



6 Questions to Ask Yourself When You're Frustrated with Your Team

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"They're just not doing their job," grumbled an executive in a group one of us (Amii) was recently facilitating. She was resentful over what she viewed as a lack of productivity on her team.

Being a leader has always been challenging, but manager stress and burnout is rising: A November 2021 Gallup survey found that 35% of people managers reported feeling burned out "very often or always," as compared to 27% of individual contributors and 22% of leaders.

When it's a constant mental strain to get the work done, managers may have a short fuse. When expectations aren't met, the brain short-circuits to judgment and reaction.

This is exactly the opposite of what your employees need. In healthy workplace cultures, leaders know how to balance accountability for results with empathy. One way to do this is to aim for reflection instead of reaction. If you're playing the long game, how you achieve goals is going to get you further than what you achieve short-term. Employees who feel they can learn and grow are more engaged. Receiving developmental feedback is also critical to development.

Our call to action is for leaders to take a pause and reflect before the pressure of high demands leads to lashing out. When frustration and judgment hovers, cultivate curiosity and ask yourself the following six questions. They will serve as your north star

checklist to make sure you're centering empathy in your attempts to encourage performance.

1. Have I been clear about expected work outcomes?

Leaders often underestimate the need to communicate. Reflect on how effectively you've shared your expectations when it comes to roles, deliverables, support, and results. Identifying what success looks like for a particular project in terms of quality and desired impact can enable others to organize their time, energy, and other resources more effectively.

Frequent communication is helpful in communicating a clear vision. Helping team members understand how their unique contribution supports business outcomes can energize an employee's sense of purpose. It may also save valuable time by preventing confusion down the line. And you should always check in with your employee to assess how clearly your message has been understood.

2. Are my expectations reasonable?

Consider the assignment and compare it with similar work you've delegated in the past. Is the current project adequately resourced? If not, you may need to find additional resources or scale back your own expectations.

Is it a stretch assignment, intended to be a challenge or stimulate the employee's growth? If yes, you may need to provide more guidance and mentoring. Consider whether you've made yourself available for questions and any necessary approvals. Assess the timeline and whether the person is adequately supported to meet expectations.

3. What do I know to be true about this employee?

When you're frustrated with an individual's performance, take a step back and remember the whole person. Assess their knowledge, skills, and abilities. Reflect on their strengths and areas for growth. Some people may enjoy and do better with greater autonomy, while others prefer more communication, support, and connection.

If you notice a downturn in performance, have a direct and kind conversation to find out what's going on. There may be personal events at play, such as an ailing family member, a breakup, or additional caregiving responsibilities. In your check-ins, make sure you are focused on listening. Ask about their experience with the work at hand, and assess whether they understand your expectations. Feelings of stress and overwhelm may require a different kind of support than on-the-job training.

4. Am I managing to results?

Successful managers focus on outcomes, not how or when the work gets done. We all possess unique working styles and preferences. Your way may not be the natural route for others, so beware of the bias towards your own style.

Micromanaging means we're impinging on our employee's autonomy, which is a core psychological need. By outlining a clear vision for results, you enable employees to either take the lead or to elicit more guidance. Ensure that you've connected the outcomes you're seeking to the company's larger vision and goals. People want to feel they are doing meaningful work and aligning purpose between the individual and organization can boost engagement.

5. Am I holding everyone to the same standard?

Despite our best intentions, unconscious bias can cause us to favor some people over others. Understanding the uniqueness of the employee at hand, consider whether

you're holding all team members to the same standard. Are you tougher on men, women, or people of color? Do you invest time equally in your team's development? Do you make assumptions based on age? Having clarity on results can also help you avoid unconscious bias. If you're unsure whether you are being fair, you can also talk with a trusted colleague to get their view on the situation.

Another bias to be aware of is proximity bias, which describes how managers can be more inclined to favor those who are physically closer to them. If you work in a hybrid environment, do you give preference in work assignments to people who come to the office more often? Note that proximity bias disproportionately impacts women and caregivers.

6. Am I providing actionable feedback that is clear, firm, and kind?

If you have concerns or criticism of the work, don't delay your feedback. Research shows that feedback is best given in the flow of work. Reach out as soon as a potential misalignment appears. It's much better to catch it early, and not let issues fester.

Also solicit feedback from your employee about their experience on the assignment. Alignment and candid conversations build trust and commitment with your employees. Employees who feel supported by their boss experience the greatest job satisfaction, and companies with high-trust workplace cultures perform nearly two times better than those without. Plus, you may gain information that changes your perspective on how the project is going.

Self-reflection takes discipline and time — and the investment is worth the reward. Companies with managers who cultivate strong relationships with their employees experience higher loyalty, trust, productivity, and joy. Use these reflection questions as a guide to bridge any gaps in your expectations. Making the conscious decision to drive performance from empathy is the difference between the true competitive advantage — discretionary effort — and punching the clock. These actions differentiate managers from leaders.

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