

# The Great eBook of Employee Questions

Part 2:

## Return of the Question Master

# Introduction

At 15Five, I have taken on several different roles. Officially, I am the Vice President of Customer Success, but I've also had the privilege of helping to shape the culture from the ground up and create many of the rituals that keep us connected as a team and company. Since many of those rituals involve asking questions, I am known to the team as, The Question Master.

Questions are not only core to the 15Five product but also core to our company culture. For years, every Friday during our all hands meetings, I would ask the team a question designed to have our globally distributed team grow closer and to enhance camaraderie and collaboration. These ranged from fun questions like, "What's your secret 'superpower'?" to poignant questions like, "What's one of the most difficult challenges you've had to overcome in life?" The responses often come with laughter or tears, and everyone can feel the tendrils of human connection joining together from half a world away.

The seed of question mastery is within us all, but it must be nurtured like any other skill. I became fluent in question mastery from years of training as a facilitator and executive coach. I have learned that questions are extraordinarily valuable for not only eliciting information, but for spawning deep inquiry about one's self in the personal and professional context.

After years of serving exclusively as Question Master, I recently decided to pass the baton to another member of the team to ask a question

every Friday for a month. After their month ends, they pass it on to another. In this way, everyone is gaining confidence leading meetings, and finding their own personal voice and style when asking questions.

Part of what makes our customers successful when using 15Five and when supporting their employees to do their best work, is the ability to ask questions. That's why we offer free educational content to enhance this ability and others. Our first eBook of Employee Questions remains our most popular piece of such content, proving that this is an incredibly valuable skill sought after in the business world.

I have assembled this follow-up with over sixty new questions, along with detailed information about why they are valuable or when they should be asked. In essence, I am passing the baton to you and initiating you as Question Master. May the questions you ask and the answers you receive help you and your team gain a better understanding of yourselves, your culture, and the product or service you are bringing into the world.

Stay curious!



**SHANE METCALF**

*VP OF CUSTOMER SUCCESS, 15FIVE*



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# I. Take a pulse

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## **What words would you use to describe how you feel about coming to work?**

We spend so much of our working life in our heads. If you ask an employee face to face how they feel, they will often look up at the ceiling because they are thinking, not feeling. They are sharing how you think they should feel. But when they actually consider their emotional state (anxious, sad, elated...etc...) that sets the stage for the manager and employee to consider and improve the atmosphere at the office.

2

## **Within the existing perks, which one do you value the most?**

Human Resources can often be just that, providing resources for humans. So those resources should be appreciated. Unless the company has unlimited funds, you will have to choose which perks to provide. Instead of guessing, find out from employees which ones are the most important to them.

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## **How's the morale around you?**

If the first question is a personal litmus test, this is one for the team. Remember that toxic energy is contagious. When people feel negative emotions like

anger, stress, or even envy they will subconsciously (or consciously!) spread those feelings. In fact, that's what active disengagement is, a form of sabotage caused by apathy or anger.

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## **How have your personal energy levels been? If you wanted to move up a number, what would it take?**

Energy is a strange phenomenon. Sometimes we can push through for hours on little sleep or nourishment because we are so delighted by the task at hand. At other times, we are depleted by the smallest task because of something as tangible as a physical ailment or lack of sleep. This question asks the employee to focus on their life holistically and make different choices if possible.

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## **How have your stress levels been?**

STRESS! Studies show that positive (eustress) and negative (distress) stress have divergent impacts on employees. Stress can be a useful tool to drive people to perform excellent work by a stated deadline. Too much stress is debilitating over time, leading to poor work product and even illness or injury on the team.



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### What % of your time are you spending in your zone of genius compared with your zone of excellence?

According to *The Big Leap* by Gay Hendricks, The Zone of Excellence is where employees perform activities extremely well and make a great living, but are capable of much more. The Zone of Genius is where employees offer their unique gifts and where self-actualization occurs.

The Zone of Excellence is the danger zone for managing talent. People add tremendous value here, but don't feel fulfilled. Employees may feel afraid that if they ask to have these seemingly vital activities moved off of their plate, that they will no longer be deemed valuable or that they are standing in the way of team objectives.

