



Tips and tools for future ready managers

Volume II: Feedback and development



Set your team up for success and help them bring their best self to work with effective coaching and feedback.

High performance is every manager's dream, and continuous development is every employees'. When managers support employees in their growth with a clear understanding of their responsibilities, goals and how to get there, performance and accountability tend to manifest. Use these 1:1 feedback and development tips to align your team on goals, expectations and responsibilities.

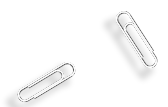
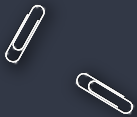


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1 on 1s simplified: what every manager needs to know

Today's world of work calls
for frequent, forward-looking
feedback all around



Continuous 1 on 1 coaching is essential to ensuring ongoing development, improving employee performance, and driving agile teamwork. Yet, most managers struggle to make time for them, and even when they do, it's one of the toughest things to get right.



According to **Harvard Business Review**, 1 on 1s are a productivity tool with two fundamental purposes:

- A time to ask strategic questions such as - **'are we focused on the right things?'** or **'what do I need to do to grow professionally?'**
- A way to show employees you **value them and care about them as people**



From our experience with clients, they are a time to catch problems before they balloon up, realign everyone on shared goals, build trust and make sure employees feel heard at work. They're also about reflecting and taking a breather, to remind managers to put employees at the heart of the business.

No pressure, right?

So how can managers equip themselves to make these 1 on 1s not only a regular habit but actually beneficial? We've got some ideas...

Work on your timing

In today's fast-paced world, employees don't want to wait till the end of the year (or even end of the month) for constructive feedback. It's important for managers to establish ongoing conversations, and create dedicated moments for delivering feedback. Set up a recurring calendar invite for each and every member of your team. This shows employees you care, and helps them come to these conversations fully prepared.

Set up an agenda

Approximately 24 hours before, remind your employee about the discussion, and feel free to share your agenda / invite them to share theirs in advance. When building the agenda, keep in mind that it should be future focused, rather than retrospective. Planning for a better tomorrow is more likely to help employees generate constructive ideas around challenges and be more receptive when you share some ideas of your own. Having said that, don't feel hesitant in sharing truly constructive feedback about past actions if need be.



Here are some agenda starters you might like to ask your employees to think about beforehand:

- How they think they can contribute to team goals in the next month
- What they need from you as a manager to help them achieve their goals
- Things they would like to accomplish on a professional or personal level this year

Give good feedback

You're now in the middle of your 1 on 1, and determined to make it meaningful. Keep in mind the following basics about what constitutes good feedback, and what does not:

Feedback should be

1. Future focused
2. Specific and actionable
3. Tailored to the receiver's context and personality
4. Intended to improve something

Feedback should not be

1. A recap of what's already been done
2. Vague or general
3. Advice based on what the giver would do in the receiver's shoes
4. A personal opinion

Keep track

1 on 1s can sometimes feel too casual or even forced, if the employee isn't really opening up in the conversation. Typically these conversations should last 40-60 minutes, and we've even broken down what they should look like:



Your 1 on 1 agenda

- 5 minutes: informal catch up
- 15 minutes: employee's inputs
- 15 minutes: your notes and inputs
- 5 minutes: action planning

Seek as much as you offer

It's important to remember these conversations are meant to be a two-way street. So if the employee doesn't feel comfortable sharing feedback about you at first, make sure you seek it yourself. High context cultures like India's can sometimes make it hard for young professionals to give direct feedback to their seniors at work. The easier you make it for them to do so, the more you'll benefit from the exchange as well.

A great way to lead by example and build a strong feedback culture in your team is by asking specific questions, such as - **'I'd like to work on my ability to (xyz), is there any feedback you can give me that might help me improve?'**



Check for a common understanding

While talking through the employee's inputs and your own, make sure you go over what was discussed in the last 1 on 1, and any commitments you both made to each other. Similarly, towards the end of your action planning, make sure you both make a note of things the employee will do and needs from you. Share these notes after the meeting and keep them somewhere easily accessible so that you actually make it a habit to refer to these outside of the 1 on 1s as well.

