritize slots that are normally free in coming weeks, and start doing what you can to fence those times off for a bit. This is important, so if you have to, consider rescheduling or cancelling some other low priority meetings next week to make room. List the slots in a google spreadsheet, or start a doodle poll with them as the entries, and in a couple of days we'll get people to sign up for them.

Also: if you have weekly team meetings, add an agenda item about one-on-ones: you'd like to start meeting with them one-on-one every week, you'll be sending an email out, and you'll have discussion on it at the meetings.

Resources

- Your Team Just Went Remote, Now What by Stephen Younge talks about the importance of communications and one-on-ones in the current moment
- The Manager's Path and High Output Management are new and classic tech-industry management books respectively that talk about extensively and early on about one-on-ones

FAQs

Q: I have 12 people directly reporting to me - I just don't think I can find 6 hours a week to spend on this.

A: I promise you that this is one of the most productive ways you can be spending your management time — certainly in difficult periods like this, but even when things get back to normal. You don't have to take my word for it - ask around if you know anyone doing one-on-ones in their team, and see what they say. Doing these meetings will mean you'll be less stressed as a manager, have a better handle on what's going on in your team, be able to put fires out sooner, have a forum for giving your team members feedback and coaching, be better able guide your team members skills and career development, and your team members will know that you're listening to them. If you're still skeptical, phase it in - start every-other week and move to weekly after you have a few rounds under your belt.

Q: Ok, 12, sure, but I'm a PI with a lab of 30 people. How's that supposed to work?

A: Thirty people is just too many people to give effective management to - you aren't meaningfully tracking the needs, career development, and progress of thirty people now on top of everything else you need to do, and your lab members already know it. One-on-ones aren't magic; they can't fix that. So you'll have to pick and choose between some options.

Perhaps you'll prioritize trainees and some senior staff: have one-on-ons with them, and after a couple of rounds so that they understand how it works, have the senior staff start one-on-ones with more junior staff, even if there's no formal reporting relationship there. That's not as good as them having one-on-one time with you, but it's better than no one having one-on-one time with anyone, and it starts preparing senior staff or trainees for future management duties. Every so often you could make sure you have "skip-level one-on-ones" with the staff or trainees who are having one-on-ones with these senior lab members - individually or as a group meeting - to make sure things are going well.

Alternately, you could just have bi-weekly one-on-ones with everyone; that's 7.5 hours a week providing direct hands-on management with your team members. Again, it's not as good as weekly one-on-ones but it is significantly better than not having them.

Q: So if biweekly is ok, can I do these monthly?

A: A useful way to think about one-on-ones from your team members point of view is to imagine the situation with you having one-on-ones with someone more senior to you - your boss if you're a staff manager, or a department chair or dean if you're a PI. How would you treat a regular monthly half-hour one-on-one meeting with someone you report to?

I don't think that this is a stretch to imagine. You'd want this precious 30 min a month to go as well as possible. You'd spend some time preparing a dog-and-pony show, probably some slides or something, and prioritize and hone a small number of questions you need answers to. It would be A Big Deal, and so kind of stressful, each time.

Your boss would get a sanitized view of what's going on. You'd get a chance to look good to a boss whose been around a while and recognizes this as the highly polished view that it is. You'd maybe get a few answers you needed, or a promise to get back to you on those questions, which is good - but at the cost of significant preparation and stress.

Monthly just isn't worth doing. Bi-weekly isn't great - you won't save as much time on interruptions and questions, because short questions that can wait three days for an answer often can't wait a week or more - but it's not bad. Weekly is the best.

Q: My schedule gets changed at the last minute a lot - I'm not sure I can always keep the same time every week for these meetings!

A: It's ok! Your team members know you're busy. Stuff gets rescheduled. They understand, really. The important thing isn't that you're meeting Frieda at 2pm every Thursday come what may; the important thing is that Frieda knows she always has 30 minutes on your schedule every week. Just reschedule them as needed, just like you'd do with any other important meeting - for the same week, and as soon as you know something's coming up.

Tuesday - Understanding What The One-on-Ones will Look Like

You know the basic principles of each one-on-one meeting now; what does this mean for how the meetings will go?

First, let's talk about the medium. This is about building working relationships, and while it's probably not literally impossible to do that over text-based chat, it's hugely slower and more prone to missteps. On top of that, there are going to eventually be sensitive topics discussed in these one-on-ones: you want the team member to be able to tell you about problems they're having with co-workers, or that they didn't do so great at something, or the stress of working at home with the uncertainty of the pandemic, and they might reasonably be reluctant to put these concerns into writing and send them off into the internet.

