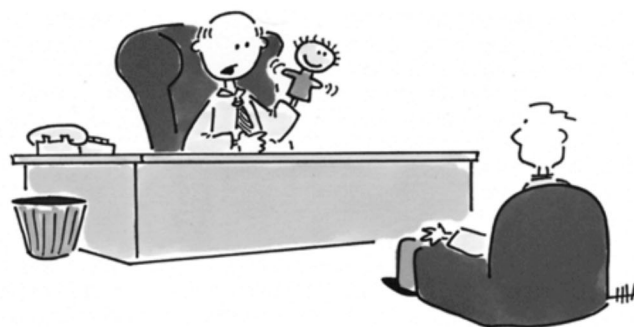


100+ questions for better 1-on-1s with your direct reports

How can you ensure that the time you spend in 1-on-1s with your direct reports is useful — for them and for you? It's not easy, especially given that these meetings are supposed to be *their* time, yet the inevitable power dynamic makes it awkward for some direct reports to take the lead.

© MARK ANDERSON

WWW.ANDERSTOONS.COM



"Well, I think those are all the questions Mr. Binky has."

One of the keys, in addition to asking your direct report to set the agenda, is to come armed with a few thoughtful questions of your own. This list can spur ideas.

To start the meeting:

Many managers like to use the same, unassuming opener each week to start 1-on-1s. It may seem boring, but doing so encourages direct reports to drive the conversation by starting with a topic they want to talk about (remember, it's their meeting). The answer will also help you gauge how they're feeling that week.

1. How' s it going?
2. So, what' s on your mind?

3. What would you like to start with?

4. Hey, what' s going on?

To gauge job satisfaction:

Proactive questions about job satisfaction can help you unearth issues before they become full-blown problems — and lead to unwanted turnover. Some direct reports are more forthcoming than others, so even if the answers to these questions sound positive, listen for clues to deeper issues, and ask plenty of follow-up questions.

5. How are you feeling about your role?

6. Are you happy here? What makes you say that?

7. Do you feel like you' re growing in your role? What makes you say that?

8. What interests you about the project(s) you' re currently working on, and why?

9. What is your favorite/least favorite thing about your work right now?

10. How do you think that least favorite thing affects your overall performance?

11. What' s working well for you in your current position?

12. What would you like to see change?

13. In what ways does your current position allow you to use your skills and talents?

14. Which areas make you feel like your hands are tied or you are unable to reach your full potential?

15. What do you think you could be doing differently?

16. If you could work on anything for the next month, what would it be? What makes you say that?

17. What's one thing that could make your work more satisfying, and why?

18. Which areas would you would like more feedback on?

To address career development:

Some direct reports may have a career path fully mapped out, down to desired promotion dates. Others may have no clue what they want to do next. No matter where your direct reports stand, it's worth bringing up career development in your 1-on-1s to ensure you get the best out of your team and keep people happy in the long term. For more see our [Career Management for Your Team](#) topic.

19. What are some of the work projects you're most proud of, and what do you think you might want to do next?

20. What are two to three new skills you'd like to learn on the job? What about those skills interests you?

21. What other roles here could you see yourself in down the line? Or what areas would you like to explore?

22. If you were to create your ideal position, how would it differ from what you are currently doing?

23. How is your current work helping or hurting your professional development?

24. Which career or development goals do you feel like you're not able to focus on right now?

25. What else can I be doing to help you grow/advance in your career?

26. Imagine it's two years from now, and things have gone well: What has been your role in that? What does your role look like?

27. Have you given any more thought to your long-term goals since our last meeting? What are your latest thoughts?

28. Where do you see yourself in three years? Five years?

29. What professional goals would you like to accomplish in the next 6 to 12 months, and what makes you say that?

30. To help identify and clarify the goal: What do you want to achieve? What will you do to achieve it? When will you do it? Who do you need to involve? When should you see results?

31. What about this goal is important to you and what will be different when you achieve the goal?

To gauge how the person is feeling about the company:

These types of questions may yield good ideas you want to pass upward in the company, or at least give you an opportunity to explain why company decisions have been made the way they have. They'll also give you insight into another facet of the person's job satisfaction.

32. What's the biggest opportunity we're missing out on?

33. If we could improve in any way as a company, how would we do it?

34. What would you like to see change here? Why do you say that?

35. What's the No. 1 problem with our organization, and what do you think's causing it?

36. What are we not doing that we should be doing? What makes you say that?

37. What are we doing that you think we should stop doing, and why?

38. How are you feeling about the company's future overall? What makes you say that?

To gauge how the person is feeling about the team:

You want to be sure your team is functioning at a high level, and here's a chance to uncover problems and opportunities that will benefit everyone.

39. How would you describe the personality of the team? What sort of person would be a good fit here? What sort of person would add something we're currently missing?
40. How would you say we're doing at working together as a team? What makes you say that?
41. What are some ways we could improve at teamwork? What makes you say that?
42. Who would you like to work more/less often with? Why?
43. How would you describe the division of work among team members?
44. Do you feel adequately supported by other team members? What makes you say that?
45. Is there anything you'd like to see change about the team, and if so, why?

To check in on how the person's coping with a recent change at work:

Change is inevitable. And no matter what type it is — layoffs, a company merger, a shift in strategy — change is more of a process than a single event. Make sure to check in with direct reports on how it's going when something has changed in their work life.

46. How are you feeling about the recent news? Why do you say that?
47. What concerns do you have about the change that haven't been addressed?
48. What's going well and not so well with the new situation/development? Why do you think this might be happening?
49. Do you have a clear understanding of the new goals and expectations? What makes you say that?
50. How is the new situation/development affecting your work? What could be getting in the way of your being effective?