Tip:

Make sure you have these sensitive conversations in a private setting where employees feel safe to express themselves. For example, Mesh provides a safe space where you can prepare for and store your 1 on 1 notes. This in-tool space can only be viewed by you and the individual you are meeting with. It keeps a confidential record of talking points and action items, so you're sure you never forget a crucial point of discussion —without having to create notes, emails, and minutes of meetings.



1 on 1s don't need to be complicated, compliance driven or mentally tiring. When we begin to see them differently, they can help both parties build on their strengths, develop new skills and stay engaged at work. So make time for 1 on 1s, and approach them with empathy, purpose and a commitment to bettering both your team and yourself.

Difficult feedback conversation:

why they're important and how to ace them

Must-read insights for managers looking to share feedback effectively



Research has time and again found that while beginners prefer positive feedback as it motivates them to do more, once people become experienced in an area of work, they actually prefer negative feedback so as to step up their game.



In one Harvard Business Review survey, nearly **6 in 10 survey respondents preferred corrective feedback over straight praise.** A Gallup study also showed that **employees also prefer receiving negative feedback over no feedback at all.**



When constructive feedback is so actively sought after by employees, why is it so hard for managers to hold difficult conversations and communicate constructive feedback in a timely manner? Our conversations and experience with leaders and managers bring up a clear pattern behind this hesitation - anticipating hurting someone's feelings, having a defensive reaction, or being unliked afterward. While these are valid fears, managers often discover these fears are more to do with their own thought patterns than actual employee reactions.



Hence, we've tried to take insights from the best feedback conversations and jot down some tips for managers looking for ways to deliver constructive feedback effectively.

Focus on behaviour, not personality:

It's way easier to change an action you do than to change who you are.

For example, if you have an assertive / outgoing / confident employee that is a star performer but doesn't put too much effort into building up junior team members / considering alternate point of views, you could try framing your feedback like this:

“

I could tell you're very excited about the project. You also know a lot about this field which is a major plus. But sometimes, when you get excited and start sharing your ideas, you don't leave room for others to voice their ideas. In particular, I noticed that our junior analyst Emily was trying to share her idea but it got shot down pretty quickly. Did you notice this too?

”



Be specific:

Zoom in on a certain problematic area instead of creating negativity around their general work. You want to come out of this having helped them find a way to improve, not leave them feeling disheartened and unproductive.

For example, if you find yourself chasing an employee for deliverables or constantly having to remind them for updates, try saying this:

“

I can't help but notice this is the third deadline that's been difficult for you this month. I appreciate you letting me know in advance that you're running behind, but I'm wondering if I can be of any help in getting you up to speed. Let's take a look at everything that's on your plate right now and how you're spending your time — maybe we can figure out a solution together.

”

Be inclusive:

People are more accepting of corrective feedback if they feel that it's a two-way conversation rather than a reprimand by someone talking down to them. A good way to do this is to encourage employees to give themselves feedback on their own work. Ask them something like this:

“

I've told you before it's great that you think big-picture, but in the last two projects some important details were missed, like X and Y. Ultimately that set us back as we had to do A and B. Do you think there is anything you could do differently for next time?

”



Be approachable:

Zoom in on a certain problematic area instead of creating negativity around their general work. You want to come out of this having helped them find a way to improve, not leave them feeling disheartened and unproductive.

For example, if you find yourself chasing an employee for deliverables or constantly having to remind them for updates, try saying this:

“

I remember when I had to do that, I was so bad at my first attempt. (Include a relevant incident) But I learnt the hard way that you have to do X and it doubled my results...