**GENIUS QUESTION:** Could you describe a good day of work you had recently?

This taps into their memories to extract clear and specific examples of positive experiences they've had. Leaders should be asking this question to learn everything they can about replicating the experience so that every day looks more like it.



**MARCEL SCHWANTES**  
FOUNDER/PRINCIPAL,  
*LEADERSHIP FROM THE CORE*

## II. Let's build a culture

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### Are there any core values that you don't quite get or don't feel aligned with?

Some companies may have ten or more core values and, while they may have hired for culture fit, one or two of those values may not resonate with an individual employee. In most instances, that is not cause for alarm. However, it can be helpful to raise awareness around it to maintain harmony among teammates who have different values.



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### How aligned do you feel with the company mission?

We live in the purpose economy, where employees want more than a paycheck. They want to feel like they are in service to something greater than themselves. So when they might feel lost in a sea of work, this question reminds them of where they are headed and why, and how their unique contribution supports the journey of the collective. The mission is also one of those cultural touchstones that should guide employee decision making when they are uncertain.

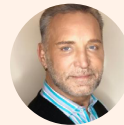
9

### Which of our values have you seen lived by someone else at the company in the last week?

Determining your core values or helping another to discover theirs is a learned skill. Usually we learn what people value by asking pointed questions or observing their actions and choices in certain circumstances. Core values buttress the company culture and how or why someone acts is as important as what they achieve. This question creates greater awareness around core values and how they influence behavior.

**GENIUS QUESTION:** Do you know your personal life purpose, why you are here on the planet?

The reason I ask is because; until we know the answer, even if we catch what we chase, we will never be fulfilled without knowing our deeper person (soul) purpose.



**DOV BARON**

LEADERSHIP SPEAKER & FOUNDER  
FULL MONTY LEADERSHIP

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### How aligned do you feel with the company vision?

The vision and mission are two different matters. You might agree with the vision and even support it from a distance without wanting to join the mission by picking up a crossbow and heading into battle. If an employee is not aligned with the vision, leadership should discuss why that is. On one extreme, the employee may not be a great fit for the company. On the other, leadership may decide to tweak the vision statement.



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**What are 5-10 qualities that you think are must haves for new hires in terms of culture fit?**

Hiring for culture fit is en vogue for a reason. Maintaining a strong culture means not introducing radical elements, ideas, and behaviors. A diversity of perspectives is welcome but not when those perspectives are toxic. Employees who are part of an existing culture can likely pinpoint the behaviors that are aligned with the values they cherish.

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**What did you do to encourage transparent communication on the team or how could you encourage it in the future?**

Trust is either granted or withheld, it is never earned. It's a person's past experiences that often determine how trusting they are. But there are things we can do to help colleagues grant trust to others. Sharing something vulnerable with your direct reports, like a mistake you made, sends the message that they are safe to discuss their own mistakes rather than sweeping them under the rug.

### III. Goals and Objectives

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**Is your OKR\_\_\_\_ by end of quarter on track? If not, why and what are you planning to do about it?**

OKRs (Objectives and Key Results) are one of the most powerful productivity tools you can have in a company. But unless employees track regular progress and have frequent discussions to get support from managers, their lofty objective is unlikely to be achieved by EOQ.

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**How have you advanced your career or personal goals this week?**

We can easily get caught up in the habit of getting sh\*t done. That's not time wasted, it's just not time optimized. Every task should fit into one of three buckets; career goal, business objective, or personal advancement. It may seem strange for a manager to support a personal goal, but those are the type of experiences that create strong work relationships and deeper levels of commitment.



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### **What's the main thing standing in the way of hitting your objectives this quarter?**

Performance is not just about what a person needs to get the job done, but also becoming aware of the distractions and negative conditions preventing progress. Managers can help them remove obstacles and roadblocks (especially if the manager is the roadblock!)

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### **What's the main thing standing in the way of hitting your goals this week?**

This is similar to the the question above but instead of being about longer term (quarterly) objectives, this is about short term (weekly) goals. This one can be about muscling through, whereas the question above deals with long term issues. If the answers to this question are frequently the same, it's time to get creative about disrupting the patterns at work or even away from the desk.