Videoconferencing is better, because it lets you show facial expression and some body language; that goes a long way towards conveying intent and reducing miscommunications. You probably already use some tools for videoconferencing, and whatever you use is fine. I personally have no problem recommending Zoom, Slack, Microsoft Teams, or Whereby. But really, if you already use something else and your team members have access to it, just use it, it's fine. If you're not already using something, pick whereby (because it's easy) or Zoom (for strong screen sharing and some white boarding features). And if for some reason none of those are available, just make phone calls. It doesn't need to be difficult.

So that's the medium, what's the message? There are a number of suggested high-level agendas for one-on-ones out there. I'm going to recommend going with the Manager Tools One-on-Ones agenda: it's super simple, I've seen it work very well in a number of research computing contexts, it's well motivated by empirical data, and I think it makes the best starting point. If you've seen and used a different agenda that's worked well, feel free to use it instead; otherwise, use theirs.

The Manger Tools agenda is:

- 10 minutes for what your team member wants to talk about
- 10 minutes for items on your agenda
- 10 minutes to focus on their career or skills development

Let's tackle these in order:

Their agenda: 10 minutes for what they want to talk about.

It's hard to give you much information here, since your various team members will have different topics they want to cover. A number will misunderstand and try to give updates on their tasks; try to gently discourage that and nudge them toward higher-level topics.

They will also likely have questions about the effort, their role, what's coming next; this is a great opportunity for discussion. They'll talk about how things are currently working with the team and may bring up things you want to follow up on.

But there will also be a lot of not particularly work-related discussion they want to have with you. Maybe it'll be about their new home-office setup, or their pets, or their family, or the world situation. They may want to lament the loss of sports (and talk about their favourite team), or talk about a new dish they're learning to cook now that they can't go to one of their neighbourhood restaurants. Remember that the purpose of this meeting is to build a working relationship with your team member, to understand them better and to open up lines of communications. It's a privilege to have them sharing this with you. Take notes and ask lots of questions — you'll learn a lot from the answers — and share in kind if you feel comfortable doing so.

Your agenda: 10 minutes for your topics.

Remember, the one-on-one isn't a status update meeting, and using it as one wastes an opportunity. You have other mechanisms for status updates that have worked well up to now - standups, ticket tracking or other project management software; use those. Further, You're the boss; if there's a particular thing you want a status update on you can ask for it at any time, and it's something easily covered over chat or email.

These meetings are better for higher level topics - talking about *why* they're having troubles, or great successes, with particular tasks, what's coming next, and the like. If you want, you can routinely check on status of tasks before the one-on-one, and then that can inform the discussion. The goal here isn't to get a weekly update on what tasks are slipping behind - the goal here is in the medium term to have fewer tasks slipping behind because you better understand the work and your team members.

This is a good opportunity to give positive or corrective feedback on things you've seen over the past few days; feedback can be a useful way to reinforce expectations.

You might well want to followup from things from previous meetings, or things that have come up from the past weeks work; to ask questions about things you saw. In general, even during your time, the more questions you can be asking that draw information from the team member, rather than just telling them stuff, the better.

It's also a great time to share some updates about the big-picture view of how things are going in your department or effort, and how it will effect them and their work, or opportunities it might give them in the future. It's a great opportunity to gauge their level of enthusiasm for new aspects of upcoming work.

Don't use one on ones to share information that you're going to be sharing with several members of the team, though.

1. It's not a good use of this time. This meeting is about the individual team member, so it should cover things specifically about them. (Covering how something you've updated the entire team about will effect them in particular, however, is completely on-topic.)
2. It's not a good use of your time. If it's something several team members need to know about, cover it at your weekly team meeting and save yourself some time.
3. It's surprisingly prone to causing problems. Efficiency aside, you're probably going to accidentally convey slightly different messages each time - at the very least, they'll each hear slightly different things. The best case is that this leads to unnecessary confusion.

Professional Development: 10 minutes

This isn't something that comes out of your time or their time, because professional development is a shared responsibility between the two of you. A first one-on-one is a great chance to update your baseline on what their long-term career goals are, and give them any guidance or resources they ask for; and to find out if there are particular aspects of the research they'd like to get more involved in or new technologies they'd like to learn. In future one-on-ones, you can cover upcoming conferences or presentation opportunities, try to find work opportunities that will help them build experience they're looking for, or coach them on particular skill development.

