

Conversation: Get more from 1-on-1s with your boss

One-on-ones are your chance to get clarity on your manager's expectations, your team and company goals, and how your work fits into the bigger picture. Are you taking charge of these important meetings?

Leadership coach Maria “Sully” Sullivan discusses what questions to ask, how to create a strong agenda, and what to do if the conversation gets emotional.

Listen to the conversation—or read the full transcript below.

Coach Maria “Sully” Sullivan discusses how to get what you need out of every 1-on-1 meeting with your manager.

Audio Player

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Transcript

Heather Kathryn Ross:

Hi. I'm Heather Ross, an editor at Jhana, and I'm here with Maria Sullivan, one of our most experienced coaches. Could you say a few words about yourself?

Maria Sullivan:

Thank you—happy to be here today. My job is to help leaders be better leaders and to be more human to the people who work with them.

Ross:

Today we're going to be talking about 1-on-1s. Could you talk a bit about what individual contributors can get out of 1-on-1 meetings with their managers? Why should we be excited to have them?

Sullivan:

The value of 1-on-1s for individual contributors is the opportunity to be sure that you're aligned with your leader—the opportunity to make sure that you understand contextually how your work fits into the bigger picture, but also the nuance. How is the work of you and your team members—how is that seen by others? Why is it valuable? What more would they want from you? These are all things that your boss can help you see and understand and contextualize during these 1-on-1s.

There's also a chance to get guidance. Your 1-on-1 gives your leader a chance to help you answer—and maybe even reframe or redirect—some of the requests that you're getting from customers or from internal stakeholders.

Ross:

What kinds of questions could you bring your manager to generate really fruitful conversations in your 1-on-1?

Sullivan:

As someone who wants to progress in the organization, it's important to understand how your work fits with the mission of the organization. So always be asking yourself and anyone who will talk with you about it: *"How do we fit? What is it that we could do to be more effective for our customers or our clients or our internal stakeholders?"* You want to be acting as if and thinking as if you were working at that next level. So what are their questions and how are they trying to answer them and how can I help them get to those answers?

One of the symbols or the signals of high potentiality is the ability to think ahead and to be more strategic and broader in our thinking than just executing tasks that we've been given. One-on-ones are a great way to say, *"How does that task that you gave me fit into the bigger mission, the bigger vision, the bigger strategy of where we're trying to go? And if you were going to piece those tasks together, boss, into a picture of what the problem we're trying to solve is, what is that problem and how else can we help you solve it?"*

Ross:

How should you prepare for a 1-on-1 meeting?

Sullivan:

Have a place where you jot down the agenda items that you might have to talk about with them as you go through your week. You might have something that you need to update them on, something you want to ask them a question about, something you want to alert them to. Make sure that you have a place to note that so when you get there, you've got a selection of things that are appropriate for that conversation.

Ross:

How else can someone make sure they're covering the subjects and questions that are most important to them, especially if their manager tends to be a big talker or take over the meeting for themselves?

Sullivan:

I'd start the meeting by saying, *"I'm excited to get a chance to talk to you today. I have a couple of things I'd like to update you on and then I have a couple of things I'd like to discuss further to get your guidance. Is there anything else we should be looking to include?"*

That'll give them a signal that you've got an agenda—and you can either share that with them in advance in writing, if they're that kind of boss, or you can have it with you in the conversation. But either way, you're signaling that you've set the time aside and you've structured the conversation in your mind to get what you need out of it. And most bosses at that point will say, "Awesome, you've taken responsibility for this meeting. Let me be of assistance to you, instead of having to drive the meeting."

What you don't want to do is to show up and say, "What would you like to talk about, boss?" because that puts all of the weight of the meeting on them. The fact that you come with an agenda and a specific set of questions—and better yet some insights for them so they can learn from you—that makes it an easy meeting for them to want to engage in. And you'll get a better response that way.

Ross:

If you sense that your manager is feeling rushed, would you say something to recalibrate the discussion or just hold what you want to talk about until they're in a better mental space?

