



Deborah Grayson Riegel

25 QUESTIONS TO DRAMATICALLY IMPROVE YOUR RELATIONSHIPS AT WORK

If you've ever worked in an organization, you know that not every interpersonal exchange is an easy one. We often hold a picture in our heads of how someone else *should* behave in a particular situation, which is often different from how they actually *do* behave in that situation.

What compounds the difficulty is that we don't explore what's in the gap between our expectations and reality. So, we end up perpetually frustrated, disappointed, and expecting things to be different next time without doing the work to make it so.

What's the work? Being curious.

Curiosity can lead to more open communication, better team performance, and reduced group conflict. Furthermore, research shows that curious people share information more openly and listen more carefully.

It all starts with asking powerful questions. Over my years of teaching executive education for the Wharton School of Business and Columbia University, as well as consulting at organizations like Amazon, BlackRock, PepsiCo, and The United States Army, I've discovered these 25 questions that can dramatically improve your relationships with colleagues, clients, managers, vendors, and stakeholders, if you're really willing to listen.

You can use these questions during:

- 1:1 meetings between managers and direct reports
- Coaching sessions
- Team meetings
- Career conversations
- Interviews
- Onboarding
- Performance management conversations
- Client kick-offs
- Project status meetings
- Workshops
- Retreats
- Career conversations
- And more

Good luck and stay curious!

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1. What do I say or have said in the past that you have appreciated the most?
2. What do I say or have said in the past that makes you uncomfortable?
3. What's your favorite compliment to get?
4. What do people think is a compliment to you, but you don't perceive it that way?
5. How would you define "productive conflict"?
6. How will I know that you're feeling valued and appreciated?
7. How will I know you may be feeling stressed or upset?
8. What happens if we can't agree on something important that involves both of us?
9. What should I never say to you, even in frustration?
10. What might I say or do to get your attention about something urgent if other approaches haven't worked?
11. Who brings out the best in you – and how?
12. What accomplishment – personal or professional – are you proudest of?
13. What might be the early warning signs that our communication isn't working effectively?
14. What can I do to make your day?
15. How can I show up as approachable to you?
16. What should I say or do if I feel like I can't approach you?
17. How do you like to receive both positive and constructive feedback?
18. What are your "hot buttons" – things that set you off?
19. How would you like me to remind you about my "hot buttons"?
20. What do you think I might be able to learn from you?
21. What do you think you can learn from me?
22. Who do I remind you of?
23. What do we do if we're both just having a bad day?
24. What about our work together is likely to give us a recurring problem?
25. What about our work together is likely to change both of our lives for the better?

BONUS: What do you do if you ask these questions and your colleague doesn't open up?

Having ongoing conversations with your colleagues to learn more about what makes them tick – and what ticks them off – can be easy and rewarding when the other person is open, easy to talk to, and readily shares their thoughts and feelings.

But when you have someone at work who tends to respond to your inquiries with "I'm good," "I don't know," or just a shrug, it can make connecting with them tricky.

So, what do you do when you want to learn more about someone who doesn't seem to be meeting you half way? One common approach is to get more assertive and push for responses that don't seem to be forthcoming. But saying things like, "What do you mean, 'I don't know'?" or "Just good? Come on!" can contribute to your colleague shutting down even more.

Another approach is to just stop trying. And while it might make sense to stop putting more effort into a relationship that doesn't seem to be progressing, giving up isn't the only way.

Here are four approaches to try when you haven't been successful in drawing someone out:

1. Ask yourself: "How am I contributing to this dynamic?"

While it's tempting to think the other person is the problem, assume that you have a contribution to what's not working here— even if it's small. Perhaps you schedule one-on-one meetings at the end of the work day, when your employee is already thinking about heading home to their family. Why open up a conversation when it might delay getting home?

Or perhaps tend to discuss your life openly with your team members--and this team member doesn't want to be asked about theirs (or even hear about yours). There are dozens of ways you might be playing a role in what's going on, so before you try to change the other person, see if you can identify what you might need to change in yourself.

2. Get comfortable with silence.

As Will Rogers said, "Never miss a good chance to shut up." Many of us would rather have a root canal than sit in silence. But if you're looking to draw someone out who may be less verbally expressive than you, you can't ask a question and then fill up the space with your own answers. Recognize that some people need time to think through their responses, especially if they're concerned about getting it "right." Be willing to sit quietly while someone else processes at their own speed. And, if you really can't help yourself, you might say, "I notice that you're quiet. I just wanted to check to see if you're thinking, or if something else is going on."

3. Model vulnerability.

Your colleague may not want to talk about your baby's explosive diaper, or your hernia surgery, or bad blind date. But they may be interested in learning about the recent piece of feedback you just received that was hard for you to hear. Or the pitch you worked on that bombed. Or the work-life balance you're wrestling with. Share some of your own challenges without oversharing (or undermining your credibility) can go a long way towards modeling what you'd like your colleague to be willing to share with you.

4. Start with common interests--and common gripes.

What do most of us have in common? Vacations, families, hobbies, food, movies, TV, weekend plans, the weather, work-life balance, commuting, projects around the house, etc. Start with one of these topics, and see which ones generate a spark of visible interest for your employee. And then follow their path down the conversation. A good start might be sharing something like: "I'm tired of going to the same couple of restaurants on the weekends. Where do you like to go out?" And if their response is: "I don't eat out much," you might try, "So what do you like to cook?" and see where that takes you. It doesn't really matter what the answer is; what matters is that you've opened the door.

Getting someone to open up to you can feel like hard work, but it's worth it. By helping your colleagues, clients, and others feel like you care about them personally and professionally, they're much more likely to care about you, too. And having a foundation of caring, curiosity and trust makes working together much, much easier.

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I'm an instructor of Management Communication at the Wharton School of The University of Pennsylvania, and I teach custom leadership development programs for both Columbia Business School and Duke Corporate Education. I have also served as a Visiting Professor of Executive Communications at the Beijing International MBA Program at Peking University, China, where I prepared senior leaders from around the world to communicate more effectively in a growing global marketplace.

As a regular columnist on leadership and communication for *Harvard Business Review, Inc.*, *Psychology Today*, *Fast Company* and more, I focus on sharing practical, research-based approaches to common workplace challenges.

I consult for companies including Amazon, BlackRock, Bloomberg, KraftHeinz, PepsiCo, 21st Century Fox, and The United States Army.

I combine my background in cognitive and social psychology, leadership coaching, presentation skills, appreciative inquiry, and - perhaps most importantly - improvisational and stand-up comedy to help leaders and teams think on their feet and make thoughtful decisions about their impact. I believe that the most successful leaders are those who balance professional credibility with personal authenticity, combining their deep expertise with transparency about where they need to grow.

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