”

Be a good listener:

The more your employees feel heard, the more they feel you care, and greater the amount of trust they place in you. If you have developed a transparent, trust-based relationship with your team, then they will know that you have their best interests at heart and that the feedback, be it good or bad, is for their own benefit. Even if you feel you have the answers, instead of telling your employees where they need to improve, start by asking them how they feel about a certain situation. For example:

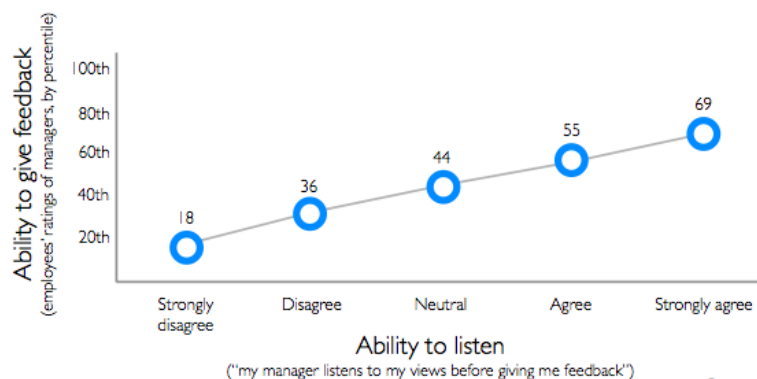


I wanted to discuss your last sales pitch. How do you feel it went?



Employees generally know when their work isn't strong and giving them the **opportunity to own up to it and offer insights into their own mistakes is a way to make the negative feedback more productive**. Let it come from them, then respectfully agree and guide them with solutions.

The more you listen, the better employees think you are at giving feedback



Most importantly, be supportive:

When ending the conversation, review the discussion's essence and try to avoid the feedback's negative aspects but focus on action points. Make sure to emphasise on what the employee could do differently and end by sharing that you're confident of his/her ability to solve the issue.

Lastly, remember that negative feedback is only constructive if shared at the right moment, which is almost always ASAP. People aren't perfect, and will be less likely to get offended / defensive if you share actionable insights in real time when they have the opportunity to better themselves rather than a mid-year or year end review when it's too late.

Delivering feedback effectively is a key management skill and extremely crucial to building a high performing team. So look at each exchange with your employees as a development opportunity for both them and yourself!

Upward feedback:

how to ask for it and act on it

Building a culture of trust and accountability
in your team



A Gallup survey found that **45% of actively disengaged employees in Germany would fire their supervisor on the spot if they could.**

Psychologist Michelle McQuaid's survey found that **65% of employees in the US would prefer a better boss to a pay raise.**

A global study by Development Dimensions International revealed that **60% of employees surveyed said their boss had damaged their self-esteem.**

Another study by Monster.com reported that **84% of respondents thought they would do a better job than their manager.**

Lastly, a Harvard Business Review and Cornell study showed **42% of respondents withholding feedback when they feel they simply have nothing to gain (or something to lose) by sharing what's on their minds.**



Sounds extreme? Before you assume this couldn't be the case in your organization, think about the last time you asked your team for feedback on your performance as their leader / manager. Poor communication between managers and employees is one of the leading causes of declining job satisfaction and higher employee turnover rates. Gallup's report on management in the US revealed that **employees whose managers were not approachable were 65% more likely to be actively disengaged.** If the last time you asked your employees for feedback was more than a month ago, it's time to rethink your managerial habits.



Even if you are now motivated to receive constructive feedback from your team, chances are they're exactly lining up to give it to you. To help you get the authentic feedback you need, **we've outlined a few easy habits you can build** into your work life.

Schedule regular 1:1 sessions to build feedback into the flow of work

Scheduling regular 1:1 sessions with your team is a good way to get them comfortable with giving you feedback. If they become accustomed to having casual monthly or weekly discussions with you about their performance, they'll be more likely to feel comfortable giving you honest constructive feedback. Additionally, a Gallup management report found that **employees who have regular meetings with their managers are three times more likely to be engaged than employees who do not.** See our blog for further reading on how to run effective 1:1s.

When your team does start opening up, make sure to proactively demonstrate how you're implementing their feedback in future 1:1s. Seeing you take steps to follow their suggestions will encourage them to be more open.



Ask the right questions, and do something about the answers you receive

Most employees, especially in high context cultures like Asia, will still feel uncomfortable giving their managers constructive feedback. Asking them directed and specific questions will help you get them to open up. If you want your employee's straightforward opinion on an issue, try asking them an action oriented question, and follow up with clarifying questions if need be. Asking an open-ended **"How can I provide you more opportunities to develop your project management skills?"** will get a far better response than a yes-no **"Am I providing you enough opportunities to develop your project management skills?"**.