Sullivan:

I think you have to work at that based on your relationship with them. It may be appropriate for you to say, *"Look, I've got a couple of really deep things to talk with you about. Right now might not be the right time."* Or it might be OK to say, *"It seems as though you're preoccupied or rushed or we don't have a full session today. Would you like the time back and we can reschedule?"* Give them an out and don't make them wrong—just call out what you are experiencing.

Ross:

Speaking of rescheduling, if your manager has a 1-on-1 set with you and they cancel it, what would be the best way to approach them about rescheduling?

Sullivan:

Best practice is to have a regularly scheduled 1-on-1. So if you were in a situation where one was canceled, you'd at least know when the next one was going to be. If that's not the case, then it's perfectly appropriate to say—you can do this either in person or via email—*"I was looking forward to our conversation. I'd love to reschedule it at your earliest convenience. Would Tuesday work for you?"* And to let them know that it is your intention to make it valuable to them and to you.

If it isn't rescheduled, don't take that as a sign that it won't be—follow up. If you want a 1-on-1, it's perfectly appropriate to ask for one and to expect one to be scheduled. Yes, I know your boss is busy. Everybody's busy. Part of your boss's job is to make sure that you have time to connect with them.

Ross:

Are there certain topics where it would be better to give your manager a heads up in advance in your agenda—things like development conversations or feedback?

Sullivan:

Absolutely. It's important to let them know in advance if you want to have a conversation for instance about your career experiences or your individual development or team dynamic. Any one of those topics is something that they're going to want to be ready for. So give them a couple of sentences of context and say, *"In one of our next 1-on-1s..."* or schedule a meeting specifically for those topics. But you want to give them time to prepare so that those conversations don't come up by accident.

Ross:

What happens if you're in a 1-on-1 and the conversation gets emotional? You're feeling anxious—maybe you even start to cry. Do you have any advice for navigating that situation?

Sullivan:

Sometimes tough topics come up. Your leader may have for you feedback that's tough to hear. They may have for you commentary about your work or even your performance that's tough to hear. That's OK—that's a gift to you because it allows you to calibrate their expectations and allows you to grow and develop as a contributor going forward.

Now, sometimes emotion comes up in that moment. It's OK to say, *"Gosh, I'm having some strong feelings about that. I want to hear more, but I need a little bit of time to clear my head. Can we reschedule or schedule another 15 minutes to talk more about this once I've had a chance to digest some of the feedback that you've given me?"* What a great way to signal to your leader that you are welcoming the feedback and that you are self-aware enough to know that you can't hear any more and be appropriate in the workplace, so that you get a chance to process that and learn more from it.

So don't shy away from a 1-on-1 because the topic is hard or because you know you're going to get feedback that may be critical. In both of those circumstances, you're going to learn, and the opportunity to learn is so rare. We want to make sure that you are fully present for that, which means if you need to put a bookmark in it and come back, that's just fine. Your leader will understand.

Ross:

Are there other ways that you can help your manager make your 1-on-1s better?

Sullivan:

I think it's worth always letting your manager know that you appreciate the time and the attention that they pay in 1-on-1s. It's easy for them to not understand the positive impact that these 1-on-1s can have. And so by you simply saying, *"Thank you. It's really great to get your insight on this. It's really great to get your direction or your guidance on that particular topic,"* I think that that helps with encouraging them to continue to make it a priority in their schedule.

Ross:

Is there anything else you'd like individual contributors to know as they approach their next 1-on-1s?

Sullivan:

Give yourself permission as an employee to need to be well-managed. Part of what comes up when we talk about 1-on-1s is a sense that whatever you have to say or whatever you want to ask isn't that important, or your leader's too busy. Nothing could be further from the truth. Your alignment, your sense of connection, and your contributions are what make us successful. In order to maximize those, you need to have a 1-on-1 with your leader.

Ross:

Thank you so much for chatting with me today. It's been great to have you.

Sullivan:

My pleasure. Always happy to help in any way I can.

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