Once you've been doing those for a while, you'll find that there usually isn't going to be 10 minutes worth of things to say about their career or skills development - their development needs or long-term career goals just aren't going to change much week-to-week. So after a while it'll more typically be 15 minutes for them, 15 minutes for you. But it's still hugely valuable to have a recurring slot for these topics to be discussed, and your first few one-on-ones there'll probably be more than enough topics there to have it take the time.

Your Assignment

For each of your team members, start a document or (a page in a document) listing them, what you know of their career plans, what they're working on, things you've been meaning to talk with them about, your current understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, how you imagine their role might change over the coming year… anything that would be useful to touch on in a one-on-one. It doesn't need to be anything like comprehensive - it'll get added to over the course of many one-on-ones - but it'll be a good starting point to preparing for the first round of meetings.

Also: if today's your weekly team meeting today, give them a heads up that because you're now all remote you'd like to start meeting with them one-on-one every week, and you'll be sending an email out.

Resources

- The entire Manager Tools Basics series, and especially their one-on-ones podcasts, are worth listening to.

FAQs

Q: What if they don't have anything to say or ask for their 10-15 minutes?

A: Team members that are kind of distrustful about this new practice might be kind of reticent to talk or ask questions. It may take them several meetings to really start trusting this whole one-on-one thing and start opening up. That's ok; one of the purposes of having these meetings is exactly to open up lines of communications.

Long silences can be helpful here; ask them what they'd like to talk about, smile patiently and look at the camera, and count out 10 seconds in your head. That 10 seconds will feel like a while to you, and an absolute eternity to them, but it's very convincing that you're interested in waiting to hear what they have to say. If they're still not coming up with anything, you can try prompting them with very broad questions — "How is this whole remote work going for you?" "How are you dealing with the COVID-19 situation?" "Do you feel our approach to working remote is going well?". It's better if the topics and questions come unprompted, but that may take some time. It's alright.

Frankly though, by far the more common issue is:

Q: What if they go long?

A: This is way more common than there being not enough to say, especially at the beginning. If they're not used to having your undivided attention, they're going to have a lot to say, especially for the first few meetings. My suggestion is just let them go long for the first few. If there are things you really want to cover on your agenda, gently interrupt them towards the end with time to cover your priorities - but remember, you're the boss, you can talk to them whenever you want about stuff; this is their half hour to bring things to you. If they keep going long week after week, start giving them feedback about that and gradually over the weeks get them to 10-15 minutes. But don't be too forceful about it; these meetings are about opening channels of communication.

Q: Can I ask about status of their tasks at all?

A: Talking about tasks' status isn't completely off-limits, but it's really easy for status questions to slowly take over the one-on-ones. If there's a task or project you two haven't talked about for a while, by all means you can take this opportunity to ask for a quick update, but try to make sure that's the exception not a rule. This is a better venue for identifying problems that keep coming up and coaching them on dealing with those, or building on strengths they've shown in dealing with other tasks - high level things rather than quick updates. Again, you're the boss - you can ask for status updates any time you want. This time is for them.

Q: What if they offer status updates during their time?

A: Listen, and take notes; and pay attention to anything they're saying beyond the status update (are they pointing out things they had to overcome that you didn't know about? Are they talking in a way that suggests they're not normally getting enough credit?). If it is really just a status update, thank them but explain that this isn't a status update meeting, you really want to focus on higher-level issues — whether they have what they need to succeed, whether there are things they want to know about the program as a whole, how things are going with their coworkers, what have they learned working on project X, are there things that they're concerned about for the coming weeks. If a few weeks of gentle redirection isn't enough, you can be more direct (or you can try to short-circuit things by directly asking for status updates before the one-on-one).

Q: What if I don't have a full 10-15 minutes of things to cover?

A: That's ok! The main purpose of this meeting is for them to talk. We'll introduce later some general questions you can raise in your time if you don't have specific things you need to address; but otherwise, if your list is short this week, give them a heads up so they can use more time this time; and if the meetings are short sometimes, it's fine.

Weekly Meeting Day - An Announcement

Now that you've got a sense of what the one-on-ones are going to look like, it's time to announce it to your team so they get a heads-up before you start signing them up.

I'm assuming that you have weekly meetings with your team; if they're on Tuesday you can cram both days worth of work (today's is pretty light!) into one. If your weekly meeting is Monday, or you don't have one, you can send an announcement around on email/slack/teams and start collecting feedback.

I'd say important things to emphasize are that you've been thinking about this for a while, (which is true, right?) and there's no sudden thing that's triggered this; what the one-on-ones will look like; and what happens next. Here's a perfectly good starting point for conversation.