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### **Any concerns about the strategic goals of the company?**

Our weeks (and months and quarters) are filled with tasks. Whether those tasks are actually moving the company forward is a different matter. Employees can often prioritize the wrong tasks for a variety of reasons. With so much to do and so little time to do it, it's imperative that everyone understands what the company is trying to achieve for the year and even the rationale behind those goals. That way, everyone can ask themselves, By doing X, what strategic goal am I serving?

**NOTE:** We highly recommend using weekly goals and quarterly objectives as a way to drive and measure performance. This can be via the practice of OKRs (Objectives and Key Results) or any other method where the top company priorities are shared and every employee creates their own quarterly priorities to support them.

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### **What did you learn from your OKR score this last month?**

This is similar to the the question above but instead of being about longer term (quarterly) objectives, this is about short term (weekly) goals. People can muscle through a short term obstacle, whereas the question above deals with long term issues. If the answers to this question are frequently the same every time you ask, it's time to get creative about disrupting the negative patterns affecting quality work product.

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### **How can I help with one of your goals to keep team objectives on track by end of quarter/year?**

Departmental goals (or team OKRs) are vital. They are the next layer down from a company-wide objective. When directors or VPs are cognizant of the struggles of middle-managers, and they step in to help, the entire company benefits.





## IV. Keep up morale

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### **What did you do this week that was fun?**

Fun? What is that, I've forgotten? Yes, hard work is important, but people can burnout without the 4 Rs: Rest, Relaxation, Rejuvenation, and Recreation. This is also a great way to remind people who have had a hard week that the company supports the "life" part of their work/life balance.

21

### **Any ideas for a fun group activity for the upcoming retreat?**

Plato said, "You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation". So if part of your intention for a work retreat is to increase team cohesion (and it should be) then you want to break up brainstorming and work sessions with laughter and low stakes challenges. Corn Hole anyone?

22

### **What's one of the favorite parts of your job?**

Work can be overwhelming and stressful, and will always include tasks that we don't like to perform. Why not regularly remind your employees of the good stuff that lights them up, and tasks that utilize their unique skills and talents? (Note: If the answer to this question is limited, it's time to meet with that employee and swap tasks they enjoy with the ones they don't.)

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### **The least favorite?**

This may seem like a risky question, one that is inviting anger and criticism. It's important for managers to be aware of the full breadth of employee experience, including the parts that are less than ideal for that person. Perhaps you will learn of a task that can be delegated to an employee who will enjoy it, or maybe it's a workplace condition that can be improved on the team or at the company.

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### **Who did something amazing that made your day? Share a bit about why.**

Research by [DR. PAUL WHITE](#) indicates that less than 10% of employees desire tangible rewards as the primary way to be recognized. While most people like receiving some type of gift, if it is not also accompanied by sincere words, quality time, or helping them out, the gift is viewed as superficial and disingenuous. When you find out who deserves recognition, give it to them in the way they prefer.



**GENIUS QUESTION:** What are you hearing that people are afraid to talk about?

Usually, there's a lot of gossip/chatter that goes on between teams and individuals, and I want to know the real deal. You can't ask this question unless you've already established trust with your team, but if you get there, you will find out an immense amount of information - some of it could be their own individual fears or concerns or it really is the water-cooler chatter. Either way, it's important to remember that perception is someone's reality.



**COLLEEN MCCREARY**  
VP OF PEOPLE & CULTURE, VEVO

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**Name an example of how you made something better...**

In romantic relationships, it's the little things that count. Or so they say. In work relationships, the same holds true. We can often learn the most about people personally and professionally by being aware of the small things they do -- triumphs, thoughtful words, offering guidance, or even dialing up someone else's work to 11. Find out who your employees are by seeing the little things they do to improve work product and culture.

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**Have you received recognition for your efforts in the last week?**

There are two parts to this question: 1) A manager might be sourcing 360 feedback. They are unaware of any verbal praise that an employee may have received from a co-worker and are providing an opportunity for them to share it. 2) A manager might be overwhelmed and has forgotten if they offered praise to one of their direct reports. This is a way of saying, I haven't forgotten about you. Tell me how you rocked it this week!