When you do receive some valuable inputs, try to fashion them into an action plan for yourself. State what you can do in the future and what you will need from your team to be held accountable to it. For example, **"I'll try to review all presentations 24 hours in advance so we have ample time to discuss review comments and make revisions collaboratively. To do this, I'll need you to help me by getting reports to me at least 1.5 days in advance."**

Display emotional intelligence and role-model the right attitude towards feedback

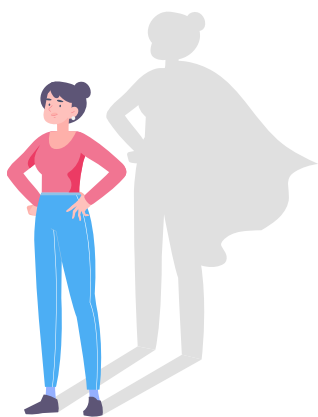
It might go without saying, but the most important element of opening up channels of upward feedback is to keep your emotions in check. Constructive feedback can leave the best of us feeling defensive, even more so when it's coming from someone below us in the old-fashioned sense of hierarchy. However, if we want to build trust in our team and have our team members be accepting of our feedback, we must role-model the desired behavior and accept feedback with an open mind.

Put yourself in their shoes

If what you're hearing as feedback doesn't resonate with your intentions, try to see things from your team's perspective. While you might be trying to help them out by giving them tried and tested answers from your experience, your team might be perceiving your inputs to be autocratic.

In some cases, the feedback you receive may need you to accept you need to change your behavior. Even if your actions are merely misinterpreted (which is most often the case), what matters is that you realize how it affects your team and find ways to alter your behavior accordingly. Some common remedies may include adjusting your tone of voice, being more insistent on demanding employee opinions, making yourself available for coaching more often, being mindful of employee interests and strengths when assigning tasks, and spending more time ensuring your instructions are clear.

Your team will also expect you to address major issues in the workplace and encourage a positive atmosphere in the office. For example, if one of your employees is consistently causing discord with a poor work ethic, your team will look to you to point this out and set clear expectations to maintain harmony.



While nurturing a culture of upward feedback might be a slow process, it goes a long way in building a positive work environment and driving employee engagement. If employees are known for leaving their bosses not their companies, they're also known for performing better and being loyal when supported by a great manager. Building these habits will not only make your **team more effective, but also help you become a better leader.**

The only question library for 1:1s you'll ever need

What great managers ask their team: the only 1:1 questions you'll ever need

Top questions to ask in your next 1:1 meeting

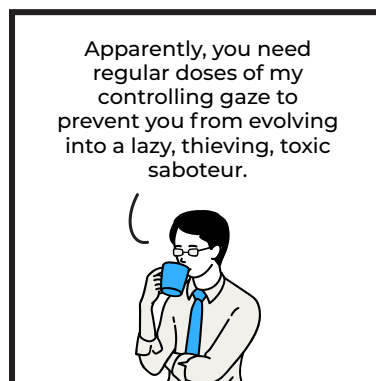


Your crash course on what great managers do best

In section 4 “1:1s simplified”, we shared with you some ideas on how effective managers approach their 1:1s, including tips on things to do before, during and after your next session.

We’ve seen many managers beginning to realize the importance of regular 1:1s in the ongoing development of their team members, but more often than not, these meetings are ineffective and can feel like a waste of time. Pointless status updates on progress you could be recording asynchronously (tools like Mesh were designed for this), extended small talk about “how things are going”, and frequent cancellations are just a few of the symptoms of ineffective 1:1s.

Has this happened to you before? Why is such an important tool so poorly used, even in the rare instances it is used at all?