> *Something I've been thinking about for a while is that I'd like to start having weekly half-hour one-on-one meetings with each of you individually. With everything going on, we don't get as many opportunities to talk with each other, hear how things are going, and ask questions of each other as we used to.*
>
> *These aren't status update meetings; it's a meeting for you to tell me how things are going, ask questions about the context of our projects, let me know what you need help with, or to tell me things you need from me. I'll have some questions for you about how things are going for you, and will give any input I have on what's gone on in the past week. And we'll have an opportunity to spend some time each meeting talking about your professional development and career goals.*
>
> *We'll have the same agenda each meeting:*
>
> *First 10 minutes - your agenda. Whatever you want to talk about or ask questions about. If there's a question I don't know the answer to off hand, I'll have it for you by the next meeting. If you want to ask me about something you're doing and it would help to whiteboard something or show a plot or diagram, by all means, but please this isn't something to prepare slides for. It's just us talking.*
>
> *Second 10 minutes - my topics for the week. I'll talk about things that have come up in the past week, share updates on efforts that have specific relevance to the work you're doing, and follow up on things we discussed in earlier one-on-ones.*

Third 10 minutes - your professional and career development. We'll talk about your career goals and what we can both do to help you get there. Maybe there are areas of research you'd like to be more involved in, or technologies you'd like to learn more about; if we're discussing these regularly then I'll be better able to take them into account when opportunities come up. After our first few meetings this may not be something we have items to discuss every single week; for those weeks it'll be 15 minutes/15 minutes.

I'll send out a signup sheet early next week with times, but let's talk about it first and answer any questions you have.

Your Assignment

Rework the text above and make the announcement. Whether done "live" or by mail take careful note of the responses. Who seems eager, who seems reluctant, who has a lot of questions? That's going to be important data going into the one-on-ones.

Resources

Some resources you could share with your team members about what one-on-ones look like from their point of view include:

- A page from the Letters to a New Developer Blog: How To Manage One-On-Ones.
- A page from a Julia Evans zine: What to talk about in one-on-ones (for individual contributors).

FAQs

Q: What if some of my team members are skeptical?

There's a lot of reasons that people could be reluctant to meet with you regularly. They might secretly feel like they're underperforming and worry they're about to get chewed out or discovered (I've had this happen with two *very* high-performing team members). They might have had a really terrible relationship with two-bosses-ago and as a result are wary of closer interactions with you. There's no real way to know.

However, the people who are skeptical and reluctant are the people it is **most** important for you to meet with, because they're the ones that you most need to build a trusting working relationship with. Their wariness is extremely important data.

Week 2 - Scheduling and Answering Questions

Monday - Sending Out The Invitations

You've done the hardest parts of preparation now - found spots in your calendar, identified starting points for discussions with each of your team members, and gave a heads-up. Today's easy, but it's the key - you send out the email (or slack message, or..) to get people signing up for the slots you set aside last week.

Make sure that the times you've looked up last week ago are still available to be signed up for, and create a signup sheet. Pick your favourite way of doing that, in rough order of least work-for-you to most:

- Google doc sign-up spreadsheet: Set up a google doc spreadsheet (or Office 365 Excel sheet or whatever you use) with the times in one column and the next column being who gets that slot. Make it nice-looking if you want; you now have a signup sheet.

- Doodle poll - In Doodle under Poll Settings you can "Limit the number of choices per option" to one, so first person to pick the option gets it.

- Email - just have them email you with their preferred time.

With that done you're ready to send off the announcement and begin the signups!

Here's a perfectly good email asking for signups. If the letter strikes you as good enough, then fill in the blanks and send it off. If you want to rework or rewrite it to be in your own voice, absolutely do so: but send it off.

> *Hi team:*
>
> *As I mentioned last week, I'd like to start having weekly half-hour one-on-one meetings with each of you individually. As a reminder, these aren't status update meetings; it's a meeting for you to tell me how things are going, ask questions about our projects, let me know what you need help with, or to tell me things you need from me. I'll have some questions for you about how things are going, and will give any input I have on what's gone on in the past week. And we'll have an opportunity to spend some time each meeting talking about your professional*

development and career goals. Below is the information we talked about last time, about agenda and goals fo these meetings.

We'll have these meetings over [videoconference]. [Details].

I've setup a sign up sheet for time slots at [google doc/doodle poll/here in the rest of the email]; let me know your first choice for times (first come, first served!) After a couple weeks we can adjust the times if we need to.

We'll begin on [start date]; I'm looking forward to starting having these conversations with you.

Let me know if you have any questions.

Best wishes, [You]

[Include text from announcement last week]

Your assignment

If today is your weekly team meeting, remind them about content of the letter before sending it out. Then get the times signup ready in whatever format you like. Rework the email as necessary, and send it off. You're done!

