

The new manager 1:1 nurturing employee resiliency during disruption and change



Editor's Note

COVID-19 impacted people around the world, challenging us to adapt to travel restrictions, school closures, and the removal of barriers between work and life—all at once. So, what does a cross-functional team of engineers, data scientists, analysts, and marketers that lives in the space between workplace culture and data do when presented with the world's largest work-from-home shift? It, well, does its homework.

In this blog series, we share real-time learnings as we measured the impact of this unprecedented shift on how one group of employees works, connects, and balances our lives.



What if the key to working less was to have more meetings? Or, more precisely, what if a single additional meeting—the 1:1 between employees and their manager—could lead to fewer meetings overall? This is one of the more surprising stories we’ve uncovered in this blog series and our research to date. We’ve got more on that later in this post, but first we need to share how we got to that finding.

When helping customers take the pulse of their organizations and drive change, we often identify the role of the manager as the critical catalyst. A Gallup study found that 70 percent of the variance in employee engagement scores across teams is explained by the quality of their managers. The same study found that great managers motivate employees to act, help them overcome adversity and resistance, and build trusting and transparent relationships. So naturally, we were curious about the role managers have been playing inside our own teams as people navigate new challenges.

We wanted to understand how the day-to-day work of leading teams has changed since we moved to remote work and see what we could learn that might help us and our customers respond now and prepare for the future. To get at this, we decided to zero in on that core aspect of managing: the relationship between managers and their direct reports.

The life of a manager within an enterprise is complex even in stable times. At Microsoft, we talk about manager expectations and excellence through the theme of “Model, Coach, Care,” which are values that only gain importance in challenging times. Given just how complex this role is, we dove deep into one of the most common manager tools—one that we know, from our prior work, is one of the most important: the 1:1 meeting with direct reports.

This simple connection point between an employee and their manager has long been studied by our Microsoft Viva Insights team, and in what academics call 'leader-member exchange' research in organization science. Research hasn't considered the current work environment, though, and so we set out to answer questions about how 1:1 meetings between managers and their direct reports have evolved in our organization, and how these meetings have impacted employees. Our findings confirm the significant power of this very simple meeting in a manager's toolkit and shed new light on how it can help stabilize an organization during disruption.

How have 1:1s changed?

Given how much has changed in our lives, we were pleasantly surprised to see that overall, managers were spending the same amount of time in 1:1s as they were before work went remote. But when we reached out to colleagues in our 300-person organization we learned that something had changed—primarily the perception and content of manager 1:1s. Their anecdotes fell into one of three categories:

1. Managers now perceive 1:1s as very essential.
2. Employee wellbeing now plays a lead role.
3. Creating clarity through prioritization is more important than ever.

Finding: Managers deemed their 1:1s with employees to be very essential meetings.

In their own words, managers told us that that 1:1 check-ins held higher priority for them, and were more essential, than in 'normal' work times:

In the past, if I had a conflict I rescheduled if it was easy, but now it's a must

Our data supports this, showing that recurring manager-employee 1:1 meetings increased by 19 percent. Whether this is driven by managers who added these meetings to their calendars for the first time, or the fact that they were no longer cancelling them in favor of conflicts, it validates the perception that these meetings are more important than ever

Finding: 1:1s are no longer just for talking about work.

We wondered: Why did 1:1s seem to matter more now? Stories shared with us offered clues. Instead of focusing mainly on current workloads and tasks, as is typically the case with regular 1:1s, these meetings now covered a more holistic range of topics:

"I'm spending more time during 1:1s checking in on how each team member, their family, and social network have been impacted by the situation since we last spoke.

A big change is the type of conversations we have as we now talk more personally about our circumstances."



Without the in-person interactions that happen in a shared office space, and given the diverse and unique challenges each of us is facing, managers appreciated this new insight into their employees' lives, interests, and constraints:

"The challenges of this time helped me understand the need to get to know my employees better and focus my efforts on their goals.

Each conversation feels like it has two layers working in concert—responding to the immediate, direct question/feedback while thinking through what my team needs to hear for their own wellbeing.

What's changed is that it's become even more important that I'm aware of how the crisis is impacting each individual team member so that we can address and adapt to their specific circumstances."

Direct reports also shared their perspective, and many comments about the value of 1:1s mirrored the managers:

"My manager asks me what I'm doing for myself, demonstrating that she values me as a whole person and prioritizes wellness.

[My manager] asks about how he can be helpful in terms of work hours and work-life balance. I think with work-from-home the 1:1s have become more useful and necessary."

Finding: Prioritization protects people.