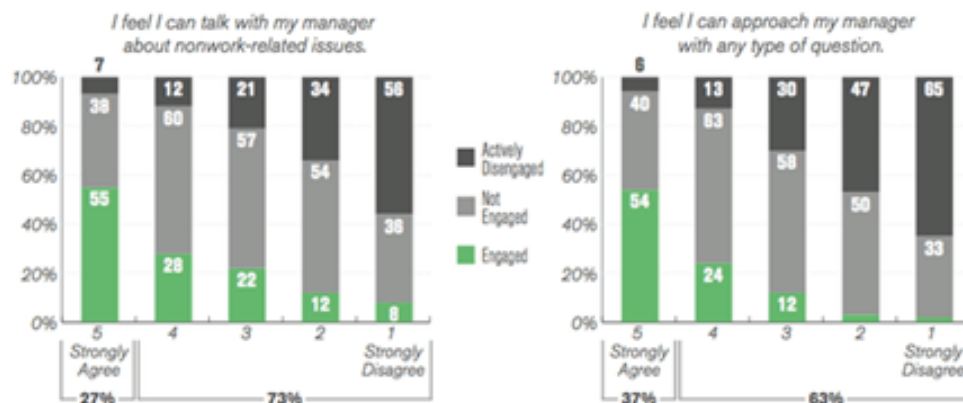
If you (or your team) are still not getting value from your 1:1s, and need a little more coaching on how to structure your next conversation, this library of questions on key must-cover topics just might be the thing you need.

Questions to build trust and rapport

The foundation of any good manager and team member relationship is implicit trust and rapport. If your team doesn't feel like you care about them as individuals, they're unlikely to be inspired by you.

This chart from Gallup powerfully summarizes that fact:

EMPLOYEES WHOSE MANAGERS ARE OPEN AND APPROACHABLE ARE MORE ENGAGED



In our last piece on 1:1s, we shared how the first 5-10 minutes are usually spent in an informal catch up. While some may brush this off as small talk, using this time to ask 1 or more of these thoughtful and directed questions can help you build a deeper emotional bond, especially so when everyone is working remotely.



- How are you? How is life outside of work?
- How do you feel your work/life balance is right now?
- What's one thing we could change about work for you that would improve your personal life? If entering / coming out of a weekend: any plans for the weekend / did you do anything fun this weekend?
- If around a holiday: What did you do to celebrate [Holiday]? How was it?
- How are your parents/grandparents?
- If they have children: How is [name of child] doing? (Ask something related to their age like starting school, playing sports, or other interests.)
- What did you do for fun in the past that you haven't had as much time for lately?
- For the seasoned coaches: What is your rhythm? (A great lesson from Marissa Mayer)

The next 15-20 minutes should usually be employee led, i.e., your only responsibility is to listen open mindedly without judgement and ask relevant, clarifying questions if need be. If you find your employees coming short of talking points for this duration, you might not be doing enough to co-create an agenda (learn about agenda-starters here) or have enough savings in your 'trust bank' for them to be ready to open up to you. Don't fret, luckily these things become easier with practice, so just remember to be consistent with your 1:1s and proactively work on creating the right environment for your team members.

The third section of your 1:1 gives you the opportunity to share your notes and inputs. You might like to use this time to:

Questions to share feedback

We shared with you the undeniable importance and power of continuous feedback in today's world of work. If you haven't taken the time to share feedback yet, this would be a great time to start. For feedback to be effective, it has to be delivered in the right way. Try out 1 or more of these questions to help you get the ball rolling.



- Do you feel you're getting enough feedback? Why/why not?
- What's a recent situation you wish you handled differently? What would you change?
- What's an area of your work you want to improve?
- What aspect of your job would you like more help or coaching on?
- How many hours a day do you feel you're productive? How could I help you be more productive?
- If you're nearing a mid-year or year-end review: How has the feedback I shared with you in the past few months helped you improve? Are there areas you feel we haven't addressed?
- For pros: tie feedback to areas they'd like to improve, such as amping up their attention to detail / scripting their presentation storyboard if they want to improve their presentation skills / get more opportunities to present to clients.

While this 1:1 session is about the individual, don't discount the importance of asking for upward feedback as well.