27

**Who would you like to nominate for this week's MVP and why?**

Even the most present managers are not privy to the same awareness of an employee's outstanding work as someone else on the team with whom that employee works more closely. Crowdsourcing kudos is an efficient way to discover who went above and beyond and then recognize those efforts in a way that each individual employee wants to be recognized.

28

**What is the most fulfilling aspect of your job?**

What's favorable and enjoyable is important, but meaning is vital for our sense of satisfaction at work. *DANIEL PINK* refers to this as purpose, the sense that what we do produces something transcendent or serves something meaningful beyond ourselves.



29

**What are you grateful for this week?**

According to [HARVARD HEALTH](#), in positive psychology research, gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness. So that one reframe on an employee's experience may be the single most valuable action you can take to improve morale.

## V. Focus on the business

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**What's the biggest growth opportunity that you see for the company right now?**  
**What are we not doing that we should be?**

We've said this time and again, the employees who speak directly with your customers hold the keys to improving your product or service, building something that people love, and staying one step ahead of the competition. Leadership can often operate with their blinders on, but this question widens the angle of what they see to include everyone at the company.

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**Describe our company as you would to a potential customer...**

Ah, the elevator pitch. Some aspects are uniform. For example, 15Five is not a tool, it's a solution, and we make that distinction known to every employee. However, everyone will relate to the product/service you offer differently. That specific emotional connection informs how they describe your offering, so by demanding

uniformity, you are removing the most appealing element of the pitch -- sincerity. Ask this question and correct any factual issues, but leave the employee's unique signature intact.

32

**How many demos/sales calls/follow-ups have you done this week?**

Balance the "softer" questions with concrete details about goals and objectives. Some activities are directly linked to outcomes. Unless you are prospecting, you won't succeed. The gold is not going to come hurtling up to the surface unless you've nailed inbound marketing!



33

**How is your team's budget? Do you have the resources you need to meet your goals?**

While we believe in finding the leverage to get the most out of limited resources, not much can happen without any resources at all. Your CFO or other leader sets the budget periodically, so don't worry if that's not flexible. You want to know where limitations exist so that you can factor that information into the next budget period. And if your team's efforts are high leverage enough, perhaps additional resources can be found (i.e. a discretionary fund or moving someone from a different team).

34

**Where is your team being wasteful? Where can you find the leverage?**

Could this be your CFO's favorite question? Someone discovered that the federal government could save millions each year if they switched fonts. That little bit of ink shaved off of countless documents added up in the aggregate. Asking this question focuses everyone on the fact that everything costs the company money. Saving by being more efficient might just save a struggling organization or add up to better perks for businesses that flourish.

## VI. Learning & Growing

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**What new thing did you learn this week?**

They say that effective CEOs read 60 books per year. Exposing oneself to new ideas in this way can greatly enhance innovation and performance. By asking this question, you let employees know that you value learning and development.

36

**Have you taken any risks lately? What did you learn?**

There's a saying in Silicon Valley, which can apply to the entire business world: "Move fast and break things". Encouraging calculated risk taking only works if you don't come down hard on people when they fail. Get curious about the innovation/iteration process and bring it full circle by cataloguing the learnings.

37

**Are we providing enough growth opportunities for your role? If not, what's missing?**

There's a common saying in the business world -- people don't leave their jobs, they leave their managers. While it's true that one's direct manager is responsible for creating a positive employee experience, research suggests that many people leave companies not over relationships, but because they feel like they've stopped growing.



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**What new skill do you want to have by this time next year?**

Sometimes employees have a desire to grow their skillsets (whether personally or professionally) but they don't know how to get there. They may also not have the resources. The first step is to ask them how they want to grow. You as a leader may be able to allocate resources, make a connection, or otherwise support their continued growth.

**What's one project you'd love to focus on for an entire week but don't have time to accomplish?**

Deep work. It can be so hard to carve out time amid distractions like email and Slack. Research shows that staying focused and getting into flow states greatly increases productivity. Three hours in flow is far more productive than six, half hour work sessions. Every time you come out of flow for something and ramp back up afterwards, you lose...well...your flow.

