



guidedinsights

breakthrough conversations
for bottom-line results

Crafting questions that inspire candor, trust

When you lead a virtual team, it's tough knowing when someone has become disengaged, derailed or lost. If you're seeing some telltale signs, such as absences during team calls, unanswered emails, or lackluster performance, it's time to validate your suspicions before you go on to suggest how you can help.

The best way, short of a face-to-face meeting, is by calling the person to find out more. *How* you pose your questions, both in content and tone, will make all the difference in terms of how much that person chooses to reveal. To increase the likelihood of having an open, productive conversation, give careful thought to the questions you ask.

Before you pose your questions:

- Preface your question(s) with your observations and associated concerns. Be specific and avoid language that connotes any type of judgment on your part.
 - ***Instead of:*** “Pat, you seem really upset and disengaged lately.”
 - ***Say:*** “Pat, I have noticed that you missed the last two team meetings, and I have never heard back from the last three emails I sent you. When you do make the team calls, your level of participation has been less than usual. I sense that something may be going on for you, and am concerned that the rest of team is missing your contributions.”
 - ***Alternative:*** Say: Overall our project team is making great progress on our deliverables. Your area seems to be behind a bit the last few weeks. I sense that something may be going on with you that I don't know about, but I don't want to make assumptions. So, I thought I would just ask.
- Then pause. Give the other person a chance to gather his/her thoughts and respond. This may take a minute or two, and possibly longer, depending on the person. Resist the temptation to say more. Silence can be a very powerful communicator.
- Assuming the person has validated your observations to some degree and is now waiting for you to speak, be ready with questions that will elicit a candid response and help you determine the extent to which this person needs guidance, direction or support from you.

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Guidelines for creating and posing questions that tend to inspire trust:

- Use open-ended statements or questions that prompt people to reflect and speak. Examples:
 - **Instead of:** “So you’re not feeling motivated about what you’re doing now?”
 - **Say** “It’s important for me to understand what factors may have contributed to [the acknowledged problem].”
 - **Say** “Tell me more about what’s going on for you.”

- Use supportive language, never accusatory. Examples:
 - **Instead of:** “What do you want me to do about it?”
 - **Say:** “I realize that you have a lot going on right now and that you feel like you’re being asked to do more than you feel is reasonable. What barriers do you think I might be able to help you remove?”
 - **Instead of:** “Why didn’t you come to me sooner?”
 - **Say:** “Wow! I am really glad you shared that with me. What are some ways I can help remove some of the load?”

- Make sure that your questions can be answered without undue awkwardness or vulnerability. Examples:
 - **Instead of:** “So are you asking me to get John to return your calls so that you can get on with your piece of the project?”
 - **Say:** “It sounds like you’re having a tough time connecting with John, and that he is right in the middle of your critical path. To what extent would it be helpful if we could somehow work around John right now?”

 - **Instead of:** “Why don’t you just let everyone know what’s going on for you so they won’t be so upset with your behavior?”
 - **Say:** “It seems like you’re concerned you’re letting the others on the team down lately. What might be some ways you can let them know how you’re feeling?”

 - **Instead of:** “It seems like what I just said triggered some defensiveness for you.”
 - **Say:** “I noticed a shift after I made that last comment. I want to make sure I fully understand what you are struggling with. Is there more I need to know about this?”

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- Listen for any indicators that recent lack of progress is related to skill gaps and not just a dip in motivation or confidence. If you hear statements like:
 - “I started to work on that but I couldn’t get the formatting to work, and Jan wasn’t available to help...”
 - “I wasn’t sure what you expected so I stopped working on it until I could talk to you. But you have been busy...”
 - “I’m really bad at math. I can’t get the formula’s to work. I’m not sure I am the right person to do this task...”

... this in an invitation for you to respond with an offer of assistance such as “I don’t want to over-supervise here. But would it be helpful for me to show you what I know about this?”

Always ask permission before you give someone direction after they have been floundering on a task. If your direction is not wanted or needed you could quickly erode trust if you engage in behaviors that are perceived as micromanaging.

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