Questions to improve your team dynamics

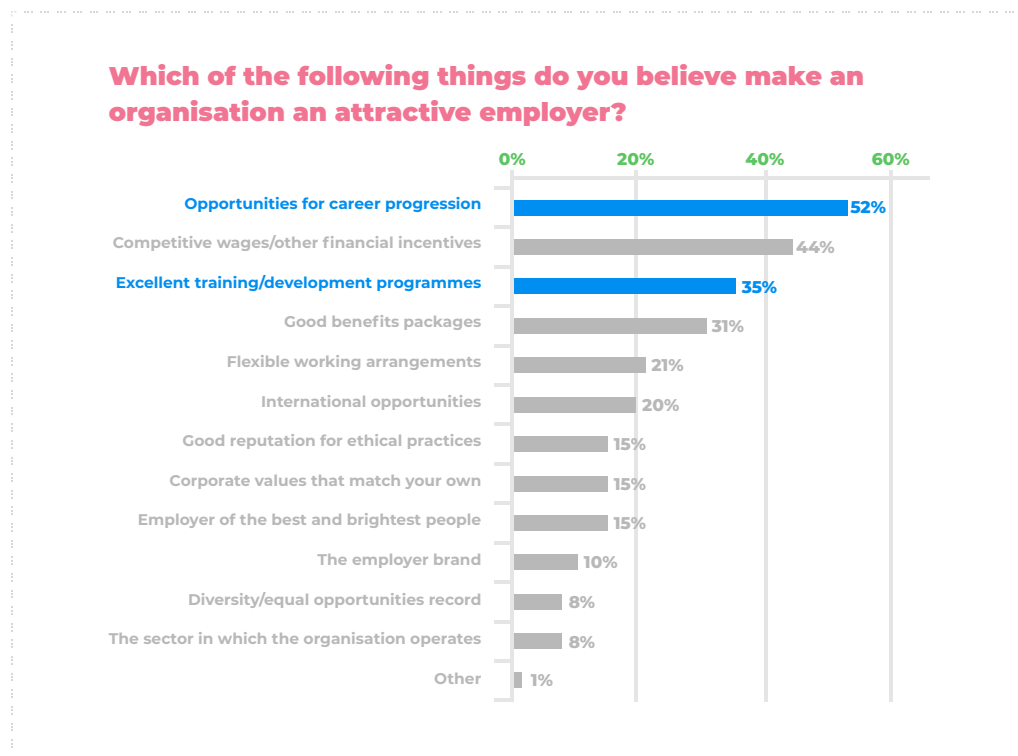
You will be surprised by the number of invaluable insights you could get about improving team engagement, culture and even performance by just taking the time to ask! By involving your team in your efforts to improve team culture, you're not only building a greater sense of ownership and belonging but also ensuring you're being inclusive and minimising your subconscious biases by respecting diverse perspectives. Here are some questions to get you started.



- How could we change our team meetings to be more effective?
- Do you feel you have too much on your plate / are under-worked / or have just the right workload?
- Do you feel like you're on the same page with the team? How often do you think you need meetings to ensure you stay that way?
- Are there any meetings or discussions you feel you should be a part of that you're not?
- Who would you like to work more often with? Why?
- What do you like most about working on our team?
- Do you help other members of the team? Do others help you when you need it?
- Are you uncomfortable giving any of your peers constructive feedback? If so, why?
- What's 1 thing we could do to improve our virtual work environment for the team?

Questions to talk about growth and development

While not necessary to bring up in every 1:1, make sure you circle back to this topic at least once every 4-6 months to show your commitment to the long term growth of your talent. According to a study by PWC, opportunities for growth and development are some of the most attractive aspects of an employer, and these 1:1s are a great time to figure out exactly what your team members have in mind.



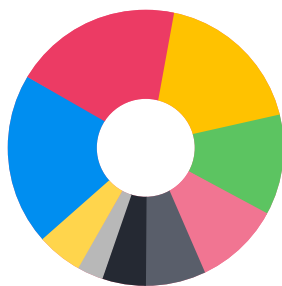
- What work are you doing here that you feel is most in line with your long term goals?
- What's one thing we could do today to help you with this further?
- What do you want to be doing in 5 years? 3 years?
- Do you feel challenged at work? Do you feel you're learning new things every month?
- Who do you really admire? What do you admire about them?
- What area of the company would you like to learn more about?
- Who in the company would you like to learn from? What do you want to learn?
- What additional training or education would you like to help grow your skills?
- Are there any roles in the company you'd like to learn more about?
- If you're at the start of the year: What do you think are the key skills you need to be successful in achieving your goals? How would you rate yourself for each of them today? What skills would you like to develop further this year?