Resources

As with the heads-up announcement, resources you could share with your team members about what one-on-ones look like from their point of view include:

- A page from the Letters to a New Developer Blog: How To Manage One-On-Ones.
- A page from a Julia Evans zine: What to talk about in one-on-ones (for individual contributors).

FAQs

Q: Isn't this… not a lot of notice for my team?

A: It's not really that sudden. They heard about this last week (and maybe again this week if you've already had your weekly team meeting), and they have anywhere from 7-11 days before their one-on-one.

If you really think it's going to be an issue, skip the first few meeting times in the list and have them starting in the following week (week four) give you and your team an extra couple of days to talk it through. But it's not like they have to prepare a presentation or something for the first meeting. It's you and each of them talking.

Q: What if one of my team members won't sign up?

A: So imagine you - possibly younger, but maybe not - getting an offer for more and regular face time with your boss, especially during a time of uncertainty. Do you run away, or jump on it instantly?

Once you send this out, most if not all of your team members are going to sign up before the electrons in your email have cooled down. We'll talk the next couple days about how to handle the theoretically-possible occasional reluctant team member; but remember that asking your team members to attend one half-hour meeting a week is a perfectly reasonable thing to ask, even with short notice, and even under completely normal circumstances.

Q: I'm still not sure about this scheduled meetings thing - can't I just play it by ear every week and schedule them on the fly?

A: I mean, you can do anything you want. But if you want valuable one-on-one meetings, this is the way to do it.

"Playing it by ear" just isn't efficient; if you thought finding gaps in your calendar and matching them to people took some time during this process, imagine doing it every single week.

But more importantly, these meetings are about your team members, and what matters to them is the certainty of knowing they have time on your schedule.

What would be more stressful for you - your boss arranging to meet with at some prearranged time like every Wednesday at 2pm (or whatever), or every week waiting for your boss to suddenly and randomly saying "Hey, are you free now?"

Yes, your schedule might get moved around if things get busy — but when things are busy, stuff that's scheduled probably gets done (even if it gets done at a different time than originally planned), and stuff that isn't on your schedule likely just gets dropped.

These meetings are for and about your team members, and for them to be valuable, your team members need the certainty of having first dibs on a slot in your calendar. Catch-as-catch-can is probably how you're doing things now; the value in this is setting up something more regular.

Tuesday - Answering Signups and Preparing Notes - Part 1

So you've sent out the email yesterday, and you're starting to get answers and maybe some questions. Today you'll respond to some of those questions and get ready to start.

First, notice how many of your slots are already filled. People by and large want time with you, and are happy to have it. If you're using google docs for a signup sheet, check out in "version history" the time that first slot got snapped up. Fast, right?

Start putting the signups in your calendar as recurring events, with no end date. (You can always move around individual events, or add an end date later). If you use email invitations yourself, include the team member on the event and send them an invite, even if you don't usually do that internally, so they know they're on your calendar. Thank them for signing up so quickly, and tell them you look forward to your conversation.

You might be getting some questions from some team members: what to expect from these meetings, they are so new, do they need to prepare anything. Those could be over email/slack, or if you have your weekly team meeting today it could be in person. These questions are (qualitative) data! Make note of them in the document you started two days ago for each team member. These are team members who might need help with change, or maybe they are team members you'll need to work a little harder with developing trust with, and the one-on-ones will help with that. On the other hand they were comfortable enough with you to raise the question to you directly. Don't try to interpret the data yet - just note that they had questions about the one-on-ones and what they were.

Answer the questions that you get (and if you get several versions of the same question, it might also be useful to send out the answer to the whole team). Also, it might be good to send out a reminder note to nudge the stragglers.

The other thing to do today is to get some note-taking forms ready for use during the one-on-one. The details of the form don't matter much - there needs to be a place to take notes on what they told you; to put reminders for things you want to talk about; and place to write down things that have to be done for followup (either by you or by them). We'll populate the "things you want to talk about" portion tomorrow.

The key to taking the notes once you're in the meeting is to (a) take notes like it's a meeting, not like it's a class - more about this in a minute - and (b) take notes without a keyboard.

Yes, on paper. Like an animal.

Or on electronic paper - I use my iPad + stylus.

The key here is to take notes in a way that show you're paying attention. Even remotely via teleconference, typing notes in a document doesn't do that. Again, when in doubt, imagine yourself in one-on-ones with someone you report to. You're talking to them, they're nodding and typing along; you stop talking, and they keep typing for a minute or so, then look up. How paid-attention-to do you feel? I mean, sure, they're probably taking notes - or maybe they're firing off a quick response to an email or sending someone a slack message.

