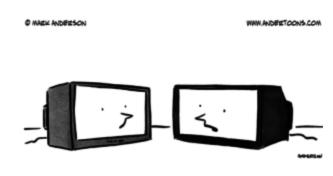# 7 great 1-on-1 questions to ask remote direct reports — and what to do with the answers

Physical distance creates unique challenges for remote direct reports — especially in the areas of trust, communication, and collaboration. Smart managers tailor their 1-on-1 questions to better understand and meet the needs of team members they don't see every day.

"You ever get the feeling that you're not being watched?"

In addition to periodically asking standard questions to gauge job satisfaction, weave a few remote-centric ones like these into your 1-on-1s at least monthly.

1. How's life outside of work?

Obvious question? Perhaps. But without the opportunity for hallway chitchat, it can be harder to build rapport and trust with remote direct reports. So it's worth starting your meetings with at least five minutes of casual chatting to establish a human connection.

You could begin by asking about something you already know (e.g., *"How's [name of their significant other] liking their new job?"*) or about something new that comes to mind (e.g., *"I like that map behind you on your wall — is that somewhere you've been?"*). Just be sure you vary the topic; asking the same generic question every time signals that you aren't paying attention. Also, share back a little so they don't feel interrogated and, if possible, use video so that you can have a more personal connection, complete with gestures and facial expressions.

Finally, consider what the person's answer tells you about their overall stress level. Do they respond excitedly about something great? Or sigh and share how busy they've been caring for a sick parent or child? Use what you learn to tweak how you manage and support the person.

For more, see This week, make small talk that has a bigger impact.

Another good question:

> How was your weekend?/Any plans this weekend?

2. How has your workload been lately — has anything taken you outside your normal hours?

While it's common for managers to <u>worry that remote direct reports skimp on hours</u>, the opposite is often true. With less visibility into their workload, you and colleagues may unknowingly overwhelm them with projects and requests. Time-zone differences can mean they receive requests at off-hours. And if they work from an office in their home, they may find it easy for work hours to bleed into personal time.

You play a critical role in ensuring that your remote team members don't get burnt out by blurred work/life boundaries. Depending on the person and how forthcoming they are, you might want to ask pointed follow-up questions about specific behaviors: *"What time do you stop working each day? How often do you check messages after hours? Work weekends?"*

If work regularly bleeds into their personal time, dig in on why. Does responding quickly during their off-hours make them feel more connected to the team? Are you encouraging overwork by emailing them during their off-hours (either because they're in a different time zone or you have your own issues with work/life boundaries)? Is it easy for them to linger in their home office and lose track of time? Depending on their answers, you may want to <u>set email off-hours for your team</u>, help your direct report <u>set — and stick to — a work/life boundary</u>, or equip them with <u>ways to say no</u> to nonessential requests.

Other good questions:

- What strategies do you use to help you disconnect after working hours?
- What are some of the requests you're getting from colleagues or clients that you feel you can't push back on?

3. How are you doing prioritizing?

Prioritizing can be tricky for remote people who work in isolation. They don't have you or the team on hand for quick questions. And you can't see them spending all morning on a task that they find interesting but is less urgent than what a teammate's work depends on. So you miss chances to coach them on where their attention should be — unless you ask explicitly.

If they struggle to prioritize, consider whether there could be a communication issue at play — especially around how you've communicated high-level goals and how the team shares updates (see No. 5). It's also worth asking yourself: Have I given them so much "important" work that it's impossible to get all of their work done?

If the weak spot is your direct report's judgment, don't just tell them what to work on and in what order. Instead, ask questions to help them develop their own ability to prioritize, like, *"How important is this for our top team goals?"*; *"How urgent is this request?"*; and *"What are*

the possible consequences of deprioritizing this work?" For more, see <u>This week, ask your direct reports "How are you doing prioritizing?"</u>

Other good questions:

- How do you determine what to work on first?
- What makes it hard for you to figure out what to work on first?
- <u>How would you describe our team's top three goals or priorities?</u>

4. What's one thing we can do to make our meetings better?

Poor sound, writing on a whiteboard that's impossible to read, participants not facing the screen, enthusiastic in-room discussions with no space to share their views — there are a zillion reasons why meetings are less welcoming, less engaging, or just plain less useful for remote participants.