It is a well established fact that people who get to work on their strengths are more engaged at work. If you're using a strengths based recognition tool like Mesh, crowd-sourced feedback in your data bank will help you and your team uncover these strengths, so you can then work together on leveraging them further.

Questions to improve the remote work experience

While remote work might have become the new normal for most of us, remote employees still face some challenges as they settle into the new dynamic. Difficulties in 'connecting' with team members and 'disconnecting' with work at the end of the day are some of the top struggles as per Buffer's State of Remote Report 2020. Pick a few of these questions for your next 1:1 or even team check-in to stay attuned to your team's engagement level.

What's your biggest struggle with working remotely?



State of Remote Report 2020
buffer.com/state-of-remote-2020



- What's your favorite part about working remotely? What's your least favourite part?
- What do you do to recharge each day?
- What's your setup like for working? Is there anything you feel you're missing?
- How could we improve our remote work daily / weekly schedule? Is there anything we could do to improve our team check-ins?
- Do you feel like we have enough opportunities to connect with the team outside of work?
- Any ideas for starting some 'water cooler' or 'happy hour' type of discussions?
- Do you feel you get ample support when you reach out for help remotely?
- What's most challenging for you in your daily work routine?
- How do you manage distractions during the day? Is it a challenge for you?
- Do you get my attention when you want to share any creative ideas you have? Have I dropped the ball on anything recently?

Questions to become a better coach

According to Gallup, "Companies are shifting from traditional performance management practices to a new approach that focuses on performance development." Managers are no longer expected to just manage team performance, but also coach team members on an on-going basis to improve their performance and help them succeed.



- What skills would you like to work on this month? How will these help you achieve your stretch goals, project commitments, etc.?



- How do you like to receive feedback? (In 1:1s, as-it-happens, etc.)
- How do you prefer to receive recognition? (most prefer recognition socially and Mesh helps with that!)
- When do you like to work on developing new skills? Do you have a routine for it?
- When do you typically read? What are you reading these days?
- What frustrates you or makes it much harder for you to learn?

Questions to become a better function leader

Often ignored but incredibly beneficial, are 1:1s with your skip level reportees. Occasionally connecting with them shows them you're invested in their growth, are committed to building a great work culture, get inputs on manager performance, and gain frontline insights. If you haven't done these before, start by focusing more of your time on building trust and rapport so they're not intimidated by you. Once you build that sense of comfort, choose 1 or more of these questions to obtain valuable feedback.



- When was the last time you had a conversation with your manager about your career? How did it go?
- Are you happy with your career progress here? Why/why not?
- Do you feel your manager is approachable? Why/why not?
- What is a recent situation you feel like your manager did a great job?
- What is a recent situation you wish your manager handled differently?
- Do you feel we properly recognize people here? Why / why not?
- Do you want to tell me about a recent project you really enjoyed working on? What was your role in it?
- What is the greatest strength of your team? What does your team need to improve upon? What are you doing about it currently?

Must-ask questions to build an accountability loop

While these questions might sound great on paper (or your laptop!), frequent 1:1s are pointless if not balanced with action between the conversations as well. No matter which of these questions above you picked for your next conversation, make sure you end the conversation by asking:



- What will YOU do to take action or make progress on what we talked about today?
- What can I do to take action or make progress on what we talked about today?

Like most things in life, your 1:1s will get better with practice as long as you're committed to them. Leverage these and you (and your team) will find purpose and value at work not found in any other way before.

Want to be a great manager through COVID-19 and every other challenge you'll face?

We built Mesh to specifically help managers and leaders like you make the most of the time you invest in team productivity and development.

Sign up now for a free trial of the social performance management tool designed for today's workforce. With easy to use, handy features like a social recognition feed, strengths recorded against hashtags for easy analysis, 1:1 notes, goal cards, task progress tracking and all in one team hub, you'll never worry about productivity and development again.