## VII. Getting sh\*t done

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**On a 1-10 scale, how productive have you been? If you wanted to move up a number, what would it take?**

This question puts the onus on the employee to rate their actual efforts against what they said they have done. Essentially, you are asking people to keep a work journal so that they can be aware of their own productivity. Where do they shine and where do they falter? Once you know that you can help them get there.

40

**What are you spending a ton of time doing, that has the least impact?**

We all have to divide our time between tasks that are high impact vs those things that just have to get done. By analyzing how

much time we spend on a project and how high leverage it is, we can start to see the opportunity cost of our efforts. If you make the equivalent of \$100 per hour and you can outsource some of your work to another for a fraction of that cost, do it. That will free you up to do work that is directly tied to producing more revenue.

41

**Is there something you'd want to do more with more autonomy or less autonomy - how so?**

Humans are interesting creatures. Until we are tested, we don't know just how much we can accomplish on our own. There's a way in which having direct oversight and not enough challenge can sometimes limit



our growth. We can rely heavily on the person with greater experience and expertise and don't ever cross over into that uncomfortable zone of learning or doing something new. Conversely, zero guidance whatsoever can lead to complete failure followed by a downward spiral of shame and frustration. The right amount of autonomy is key.

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**How much time do you have every week to accomplish your work? Are you overwhelmed or need more to do?**

Finding that sweet spot where employees are humming along but not freaking out, can be a challenge. Some people are programmed to just keep going until they collapse. Others are not driven at all and will pretend to be busy just to avoid more tasks. Opening up a conversation around this will let you get ahead of problems like employee burnout or disengagement.

43

**How's your team looking? Any roles you need filled?**

Sometimes productivity stalls because you just don't have enough people. Ask these questions so that you can plan budgets in advance. Using freelancers and other consultants may be a band-aid or permanent solution. That also sends the message that you care about the overwhelm or talent gap that a department may be facing.

**GENIUS QUESTION: Are you good with this?**

I could be talking about the task at hand, or what we've just discussed in a conference call or a meeting. I'm asking my team this question because I want to give them room to answer — in a way that is openly worded. The truth is I'm fairly informal with my team, so long as they're doing their best work and bring their A-game. Which they do, and I think it's in part because I ask questions like this. I don't ask wooden, overly detailed, micro- managerial questions. I'm just checking in, taking their pulse, and it also means if there is any problem at all — they don't understand a direction or aren't on board with an approach — they'll tell me. They're fine with telling me they're no good with something, because I am. And then we'll put our heads together and make it good.



**MEGHAN M. BIRO**  
HR/TECH EVANGELIST & CEO  
TALENTCULTURE



## VIII. Customer delight

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**What was the most common negative piece of feedback you received from a customer lately?**

One of the main reasons to have a regular employee feedback practice company-wide is so that the highest levels of management can access real-time information. Customer feedback is often the most valuable info the C-suite does not otherwise have access to.

45

**What was the most positive compliment you received about our company from a customer this week?**

Managers so often want to be aware of issues to get ahead of problems, that the good stuff stays hidden. This simple question is important, because sometimes doing more of what you're doing well is just as important as fixing the negatives.

46

**Tell me about a customer problem that you turned around lately?**

Turning personal experiences and learnings into institutional knowledge is how you grow a company long-term. This is true for your sales team as well as your customer support crew.

As a bonus, you are providing an employee with an opportunity to toot their own horn. That's something they may be otherwise unlikely to do.

47

**What is something you or a customer would like to see on the product roadmap?**

Ah, the product roadmap. Even with an army of engineers, product designers, and others, you will need to prioritize what gets built or fixed first. Customer feedback is critical for informing this process.

48

**What's a great idea for swag (stuff we all get)?**

A great way to recognize an existing customer for being an advocate is to send along something thoughtful. Likewise, if you are attracting potential customers at a trade show, you may want something for the table, like a fidget spinner. Some people are more tapped into the latest trends than others, so polling the team for your swag efforts is valuable.

