

A Supervisor Guide to One-on-Ones

A useful one-on-one helps a supervisee understand their progress, work through challenges, and identify what they need from you. It also gives you a fuller picture of their work than metrics or day-to-day interactions alone can provide. The form offers a structure; the conversation makes that structure useful.

Prepare with the supervisee's experience in mind

Having the supervisee complete the form beforehand gives them a chance to reflect and choose what they want to discuss. Brief notes are enough. Agree on when they will share the form so you have time to read it, review previous commitments, and prepare any feedback or decisions you need to bring.

As you read, notice what deserves recognition, what needs clarification, and where your support could make a difference. A concern about motivation, for example, might be connected to workload, unclear priorities, or limited opportunities to develop. Treat your first interpretation as something to explore in the meeting.

It can help to ask what they want from the one-on-one process itself: more feedback, help solving problems, clearer expectations, opportunities to develop, or space to think through their work. Their needs may change over time.

Use a consistent structure with room for conversation

The form follows this sequence: review previous commitments, discuss the supervisee's priorities, review metrics and supervisor topics, and agree on next steps. This gives both of you a familiar starting point while allowing some topics to receive more attention than others.

Reviewing commitments includes your own: what you agreed to do, what happened, and anything still outstanding. Then ask which of the supervisee's topics would be most useful to explore. If you have a significant concern to discuss, make it visible at the beginning so they know it is on the agenda.

Explore the answers rather than simply recording them

A brief answer may be the beginning of a useful conversation. Asking for a recent example can reveal where a process breaks down, what someone finds rewarding, or what is getting in the way. Once you understand the situation, check whether they want help thinking, a decision, feedback, or action from you.

- What feels most important for us to spend time on today?
- What has gone well that you would like me to understand or recognize?
- Can you walk me through a recent example of that challenge?
- What have you tried, and what happened?
- What would be helpful from me here?

For example, if a supervisee says they are overwhelmed, you might explore which tasks are competing, what deadlines are fixed, and what could be delayed or reassigned. That gives you a basis for a decision about the work.

Support participation in ways that fit the person

Some supervisees think best aloud; others benefit from preparing in writing or having time to consider a question. If the conversation stays general, a concrete prompt such as "Which part of your work took the most effort recently?" can make it easier to begin. A pause or a short answer does not tell you much on its own about someone's interest in their work.

Reflecting back what you heard gives the supervisee a chance to clarify. "It sounds like the priority changed, but the original deadline stayed in place. Have I understood that?" can help you reach a shared understanding before deciding what to do.

Review metrics in context

Use the metrics section to compare agreed targets with actual results and changes since the last meeting. Make sure you are discussing the same reporting period and definition of the measure. Where results are unavailable, clarify how they will be obtained.

The numbers are a starting point for understanding performance. Explore what contributed to the result, including the supervisee's choices, workload, resources, and dependencies on other people. Discuss progress as well as shortfalls, and consider quality alongside quantity where it is relevant to the role.

- What contributed to this result?
- What changed since the last meeting?
- What is working that we should continue?
- What would help you move toward the goal?

A missed target still needs a clear conversation about expectations. Understanding the context helps you identify the right response: a change in approach, additional training, clearer priorities, or support with a barrier. Record any agreed change to the goal or the support provided.

Offer feedback that gives the supervisee something to work with

Specific feedback makes it easier to recognize a strength or understand a concern. Describe what happened, its effect on the work, and what you would like to see continue or change. Invite the supervisee's perspective, especially when you may not have the full picture.

For example: "The last two reports arrived after the agreed deadline, which delayed the next team's work. What got in the way?" From there, clarify the next deadline and agree on any support needed. Recognition can be equally specific: "Your handoff notes gave the next person what they needed and reduced the follow-up questions."

Broad terms such as professionalism or commitment need concrete examples to be useful. Focus on behavior related to the role, with clear expectations applied consistently. Address urgent performance concerns when they arise; the regular one-on-one can provide space for follow-up.

Invite feedback about your supervision

The supervisee's experience of your support is part of the conversation. You might ask, "Is there something I could do differently that would help you in your role?" or "Are you getting the clarity and feedback you need from me?"

When feedback is difficult to hear, asking for an example and checking your understanding can help you respond thoughtfully. You may see the situation differently. Explain your perspective after hearing theirs, and identify anything you can clarify, change, or look into. Your response and follow-through will influence what they feel able to raise in future meetings.

Close with decisions and shared commitments

Identify what became clearer, what was decided, and what needs to happen next. Record actions from both of you, with an owner and a date. If something requires another person's decision, agree on who will pursue it and when an update will be given.

Review the notes together, including any unresolved differences, and make sure both people have a copy. A brief closing question such as "Was this useful, and what would improve our next meeting?" can help you adjust the process. Between meetings, follow through or give an update if a commitment is delayed.