Remember, a principle goal of these meetings is the team member understanding that they have your undivided attention for a non-trivial amount of time every week. You leaning off to the side, scribbling something down, and coming up with a pen in your hand occasionally is completely unambiguous.

On my iPad, I have a notebook for each team member (I use Goodnotes, there's a lot of other good ones out there too), and before each meeting I set up one page with the date on it for stuff they're telling me about, one page for me that I can put things that I want to talk about, and I use the bottom of each page for follow-up items.

The other key note-taking thing is to take notes like you would for a meeting, not like you would for a class. We in academia-adjacent fields can be really bad about this. We've spent a lot of time in class and lectures and symposia and colloquia writing down all the information being presented like any of it might be on the exam. That's easier when you're doing the note taking - you don't have to make decisions about what's important and what's not - but it means that it's more work to use the notes later, since everything's there no matter how important it was. And in our line of work we know that stuff is read many more times than it's written.

So while you're taking notes, try to focus on the important things; specific things they say or do that you want to remember, things that need to be followed up on, surprises, etc. This will make you a more careful listener, too. If you're not sure if something was important, ask a followup question about it and you'll find out pretty quickly. Useful multi-purpose followup prompts every research computing manager should have in their toolbox include: “Tell me more about that.” “That sounds tricky.” and “What are some options for handling that?”

Your assignment

As above; add the meetings to your calendar as the signups come in, and answer any questions that you get.   Get some note taking forms ready for your meetings; we’ll populate them with some initial questions and topics tomorrow. Just make sure there’s some room at the start of the form for what they tell or ask you (because they go first), a place for you to write down things you want to talk about (we’ll put stuff there tomorrow), and a place to take note of things that need to be followed-up on, by either of you.

Resources

Manager-Tools podcast - At the end of the page (look for downloads) there’s a template form for taking notes and question prompts: the "1-on-1 Key Points and Prep Form”, in PDF or word. It’s a good starting point for your notes form if you want to use it.

FAQs

Q: Seriously, on paper?

A: Like an animal, yes.

Q: C’mon.

A: You c’mon.

Q: Ok, fine. What if one of the filled slots has already been stomped on by a meeting that’s come up for me?

A: It happens, and there’s no sense in pretending it won’t. Just let the team member know; it’ll give them a model of what might happen in the future. “Hey Lawrence - I’ve got you in my calendar for 11:30am on Tuesdays now - thanks for signing up! Something just came up for our slot this week - it’s a one-off and I tried to have it rescheduled but I can’t avoid it. Can we do 3pm on Thursday for just this week?” This is one of the reasons you made sure there were a few extra slots. Maybe X-out that replacement slot from the signup sheet if people are still signing up.

Q: Should we set up some kind of shared agenda so we can each see what topics we each have?

A: Some teams find that extremely useful, and some don't. Tools inevitably shape the work they're used for, so you and your team still need to figure out the best way to run these for your particular work first. Hold off on integrating tooling into these meetings for now until you have a better sense of what you need. After a couple weeks of one-on-ones is a good time to take stock and see might would be helpful.

Wednesday - Answering Signups and Preparing Notes - Part 2

Great! You're nearly there. Signups are rolling in, people are getting used to the idea, and you can continue your preparation.

You'll need to think about some questions before hand for the one-on-ones, so that if they're quiet you can still elicit information about how they're doing, and you can find out things you're curious about how they're working, how the team is functioning together, and the like.

Your assignment

Continue adding the meetings to your calendar as the signups come in, continue answering any questions that you get. If there are people who haven't signed up, send a reminder message.

Review some of the one-on-one question lists below, or other you've seen, and choose some open-ended "how are you doing"-type questions that seem like a good match for each employee. Add them to the note-taking forms from Monday. Add a few that seem relevant to the topics you'd like to cover with them. Remember, the first few one-on-ones are all about opening lines of discussion You want to be asking questions, and following up, not talking very much.

Resources

- The Ultimate List of One on One Meeting Questions, Peoplebox.ai
- How to coach employees? Ask these 1-on-1 meeting questions, Know your team
- Managers, Take Your 1:1s to the Next Level with These 6 Must Reads, First Round Review

Week 3 - The First One-on-Ones

Monday Morning - Getting Ready

This is almost it! All, or at least most, of your team has signed up for one-on-ones; by the end of the day you will have had your team meeting at some point where you'll have either given the team members a heads-up or answered some questions; you have note sheets ready for notes. Today you'll handle anyone who hasn't signed up yet and get started.

