Managing
People at Work

15 questions to ask new hires in first 60 days

Recruiting, hiring and training new employees can eat up a manager's time. The last thing a manager wants to do is restart the process all over again because that new hire quit after three months.

To avoid repeating that time-consuming process, it's important to talk with new employees shortly after they begin the job, preferably within 60 days. *Your goal:* Discover their likes/dislikes about the job and environment, see if the job meets their expectations and nip problems in the bud.

Then, ask some of the following questions, adapting them to your needs:

1. Why do you think we selected you as an employee?

2. What do you like about the job and the organization?

3. What's been going well? What are your experiences so far? Why?

4. Do you have enough, too much or too little time to do your work?

5. How do you see your job relating to the organization's mission?

6. What do you need to learn to improve? What can the organization do to help you become more successful in your job? (Don't ask these two questions unless you are prepared to follow up with action. Otherwise, you can build false expectations, and that can cause disappointment.)

7. Is there anything you don't understand about your job?

8. Compare the organization to what we explained it would be like.

9. Which co-workers have been helpful since you arrived? (Goal: Pinpoint which employees can be influential in retaining the new hire.)

10. Who do you talk to when you have questions about work? Do you feel comfortable asking?

11. Does your supervisor clearly explain what's expected of you?

12. How does it go when your supervisor offers constructive criticism or corrects your work?

13. Do you believe your ideas are valued? Give examples.

14. How well do you get along with co-workers?

15. Have you had any uncomfortable situations or conflicts with supervisors, co-workers or customers?

What to ask *before* hiring

To make a great hire, ask great questions. You can access 200 sample interview questions at **ManagingPeopleAtWork. com/200questions.**

Difficult employee? Time for 'the chat'

Being an effective manager means confronting those "challenging" employees who, while typically good at their jobs, too often display unprofessional or downright obnoxious behavior. The best way to tackle such problems is to meet with employees right when you spot the problem behavior. When you sit down with the employee, describe the behaviors and tell the employee firmly that those behaviors must stop, using the D-I-S method:

Direct. Pinpoint the problem—don't beat around the bush. Too often, managers fail in their counseling efforts because they skip this basic, yet uncomfortable, step. Don't feel bad about being direct. Every manager has the right to demand that employees behave in a courteous and cooperative manner.

Immediate. Talk with employees right after you see (or hear about) offending behavior. That makes it harder for the employee to explain away your words.

Specific. Explain concrete examples of the employee's actions, how they affect co-workers and the consequences. A vague accusation like, "We hear you're being rude to co-workers," isn't as effective as, "Telling Mary her haircut looks like a rat's nest won't be tolerated."

Make sure the employee understands the negative impact of his behavior on morale, productivity, etc. Gain agreement with the employee that a problem exists. And discuss the consequences if the problem continues. Don't let such a meeting end without deciding on the best course of action.

Managing the Google way

Google, the king of search engines, recently set out on a search of its own—to identify the qualities that make the highest-quality managers at Google Inc., and then to replicate those qualities across the entire company.

The end result: A simple, yet elegant, list of eight management practices that the best Google managers consistently do. Here's the list, in order of importance to Google:

1. Be a good coach. Provide specific, constructive feedback, balancing the negative and the positive. Have regular one-on-ones, presenting solutions to problems tailored to your employees' specific strengths.

2. Empower your team and don't micromanage. Balance giving freedom to your employees, while still being available for advice.

3. Express interest in team members' success and personal well-being. Get to know your employees as people, with lives outside of work. Make new members of your team feel welcome and help ease their transition.

4. Be productive and results-oriented. Focus on what employees want the team to achieve and how they can help achieve it. Help the team prioritize work and use seniority to remove roadblocks.

5. Be a good communicator and listen to your team. Communication is two-way: You both listen and share information. Hold all-hands meetings and be straightforward about the messages and goals of the team.

6. Help your employees with career development.

7. Have a clear vision and strategy for the team. Even in the midst of turmoil, keep the team focused on goals and strategy. Involve the team in setting and evolving the team's vision and making progress toward it.

8. Have key technical skills so you can help advise the team. Roll up your sleeves and conduct work side-by-side with the team, when needed. Understand the specific challenges of the work.

Are you a 'buddy boss?'

While it's OK to be a friendly boss, managers should avoid being a "buddy boss."

You can still laugh and joke with your employees without it compromising your working relationship. Simply strive for balance, and draw the line at any behavior that might be considered inappropriate for a leader and a professional.

Here are the downsides to forging a friendship with subordinates:

1. It may appear to be favoritism. If some employees are your friends and others are not, it may appear that certain employees are favored.

2. The management line becomes blurry. It is harder to lay off a friend or pass him or her over for a promotion.

3. It sets unrealistic expectations. The employee expects more from the boss and vice versa.

4. The company can be sued. A company opens itself up to a lawsuit if it appears the manager is discriminating.

5. It can jeopardize a manager's perception as a role model. Too much fraternizing can lessen an employee's respect.

6. Attempts at friendship could be read the wrong way. Employees could perceive this as a hostile work environment.

Keep It Legal

Your text messages can be used as evidence. An employee who sued for sex bias requested that her company hand over text messages sent between bosses discussing her wage complaints. The court said these texts were relevant and had to be turned over to her attorneys, even though they were casual text exchanges. *(Ewald v. Royal Norwegian Embassy)*

The takeaway: Text messages should be composed with the same careful deliberation as letters and memos.

