

(Do 10 minutes of softball opening questions first. Questions about how the candidate has handled difficult conversations in the past are great!)

Opening Question/Teeing it up

Have you ever done a role play in an interview? Would you be up for it? Great! So, recognizing that interviews are unnatural environments, and role plays even more so, we're not judging you on your improv skills. We'll have a debrief after which is the more relevant discussion.

Here's the context: we're both your direct reports, we're both at the same level. We're imagining some context that obviously you don't have; feel free to invent your own, or time out to ask questions if you want. We'll start the role play in a 1:1.

Role Play

Lara: Hi <candidate>! First, I just want to say thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to lead this project, I'm really enjoying it and I think the team is too. We're totally on track, hitting our milestones, feeling really good. So again, thank you so much for this incredible opportunity; I'm really happy with how everything is going! ... There's just one thing that's a little weird that I wanted to talk with you about. You know Seth, your other direct report who is working on a totally different project? He's been coming to our meetings anyway, and he's been very vocally disagreeing with some of the choices we've made. He's been steamrolling, interrupting, and assigning different tickets to people. I think it's confusing for the team, it's making me pretty uncomfortable, I'm not really sure what's going on. Weird right?

[Some conversation with Lara]

[Eventually the candidate talks to Seth, Seth is a very friendly, sophomoric, and optimistic jerk who is trying to subtly undermine Lara]

[Sometimes the candidate asks to facilitate a meeting between both Lara and Seth. Sometimes they shuffle back and forth between the two ICs. Make sure that the candidate knows they can call a time-out. Mostly just have fun and roll with however it goes!]

Debrief

Afterward, we'll do a debrief and ask a few questions. This is really the most important part of the whole exercise. Example questions:

- **What do you think was going on here?**

- What more information/context would have been useful? How would you go about getting it?
- What next steps would you take?
- Would you do anything differently?
- Where were the decision points for you, where you could choose one path or another as you handled the situation?

Then, ask any questions you have about how they handled it to make sure you understand their choices. For example, “I noticed you asked Seth if he had enough to work on. How does understanding that align with what’s important to you about managing ICs? What are you trying to balance?”

What does this question assess?

How a candidate gathers context, coaches and supports reports, thinks about group dynamics, and deals with difficult conversations.

A great answer looks like

When talking with Lara, getting more context - asking how it’s affecting her and her team, if she has any clues about Seth’s motivation, any thoughts she has about how to move forward, what kind of support she’s looking for. Coaching her to talk to Seth directly in a way that gives her the tools she needs for that conversation to go well.

Getting Seth to commit to a different set of behaviors, challenging him on anything inflammatory, deftly negotiating traps.

In the debrief, really describing the core issues, describing appropriate next steps. Understanding what the “crossroads” were where they had a choice about how to handle a trap. Walking us through what their thought process was for these crossroads. Talking about what additional context they would have gathered outside of these roleplayed 1:1s.

A good answer looks like

When talking with Lara, getting more context. Encouraging Lara to talk to Seth, or getting everyone in a room together and moderating that conversation so that it remains healthy and productive. Or, offering to talk to Seth and asking Lara if she’s comfortable with that next step.

With Seth, avoiding most traps, containing the worst behavior. Helping Seth begin to understand that his behavior is damaging and needs to curb it.

In the debrief, identifying and speaking to the “crossroads”, describing appropriate next steps. Understanding what, if any, pitfalls they took. Accurately describing “what was going on” in this scenario.

A weak answer looks like

Going straight to talking with Seth without verifying how Lara would like the next steps to look, or what she’s comfortable with. Or, thinking that Seth just has too much time on his hands, and needs more work to do.

Moderating a conversation between Seth and Lara that undermines Lara’s authority or allows Seth to continue to steamroll (this is “weak” but not “terrible” if the candidate realizes things are going downhill and ends the moderated conversation and switches to a 1:1 with Seth.).

A terrible answer looks like

Trying to figure out what Lara is doing to invite this abuse. Appeasing Seth. Inviting Seth to provide more input on this project. Missing the point entirely.

In the debrief, saying that they wouldn’t do anything differently (or couldn’t see any other opportunities to do something differently). Not being able to describe accurately what was happening for our characters. Believing that Seth was more knowledgeable and/or more senior than Lara.

I can tell the candidate doesn’t understand the question / is answering a different question when

When they think the exercise is to determine who is right.