It's really unlikely that at this point you still have someone who hasn't signed up for a one-on-one slot after you've answered questions and sent out a reminder. I'm including what to do if it does happen, because people will ask otherwise, but understand that this isn't the common case.

If you do have someone dragging their feet, this is the time to follow up with them. (And the fact that you have to follow up with them is also data which is worth recording. Maybe it's reluctance, maybe they're overwhelmed, maybe it's a lot of things — you don't know yet, but there's something there). Find out if they have questions; be genuinely curious about their reasons for not signing up, don't assume a reason (this is a time of a lot of change and disruption, we're all going through a lot right now). Try to get to the reason it hasn't been done yet, do what you can to address it, and directly ask them to choose one of the remaining times by the end of the day.

If by the end of the day they still haven't signed up, sign them up for one of the remaining slots - the latest one that's still available, ideally - and send them the invitation. Yes, this is a little heavy-handed, but you've asked them three times now over the course of over a week to complete a very simple and reasonable task. Either they are reluctant because of work-related reasons, or overwhelmed because of potentially non-work-related-reasons, and either way having individual conversations with them is the right thing to do, and your duty as their manager.

Ok, so by the end of the day you will have everyone signed up for one-on-one slots. Now it's time to make sure you know what you'll be talking about in your time.

Pull out the document you wrote three days ago covering each team member, and the forms from last week, and pick a few other easy things you'd like to cover in your first one-on-one together with each of the team members now that you've had a chance to think. Maybe it's about something coming up that's relevant to them, maybe it's a check in on a project that hasn't come up in a while, maybe you've been thinking about getting them to give more presentations and you wonder if that's something they'd be up for. Make a note to ask how they're doing, and whether they think the team is working well in this new mode, and if they have any suggestions for things the team could do differently or start doing.

Note that this is really not the time to bring up that thing that really bugs you but you haven't mentioned yet because you've been waiting to have "the talk". This is not the time for "the talk". If you start a new practice like one-on-ones and then immediately drop something like that on them, especially if it's from a while ago and they had no idea, they'll feel ambushed — and they won't be wrong.

Now I'm a big believer in giving corrective feedback (even though I still find it really hard!) and in research computing, not giving enough negative feedback is a much bigger problem than giving too much. But this meeting series is about them, and developing a solid working relationship and trust. When that's done, then among other things it will be easier for you to give and them to receive respectful, helpful, negative feedback, and have it taken in the spirit it's intended. But building that relationship and trust, especially with everything else changing around us, will take time.

Lean way into the positive for now. (Again, big believer in the usefulness of good negative feedback, but people often forget how powerful and effective positive feedback is in encouraging the behaviour that the team needs and helping a team member grow to reach their potential.) If they've been working at anything even approaching their normal productivity these past weeks, there's lots to give positive feedback about! It's ok to point out some small negative things you saw in the last week or so — nudge them about being better with "mute" on Zoom, remind them about that code review that's still pending, ask them to be on time to the next team call, whatever — but don't poison these meetings for the team member by introducing some big negative topic early on, and do not dig up anything that's more than a couple of weeks old.

For this week, preparing for the career development section is really easy. Unless you've had this conversation very recently, just make a note to ask them what their medium and long term career goals are now, and what skills and experience they'd like to develop to get there.

And that's it. Everyone's signed up; the one-on-one forms are ready and waiting; now the one-on-ones start. You're all ready – you can do this!

Resources

- One-on-Ons app - Random one-on-one questions

FAQs

Q: More of a comment than a question - This whole thing is a lot of work?

A: Kind of, yeah. But it's a lot more work getting them started than keeping them going. Once everything is set up, it only takes a few minutes a week per team member in addition to the meetings to get all of the benefits of one-on-ones – which will help your team members and help you.

Q: I've gone back and forth with one team member and answered their questions and they still seem reluctant; what should I say?

A: "I look forward to speaking more about this with you Wednesdays at 1pm."

Seriously, there are very few times when "because I'm the boss" is a good enough reason; these sort of process details about how the team will work together is exactly one of those times. It's good to hear their concerns if they have any, you should respect those concerns, and you should expect them to show up for the one-on-one.

Wednesday - Reminders

One on ones are happening! The first few one-on-ones meetings may seem a little awkward and stilted, but they'll quickly grow more comfortable as you get the hang of them.

Keep in mind the principles:

- The meeting is scheduled and at a regular time every week.
- This is about building working relationships.
- This isn't a status update: the meeting is about your team member, not you.
- So, the the team member and their agenda goes first, every time.
- Take notes in a way that shows you're paying attention.
- Followup is crucial.
- When in doubt, imagine having one-on-ones with someone you report to.