## IX. Improving your management chops

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**How is management doing? Any feedback for me on my leadership?**

Just as employees are not an objective, reliable judge of their own performance, so too managers need reflections from time to time. Of course, this is edgy for employees. So to get honest feedback,



you need to encourage transparency as a cultural value and commit to meeting criticism with gratitude. (We strongly advise you to collect this information via software, because a face to face conversation of this nature is likely to be prohibitively intimidating.)

50

**What's a way that I can improve my communication or listening skills?**

Active listening is a skill that involves listening to other people's problems with their needs in mind. If you're not suspending your thoughts, you're not listening. If you are just waiting for the other person to stop talking to chime in with what you think is a better idea, that's not listening. That may not even be hearing.

51

**What's something you want the c-suite to know about you?**

The Society for Human Resource Management performs a survey each year to determine which factors influence overall employee satisfaction and engagement in the workplace. What's one of the highest factors on the list? Trust & Communication Between Employees & Senior Management.

52

**What was the best part of the company retreat/offsite? How could we have improved?**

Have you ever put together an agenda for a multi-day retreat that brings together various departments to set key objectives for the upcoming year? It's no simple feat. Getting feedback from employees means that the leadership team can improve year after year and create an experience that is universally fun, impactful, and challenging.

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**Did you miss any one-on-one meetings during the last cycle? What happened?**

"I'm so sorry, I need to reschedule our one on one meeting again." When employees hear that, they will likely either feel relief, frustration, or anger. If they're relieved, that means you're missing a major opportunity to discover exactly what it is that employee doesn't want you to know. If they're frustrated, that's because they genuinely need your help to move their work forward. And if they're angry, it's because you're sending the message that they just aren't worth your attention.





## X. Cross-Team Collaboration

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**What's something you need from someone on a different team that you aren't getting?**

People who are dedicated put their heads down and work, and a special project for someone on a different team can fall through the cracks. This question helps you to combat silos by creating a collaborative environment.

55

**What is a great cross-team initiative that you haven't shared? Who would be best for it?**

Just like a project that has been identified can get lost, a great idea for multiple teams to work on can remain unspoken without the right opportunity. No time like the present!

56

**Who on a different team would you like to include in a brainstorming session?**

Sometimes the best people to help with ideation are not as close to the design/problem/initiative as you are. Fresh eyes from others at the organization, or people whose top strengths lie in the creative realm can be just what you need.

57

**If you could shadow anyone in the company for a day, who would it be?**

Winning today is not as simple as it used to be. Technological advancement means that

new products and services (including those of your competitors) can penetrate the market in years, not decades. Innovation must occur far more rapidly these days for businesses to stay competitive. Part of that competitive edge can be to see another aspect of the business through the eyes of a co-worker. Then take what you learn back to your work and get creative.

58

**Have you honored your commitments to other team members? Where are you out of integrity?**

This question is more about team dynamics than getting a project completed, but trust is vital for working together to work. When people reach out for a collaborative effort, this question reframes the issue as one dealing with trust, honesty, and empowerment. Brainstorming collaboratively or finishing a project that is outside the scope of your goals may seem like a favor or a colleague, but everyone's job at the company is to ensure that the business succeeds. Take the opportunity to follow-through, restore trust and get things done together.



# Conclusion

Sometimes the best questions are the simplest ones like, Anything else you want to share? Everyone has their own communication style. Some folks you will constantly and delicately have to interrupt, while others you will have to be very active with in order to solicit information. That's where the power of the prompt comes in. Ask a pretty general, open ended questions to grease the wheels of the conversation and then get more specific to grain more granular insights.

There are practically infinite questions out there, and asking them can help you as a leader to maintain visibility, strengthen relationships, and gather information to help you lead better. And who knows? With a little time and a bit of practice, you may become The Question Master.



## About 15Five

15Five is a continuous performance management solution that helps employees grow and develop, in just 15 minutes each week. Through a lightweight weekly check-in, 15Five delivers everything a manager needs to impact employee performance, including continuous feedback, objectives (OKR) tracking, recognition, 1-on-1s, and 360° reviews.

To learn more, visit [www.15Five.com](http://www.15Five.com)