Resigned to exclusionary meetings, your remote direct report when asked "How are our meetings?" may default to, "Oh, fine." But if you ask specifically for an idea for improvement — implying that you genuinely want to make them better — you might surface real challenges and solutions.

Depending on what you hear, you might make remote-friendly changes like:

- Asking co-located participants to join the meeting video (sharing a single microphone) so that remotes can see who's speaking.
- Using an online shared doc instead of a whiteboard to capture ideas.
- Asking your remote direct reports to lead parts of the meeting.
- Building a habit of proactively asking for remotes' input before moving to the next agenda item.

Make improvements and your remote direct reports will not only feel more like part of the team but also that their input matters.

For more, see <u>How to run a really good meeting with remote workers</u> and <u>For your next meeting that includes remote participants, join remotely</u>.

Other good questions:

- Do you ever feel after meetings like you didn't get to share your full perspective or that the group didn't fully consider it?
- What about our 1-on-1 meetings — what could we do differently?

5. How informed do you feel about what's going on with our team and company?

Under any circumstance, managers play a critical role in helping their direct reports get the information they need to do their jobs well and feel connected to the team. When there's physical distance between you and your direct reports, it's easy for critical communication to fall through the cracks in ways that can leave remote team members feeling like they're stranded on a desert island.

If your direct reports are up to date on news, team work statuses, and how their work connects to high-level goals — congratulations! You probably have a robust communication system in place. If your direct reports have found any recent news surprising, get frustrated waiting for you or others to answer their questions, or generally feel out of the loop about conversations that happen on-site, consider remedies like:

- Revisiting how your team shares status updates.
- Adding more-frequent check-ins with the person, beyond regular 1-on-1s.
- Sharing high-level news and information in a centralized place that remotes can access equally, like a team chat channel (i.e., not in hallway conversations).
- Encouraging your direct reports to communicate more with one another (e.g., *"That's an interesting idea. Could you check in with Abby about it? We will want to be sure it doesn't impact her plans."*).
- Establishing or upholding team communication expectations — like the timely updating of online status/availability, posting news in shared channels, and responding to requests.

For more, see Assess your remote team communication and Communication checklist: Are you undersharing with your team?

Other good questions:

- What information do you find easy to get when you need it? What information is hard to get?
- How well do we stick to our team communication system?

6. What's an area where we could improve our team interaction and collaboration?

Few things can undermine a remote direct report's motivation and performance like feeling disconnected. By asking your remote direct report for an idea for improvement (rather than "How would you say we're doing as a team?"), you're empowering them to play a role in improving their own engagement and sense of belonging.

As you listen to the person's answer, note what area they flag for improvement. Do they yearn for a stronger feeling of connection with teammates? If so, you might bring remote directs reports on site more often (if possible); suggest that your direct reports set up peer 1-

on-1s with remote co-workers; and plan creative, remote-friendly team celebrations, like shipping them a treat to enjoy while co-located team members eat cake.

Or, do your remotes crave more work time with teammates? If so, you might suggest that co-located direct reports seek advice from remotes — to create a virtual hey-got-a-second moment that happens more naturally in person. Or add a round of peer feedback to projects, where team members review one another's work and share ideas.

For more, see How to help remote and co-located direct reports work together as a team.

Other good questions:

- Whom do you work particularly well with and why? Not so well with and why?
- What do you think about the level of input and feedback you're getting on your work — from me and others?
- How are we doing with recognition and team celebrations?

7. What have you enjoyed working on most, and what kinds of projects would you like the opportunity to work on in the future?

Research suggests that managers are inclined, often unconsciously, to give remote workers smaller, less important assignments. Could you be underestimating or overlooking your remote direct reports because they're "out of sight, out of mind"?

This question helps you determine how eager someone is to learn new skills and take on more or different responsibilities. You can use the answers to revisit how you delegate work across your team, as well as launch a discussion of how the person wants to grow in their career — and how you can help. Keep in mind that remote direct reports are typically less visible to others within your organization, too. Knowing your remote direct reports' interests will help you advance their names when your boss and other higher-ups are considering new projects and opportunities.

For more, see 7 ways to advocate for a high-potential direct report in your organization and How to manage remote team members more effectively

Other good questions:

- What's been your biggest win lately?
- What skill-building opportunities do you see for yourself in our organization? What actions could you take to pursue those opportunities?

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