You've already got the first one done, by creating the scheduling, and you've got the note-taking sorted. Now you just have conversations with your team members.

If I could recommend any tactics for the conversations, I'd just say:

1. They go first. Kick off with "What would you like to talk about?" or something similar to hand over the agenda to them.
2. Listen a lot more than you speak, and ask a lot of high-level questions and followup questions.
3. Let them go long for their part if they want to this time. The career development conversation can wait another week. If it gets to 20-25 minutes and you really want to cover your topics this week, see if you can gently interrupt; but remember, you're the boss, you can talk to them about your stuff any time you want.
4. Take notes and highlight the things to follow up on. Make sure those followup items end up on your todo list.
5. Focus mostly on the positive for the first few meetings.

Your assignment: Keep having one-on-ones!

Friday - How’s It Going?

You’re done your first week of one-on-ones, just three weeks after starting the process. Congratulations, this is a big milestone. How's it going?

This is a good time to glance through the notes from the first few one-on-ones. What are you learning that you didn’t know this time last week? Have you already helped some of your team members solve a problem they were having?

Be sure to add the things you said you’d followup on to whatever task list system you use. Having the conversations with your team members builds a good working relationship; but it’s following up on the things you said you’d do that builds trust. Did the team member ask you for some information? To contact someone for them? To get something un-stuck in administration? Add it to your list and get them done before the next one-on-one. That, more than anything else, will prove to them you were listening and care about what you heard.

Week 4 - The Second One-on-Ones

Monday Morning - Reviewing Week One - What Went Well, and Planning for Week Two

So the benefits I listed on day one of getting started with one-on-ones were:

- Understand your team member better and so build solid working relationships.
- Build trust with your team member.
- Make your team member feel more important and engaged, and likely to raise issues with you.
- Learn much more about what's actually going on with the work your team is doing.

Building trust will take more than a week; setting that one aside, do you feel that there are team members you already understand a bit better? How did the team members seem to react to having your attention for 30 minutes? Did you learn anything about the work being done that surprised you?

Scan those one-on-one notes again and update the document on your team members with things you learned. It could be very work-related things like career goals, or it could be things like the names of their pets - if they told you about it, it's important to them, so it's important to you.

Of the team members, who had a lot to say? Did some go better than others? How are you doing with the follow up tasks? Do those followup tasks suggest new topics of discussion for next week?

Now start putting together the one-on-one notes for next week. Have you learned something - maybe a question - that worked really well with one team member and you want to try with others? What's come up over the last week that you'd like to talk about?

Congratulations - you're done with week one, and starting week two! Preparing this does take a little time each week, and it will always take time, but it will be easier as the weeks go on.

Friday - Reviewing Week Two - What Went Well, and Thinking of Future One-on-Ones

Fantastic. Two weeks of one-on-ones!

You're now starting to get the hang of this, and seeing what works and what doesn't.

This might be a good time to take stock and see if there are things that would help the process go more smoothly. Have there been topics that have come up that some preparation would have been good for? Maybe it would be useful to have some kind of shared agenda. Some groups just have a google doc for each team member shared with the manager, and that can work nicely.

If that would be useful, consider raising it at the next team meeting. But for heaven's sake, before you put any item on it, think about it from the direct's point of view. If your one-on-one is a Thursday, and on Monday you enter an agenda item like "Performance on Project X" or "Your future in the department", your team member is going to have *a very bad week*. Be much more explicit and include context: "Project X review: 5 things that went well, one thing to tweak for next time", or "Opportunities opening up elsewhere in the department".

If you'd like more specialized tools, there's a bunch of promising seeming ones; I'll list some of heard of below in the resources.

Those tools might be helpful to you, or might not; our team doesn't even use a shared agenda, but research computing is incredibly diverse and your teams needs will be different from ours. If there are any tools you find that make your teams' one-on-ones easier and more successful, by all means use them (and let me know!)

You're done! Congratulations again, and best of luck to you and your research computing team!

Resources

- https://soapboxhq.com/
- getlighthouse.com
- https://knowyourteam.com/

- https://www.fellow.app/
- https://teambit.io/
- https://www.fellow.app/
- https://www.small-improvements.com/

FAQs

Q: So this isn't as bad as I thought it was going to be, but I'm still not convinced. Should I just drop them?

A: Do me a favour? Keep them going for two months. Have them become part of the routine way you manage. Get input from your team members. Then do what you think is best.

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