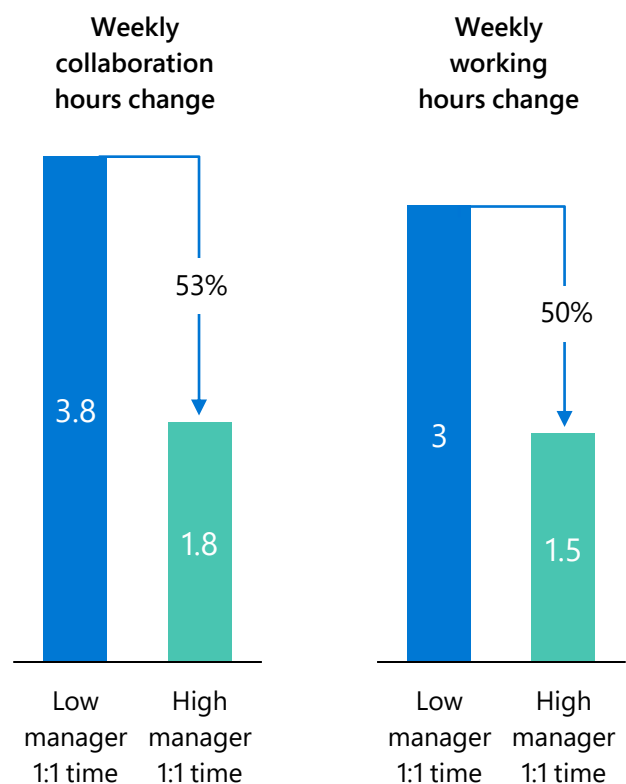
Lastly, since this situation created massive disruptions at work and at home, employees faced competing priorities. Regular conversations between an employee and their manager are often a time to address and prioritize work objectives. But in the current environment, the need to “create clarity” (which also happens to be one of Microsoft’s [leadership principles](#)) by helping employees prioritize felt nearly critical. The 1:1s helped our colleagues gain clarity, as expressed in their own words:

“The stress of today’s climate made some goals come into focus for some of my team and [led] to questions for others.

The biggest challenge has been managing workload with several pressing projects, a shortened workweek due to childcare responsibilities and keeping connected across our team.”

We knew extra clarity is good for wellbeing and leads to greater engagement, but it appears to also influence how people work. This brings us to that fascinating finding about the protective benefit of 1:1s:

Data shows manager 1:1s can lead to fewer hours worked by employees. The current situation has led to an increase in total collaboration hours and workday span for many employees. Interestingly though, employees who had the most 1:1 time with their managers experienced fewer changes to their workday span and saw a much smaller increase in total collaboration hours (50 percent less change).



Data from Microsoft's companywide daily pulse survey also supported what we found in our organization, showing correlation between employees' productivity, their ability to prioritize, and their work-life-balance. In that survey we learned that employees who receive prioritization support from their managers are 2.5 times more likely to report maintaining their productivity levels with work/life balance in comparison to those who do not receive prioritization support.













As a result of these findings, we wondered: Did the positive impact on employee resiliency from 1:1s depend on well-established practices and sustained behavior? Or was this something organizations could help managers take advantage of, even on short notice and in times of unplanned disruption, to drive a positive impact?

Finding: When manager 1:1s hadn't been a long-term habit, increasing them had an immediate benefit.

We found it is never too late to start a new norm around 1:1s. When managers and employees who hadn't been meeting 1:1 quickly increased their time together and established a regular cadence after the shift, the benefit was immediate: Those employees saw their weekly work increase half as much as those who had not met much with their managers before the shift and didn't change that habit after.

And the data suggests carrying on that behavior over time results in an even greater benefit. Those who had established this habit with their manager long before the remote-work shift experienced 65 percent less of an increase in their working hours than those who had low 1:1s.



Manager 1:1 time		Increase in work week hours	Observations
Pre-COVID	Post-COVID		
			Low 1:1s resulted in the biggest increase in people's work week
			High 1:1s, even when decreased post-shift, reduced the impact on people's work week
			Increasing 1:1s after the shift reduced the impact in people's work week
			Consistently high 1:1s reduced the impact on people's work week most

 Low manager 1:1 time  High manager 1:1 time

These insights are encouraging for us. They show us that not only do sustained 1:1s have an impact on the ability of employees to be more resilient to change and more productive with their time, but more importantly it shows it is never too late for managers to change their behaviors to drive a positive experience for their teams.



How can we help managers take advantage of these learnings?

Microsoft has been helping managers lead their teams through the shift with a tremendous amount of guidance and resources, and this analysis confirms that focus is directed in the right places. Much of this focus centers around the framework of “Model, Coach, Care,” including an emphasis on spending time with employees through 1:1s and team check-ins. In addition, tools such as MyAnalytics have manager-focused features that remind managers to maintain 1:1 connection with employees through nudges. Based on the above observations, these approaches do seem to be working.

As the weeks go by, the managers on our team have been front and center in enabling our adaptation. The data shows the managers have not only retained their focus on our employees and but also have evolved that focus to fill the needs of these unusual times. Most importantly, we see positive impacts from these actions that will help create a stronger, more robust culture as we push forward into the new normal.

Methodology: To help us chronicle the journey of our 300-person organization, we draw on data from Viva Insights to help quantify the impact on collaboration, networks and focus, explore the lived experiences of our teammates through surveys and interviews, and tap into the knowledge of experts where it helps our understanding.

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