To learn more about a project:

These questions go beyond a status update to help you learn about what your direct report finds engaging, as well as challenges or roadblocks you may be able to help with.

51. How are you feeling about the project?

52. What aspect of this project has been particularly interesting for you?

53. What do you feel like you're learning from this project?

54. What frustrates you about the project?

55. Which areas would you like to spend more time on and why?

56. What do you think has gone well? What do you think you could have done better? What, if anything, would you like to do, but haven't been able to?

57. What can I do to make things more manageable?

58. How might I make this project more challenging or interesting for you?

59. What do you think I should know about the project, but might not?

To learn your direct report's biggest challenges:

For some, discussing a challenge is like admitting a failure. Let your direct report know that you want to hear about their concerns because you care about making things better.

60. What is the biggest challenge you are currently facing? How can I help with that?

61. At what point in the past week were you most frustrated with or discouraged by your work? What can I do to help you manage that?

62. What are your biggest concerns about your current project(s)?

63. I've noticed X about the project... Can you help me understand that better? Talk me through your process.

64. Which parts of your project are unclear or confusing?

65. How is your workload right now?

66. How has your work/life balance been lately?

67. What sort of resources could you use right now to make things more manageable?

To draw out an issue:

If your direct report seems to stop short or gives a curt response on a topic where you think there may be important issues lurking beneath the surface, use open-ended questions to encourage them to continue.

68. Could you tell me a little more about that?

69. Can you share some of the details around that particular issue? (Who was involved? Where? When? For how long?)

70. What was that experience like for you?

71. What did you like most/least about that?

72. How did that affect you?

73. How did that make you feel?

74. If you could change what happened, how would you alter it?

75. What do you think caused that to happen?

To coach a direct report on a problem:

Coaching can be a powerful way to encourage, empower, and help direct reports to solve their own problems. Ask questions that help the person establish a goal outcome, explore the situation, generate a set of potential solutions, and finally plan the way forward. For more, see our [Coaching](#) topic.

76. What's your No. 1 problem right now? How are you feeling about it?

77. What would be the most helpful thing for you to take away from this conversation in order to make progress on it?

78. What have you tried so far to make progress on it?

79. What ideas can you bring in from past successes?

80. What haven't you tried yet?

81. What are some possible ways to get the solution you need?

82. What additional resources from me would be helpful for you as you solve this problem?

83. What are your next steps to make progress on this problem?

To promote continuity between meetings:

Your 1-on-1s will be more effective in the long term if you follow up on the topics, goals, and actions discussed in previous meetings and set items for follow up next time.

84. What sort of progress have you made on the next steps we discussed last time?

85. In our last 1-on-1 you mentioned that you'd like to grow in X — how has that been going?

86. In our last 1-on-1 you mentioned you were frustrated by X and wanted to try Y as a solution. How has that been going?

87. What development areas do you want to work on in the coming weeks?

88. What actions will you take before our next 1-on-1 to make progress on X? (Also discuss and agree on actions you will take to help.)

89. During this meeting you've mentioned that you'd like to pursue X. What steps can you take toward that before our next 1-on-1?

90. What additional resources can I provide for you between now and the next time we meet?

If you feel like your 1-on-1s are stuck in a rut, or ineffective:

You want a 1-on-1 to be a good use of your time, as well as your direct report's. Sometimes a simple change of scenery can help. Other times, direct and honest questions about the issue can really open things up — chances are if you feel the meetings aren't as effective as they should be, your direct report feels the same way, too.

91. Would you like to walk today, or go somewhere else outside the office?

92. I've noticed that our last several 1-on-1s have stayed pretty surface. What are your honest impressions of this meeting? What could we be doing differently or better?

93. What would you like to see change about these discussions? How could we make them more useful for you?

94. What would you be doing right now if we weren't having this meeting? How do you feel about being taken away from that task?

95. I'm trying to make my 1-on-1s better and would appreciate your honest feedback on this one — what did you like about it, and what could be improved?

To address the direct report's personal life:

Asking about your direct report's personal life can be a good way to show that you care about them as a person. Be sensitive and keep in mind that some people are more private than others. Depending on the individual, personal topics could be informal small talk about the person's family or interests, or more serious matters. It's often good to start with broad questions, like these, and be careful not to make assumptions.

96. How are things going for you outside of work?

97. How do you feel about your work/life balance?

98. What, if anything, did you used to do that you find you don't have time for right now?

99. I've noticed you're a little quieter than usual. Is there anything you'd like to talk about?

100. What could we change about work that would improve the rest of your life?

To ask for feedback on the 1-on-1s and on your performance as a manager:

Getting feedback from your direct reports can be just as important as giving it. Not only will it help you improve as a manager, it can also build trust and strengthen your relationship with your direct reports.

However, only ask for feedback if you feel confident in your ability to take the feedback well and act on it; asking and then doing nothing could do more harm than good. Plus, given the power dynamic involved, how you ask is critical. For an example of how one experienced manager handled this situation, see our video [Asking a direct report for feedback](#).

101. I'm interested in feedback on how I can improve as a manager. In preparing for our next 1-on-1, would you be willing to think through what you like about how I do X (for example, run team meetings) and what I could do differently or better? (Ask prior to the 1-on-1.)

102. I'd like to improve as a manager and I could really use your help. Next week, would you be willing to share some feedback on one to two things you think I could do better as your manager?

103. What can I do to help you enjoy your work more or remove roadblocks to progress?

104. Which areas would you like more or less direction from me on your work?

105. I'm trying to make my 1-on-1s better and would appreciate your honest feedback on this one — what did you like about it, and what could be improved?

106. What are your impressions of our 1-on-1s? What could we do differently or better?