Running Better One-to-Ones in Law Firms (That Don't Drag On Forever)

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Let's be honest: one-to-one meetings in law firms are about as welcome as a surprise SRA audit. We all know they matter—your team needs support, feedback, and the occasional nudge in the right direction. But when your calendar is already bursting with client calls and billable hours, the thought of yet another meeting is enough to make you groan.

The tension is real: you want to check in with your team, but every minute spent chatting is a minute not billing. No wonder one-to-ones often feel like a box-ticking exercise at best and a time-sink at worst.

This blog post is your shortcut to running one-to-ones that actually work for you and your team. Discover practical, bite-sized tips to make your check-ins matter, without eating into your precious fee-earning time.

Why one-to-ones often waste time in law firms

One-to-one meetings are a golden opportunity for leaders to connect with their teams. Effective legal team meetings can and should produce actionable outcomes. Unfortunately, well-intentioned one-to-ones often end up as productivity black holes for the following reasons:

Lack of structure leads to rambling

The lack of structure is a classic culprit. Without a clear agenda, one-to-ones can easily unravel into rambling discussions that drift from one subject to another without achieving very much for either party. This lack of direction also means that meetings frequently run over time, cutting into billable hours.

Viewed as competing with client work

For legal professionals, one-to-ones can feel like an unwelcome interruption that pulls them away from vital client work. The pressures of serving clients and billing hours often make it hard for lawyers to recognise any immediate value in internal check-ins. As a result, one-to-ones can be viewed as annoyances and time wasters.

Prevalence of micromanagement and vague feedback

Sometimes one-to-ones are used as a guise for micromanagement—checking up on every detail rather than trusting team members to do their jobs. Other times, feedback is so vague it's barely actionable. "Keep up the good work" sounds nice but doesn't help anyone improve or feel valued.

> "One-to-ones should never feel like an obligation or a time sink. Done right, they're a chance to build trust, spot challenges early, and keep your team energised. The key is respecting everyone's time: have a clear purpose, focus the conversation, and always follow through. I've found that when you approach one-to-ones with intent, they stop being 'another meeting' and start being your most valuable leadership tool. – Sarah Murphy, GM of Clio International."

What a productive one-to-one should actually do

A productive one-to-one should help you better manage your lawyers, and offer much more than a simple status update. With the right approach, these meetings can encourage open communication, check everyone's on the same page, and catch issues early before they turn into major problems.

Here are our top lawyer management tips for a productive one-to-one:

Create alignment without eating the whole afternoon

Set a clear agenda, agreed by both manager and fee-earner, to ensure focus and respect for everyone's time. Discuss how individual work ties into firm-wide objectives and keep meetings to an agreed length.

Improve communication, morale, and retention

Give your team members a chance to talk about what's really going on—work challenges, career aspirations, or that difficult client who's driving them up the wall. When people feel heard, morale goes up and so does retention.

Spot roadblocks early

Law is demanding, and burnout is a thing. It's better to identify issues before they blow up and offer proactive support. Ask open questions about workload and wellbeing. Listen for cues about stress, exhaustion, or frustration.

Give people a space to speak openly

Stay employee-focused, and give fee-earners the chance to speak openly about their experiences and needs. Managers should prove their commitment to their team by listening actively, taking notes, and following up on action items.

5 tips for running better one-to-ones (that don't drag on)

If you're a practice manager, partner, or team lead at a law firm, you know how precious every billable minute is. Here's how to keep your one-to-ones short, sharp, and effective:

Set a time limit (and stick to it)

Let's be honest: if you don't enforce a strict time limit, your one-to-one will expand to fill whatever space you give it. Set a clear time cap—20 minutes is plenty for most one-to-ones. Commit to starting on time and ending on time.

Setting a clear, short window forces both of you to focus on what really matters, not what's just "nice to talk about." If you're both talking when the clock runs out, that's a sign the agenda was too long or the conversations wandered. Setting time caps is an example of good time management in law firms.

Have a light agenda

A heavy agenda can bog down a one-to-one, but no agenda at all leads to aimless chatter. The sweet spot? Two or three focused prompts, shared at least a day ahead. This gives both you and the fee-earner time to prepare with relevant updates and questions, so you can both hit the ground running.

A simple agenda might look like:

- Progress on key tasks
- Recent wins
- Upcoming challenges

No need for a 12-point action plan. Your goal should be to have a focused, productive dialogue—not conduct a mini-trial.

Ask the right questions

Don't view one-to-ones as a mere status update—see them as a chance to unblock, support, and motivate your team. Ditch the "So, how's it going?" and get into the specifics.

These questions will help you turn your one-to-ones into valuable legal team performance reviews:

- "What's blocking you?"
- "What's going well?"
- "What do you need from me?"

Get to the heart of what matters and show your team members that you're there to help, not just to tick boxes. Keep your focus on the employee, listen more than you talk, and come up with ways you can offer more support.

Don't cancel them (unless you'd cancel on a client)

It may be tempting to call off a one-to-one when you're drowning in client work. But this would send a message to your team that they aren't a priority. Stick to this rule: if you wouldn't cancel on a client, don't cancel on your team.

When you keep these meetings sacred, you send a clear message to your team: "You matter." This is especially true in law firms, where people management often takes a back seat to fee-earning. Treat your team like your best client and they will reward you with both loyalty and productivity.

Keep notes (brief ones)

You don't need a full transcript, but jot down a few bullet points after each meeting covering what was discussed, any agreed actions, and follow-ups for next time. This helps you track progress without turning your meetings into admin hell.

Keeping notes also means you won't forget what you promised (or what you were promised). Tools like OneNote, Google Docs, or even a shared email thread will do the job. A written record helps you spot patterns, celebrate wins, and fix recurring issues before they snowball.

Bonus: Tools to make it easier

Running a law firm often means juggling client demands, managing a team, and staying on top of ever-changing regulations. The good news is that legal tech tools can boost your law firm's productivity while helping you reclaim your time and sanity.

Here are three important ways legal tech can make your life easier:

Tracking performance goals or objectives

Clio's Law Firm Performance Dashboard lets you monitor everything from fee targets to case progress in one place, with real-time insights you can actually use. Enjoy a comprehensive suite of features including client intake, time tracking, billing, document management and calendar management—all designed to enhance law firm productivity.

Freeing up time for better people management

The magic of legal tech isn't just the fancy dashboards or AI-powered automation. The real win is the time you get back. By automating repetitive tasks you free yourself and your team to focus on higher value work like people management. That means more time for coaching junior solicitors, checking in with colleagues, or just having a proper chat over coffee.

Shared agendas and check-in templates

You don't need complicated tech to make life easier. Shared digital agendas (Outlook, Google Calendar, or Clio's Legal Calendaring Software) keep everyone on the same page and cut down on those "When was that meeting again?" emails. Pair that with a simple check-in template where team members jot down their priorities and roadblocks, ensuring better communication and fewer surprises.

Make every minute count in your one-to-ones

Short, focused one-to-ones are a lifeline for busy law firm leaders balancing billable hours, meeting client demands, and staying on top of an overflowing inbox. By keeping these meetings brief and impactful, you get the best of both worlds: stronger relationships within your team and more time for the work that really matters.

Try running your next one-to-one with a 20-minute timer and a 3-point agenda—you might be surprised how much you get done.

About Clio

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