Ignore FMLA absences when rating attendance. Suzette missed a lot of work to tend to one of her children, who has Down syndrome. Her bosses often spoke to her about her absences. She was fired for allegedly poor performance right after she returned from Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) leave to care for the hospitalized child. She filed an FMLA interference lawsuit and the court ordered a trial. *(Whitman v. Proconex)*

Online resource: For a primer on what managers should know about the FMLA, visit **ManagingPeopleAtWork.com/FMLA**.

Costly question: "What country are you from?" An employee of Senegalese national origin was fired for ignoring his boss's directions. He sued, claiming discrimination was the real reason. He said the boss once asked him what country he was from, adding that she was from Puerto Rico and therefore a U.S. citizen. The case was ultimately dismissed, but not before an expensive trial and appeal. *(Lam v. Sephora)*

The takeaway: Curb your curiosity and save your organization costly litigation.

Stop the pessimism!

10 ways to overcome 'negative vibes' among your staff

Every manager has to deal with a certain amount of pessimistic, hostile or uncooperative behavior at times. But a hard-core negative attitude that starts with just one employee can quickly infect an entire department (or a whole company) if the manager doesn't rein it in quickly.

Negativity can spread through your workplace like wildfire.

Here are 10 tips for confronting employees whose negative behavior has begun to affect the workplace:

1. Don't get drawn into the employees' negative mind-set. Listen to their points, but don't temper your own realistic optimism.

2. Avoid getting into an argument. Negative people thrive on the negative energy of arguments. Point out areas of agreement when possible in order to build rapport. Keep your cool.

3. Set standards. Spell out the consequences of negative behavior, such as decreased morale. Base them on behavior, not attitude.

For example, you may not be able to change the fact that an employee doesn't like a certain company policy. But you can discipline employees if

> "Always ask for employees' opinions before making major decisions that will affect them."

they don't follow the policy or are insubordinate in gossiping about it.

4. Ask questions. Force the employee to be specific about what is creating his or her negative thoughts and actions.

5. Try role-playing. Ask the employee to put himself in your shoes and pretend he has been asked to resolve the problem. That way, you will have the employee contribute his ideas for the best possible solutions. Involving the employee may also lead to more positive feelings about the solution or outcome since he or she had a hand in creating it.

6. Listen carefully. Use active listening to ensure that you're understanding the employee correctly.

7. Don't lower your expectations of them. A negative attitude doesn't necessarily mean a poor performer.

8. Empower employees. Stop the "victim" mentality from forming. Allow employees to take responsibility for "good" events, so they can make them happen again, and for the "bad" events, so they have the power to change them in the future.

9. Solicit feedback. Always ask for employees' opinions before making major decisions that will affect them.

The more you listen to employees, and take an active interest in their concerns, the less likely they will complain to each other.

10. Hire right. Identify negative people before they're hired. During the interview, listen for feelings that "life isn't fair" in response to questions like: *Have you ever felt you've been treated unfairly in the past? What were your chief concerns about management in your previous jobs? What would you have changed if you were the manager at your last job?*

4 don'ts

1. **Don't shower negativists with lots of attention.** You're only rewarding bad behavior.

2. **Don't stop asking them to pitch in** and do tasks outside their normal job descriptions. Otherwise, you're also punishing positive (or less vocal) employees.

3. **Don't correct them less often** in order to avoid dealing with the attitude. Employees can't be expected to change for the better if they're not asked to.

4. **Don't allow employees to get bored** or complacent. A negative attitude develops easily when there's "nothing to look forward to."

Q&A

Salty language but no complaints: Is that considered harassment?

Q Can vulgar language and jokes, etc., be considered harassment in the workplace if nobody actually files a complaint? — M.N., Maryland

A An employer cannot be expected to provide employees with a completely antiseptic workplace, so a certain amount of vulgar language, etc., is allowable. However, gender-specific profanities could support a female employee's hostile environment sexual harassment claim, even if the words were not directed at her. While the general use of profanities isn't a Title VII violation, employees who can swear and use vulgarities with impunity are not likely making a distinction between what's legal and what's not. *Your best bet:* Clean it up.

Can we stop employees from wearing T-shirts with strong messages?

Q One of our workers often wears T-shirts with slogans that have a strong political bent to them. Some employees have complained. Is it a violation of employees' free speech rights to ban such clothing? — Liz, New York

A When it comes to the issue of freedom of expression on the job, the courts tend to look at each incident on a case-by-case basis. Freedom of expression is not always a protected activity. In general, the courts consider whether an employer has a valid business justification for banning T-shirts, buttons, emblems, etc. Some accepted justifications for banning insignia include promoting safety, preventing alienation of customers, preventing adverse effects on customers/patients, and preventing dissension and conflict. Also, if messages are denigrating, confrontational or disparaging, an employer can enforce a ban.

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The Breakroom

In the office, there are those who smile and say hello when they pass you in the hallway, and those who don't. Think how much more pleasant it is to encounter someone from the former group, and how much more esteem you have for them. For a manager, becoming a "Hi" person is step one toward gaining the respect of your peers.

Four words to gain their trust. Just four! By asking one question—"What do you think?"—you let people know that you value their input, respect their opinion and have an open mind toward solving problems. Heck, they know you won't take every bit of guidance you hear; it's the request for it that forms a valuable bond.

Where are employees wearing their company T-shirts?

Imaginary Poll Services, Inc.

- on their lawn when bagging leaves — 10%
- at that one Arby's where they won't run into anyone they know — 14%
- at the boss's barbecue, but only if 2 other people wear theirs too — 34%
- under a sweater when visiting Grandma — 19%
- to bed when their Yankees shirt is in the wash — 23%

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