

# How to Get Your Team to Stop Asking You Every Little Question



You're finally in the flow, typing away and making progress on that strategy document. And then a team member IMs you a question. And then another one pops up. Before you know it, your afternoon is gone and you've made no progress. Sound familiar?

In order to make time for reflective thinking, managers need to facilitate their team members' independence. This is especially important if your team is not physically together, because "quick questions" sent through team chat channels can otherwise be endless.

Start by analyzing the problem. What are the reasons your team members feel they need your input? Is it because they don't have the confidence to make decisions on their own? Because they fear reprisals if they make the "wrong" decision? Because they are unqualified or inexperienced? Categorizing the types of issues can be helpful to recognizing patterns and taking corrective action.

Once you understand *what* they're coming to you about, then you need to determine *why*, and what role you play in that. Does your behavior enable, or even encourage, your staff to bring you every little "speed bump" in their day? Does it lead them to believe that you are the only one who is authorized to solve problems or make decisions? Does the way you interact with them cause them to lack confidence in their own judgment or make the limits of their authority unclear to them? Do they have good reason to fear making a mistake?

Below are ideas you can implement in four specific categories that will empower your employees while promoting your own productivity.

## 1. Put an emphasis on attention management.

Start by identifying whether an “open-door policy” is something that is stated or promoted in your organization. If so, make it explicit with a clear definition.

Of course, it’s important for leaders to be available to their teams. But “being available” shouldn’t come at the cost of everyone’s work being interrupted unpredictably, all throughout the day. An open-door policy was never intended to mean that anyone is available to be interrupted at any time for any reason. A better implementation is to be clear that everyone in your organization should be considered *accessible*, but not necessarily constantly available. Individual team members need to provide signals about when they are available to be interrupted, and when they aren’t. And the culture needs to support this undistracted work time.

In a virtual situation, encourage the team to practice attention management by periodically closing their email client, putting their phone on silent and out of sight, and setting their chat tools to “do not disturb.” You should model this behavior, because if you never do it, your team won’t either, no matter what you say.

In the office, indicate your do-not-disturb times with some sort of signal, and empower your team to do the same: You could use a do-not-disturb sign, a cubicle flag, or headphones, for example. Everyone should know what the signals are and what they mean. Then be judicious about putting them up to create undistracted work time and taking them down when you’re willing to allow interruptions.

These scenarios might seem impossible at your organization. In that case, you need to look at the way communication flows. Put a focus on creating a culture that supports *asynchronous* communication, where the conversation isn’t always “live” but people can chime in when it’s best for their work flow. My favorite team collaboration tool, Twist, offers a great guide for how to do that.

## 2. Promote self-confidence in your staff.

Set boundaries for your employees, making sure they understand the responsibilities of their role, the types of decisions they can and should make on their own, and the general limits of their authority. Then, encourage them to find their own solutions to day-to-day problems. Instead of answering questions, try using the phrase, “I trust your judgment.” The more successful your direct reports are in solving their problems on their own, the more their confidence will grow. This is a great way to develop your team members while also increasing your own opportunities for undistracted work time.

One thing that can interfere with your team’s autonomy is if you’re the kind of manager who likes having a lot of control, and being involved in every decision. This kind of

micromanaging is a burden on you and stifles your team's growth. You can't do everyone's job for them, nor should you. Empower your team members to make their own decisions. If you are unsure whether you are micromanaging, ask a trusted peer or former employee to give you honest feedback.

### **3. Embrace the tough decisions.**

If there are employees whose judgment you don't trust, try to understand why, so you can find remedies. Do the employees have a gap in their skill sets? Would additional training help? Is the person new to the organization? Perhaps more time is needed to "learn the ropes." Maybe finding a mentor or "buddy" on the team would be helpful. But set a time limit on this.

Occasionally, you may find you've made a hiring mistake. The hardest questions to face are whether you have the right person in the wrong role, or whether the person isn't a good fit for the organization. Don't drag your feet here. Make it a win for you and the employee by helping the person find another role at your organization, or a new job somewhere else. This will enable you to cut your losses, as well as help develop your company's reputation as a good place to work.

### **4. Create a safe environment to make mistakes.**

If there are serious, unpleasant consequences to honest mistakes, your organization has a "CYA culture," where people aren't coming to you because they want your input, they're just looking for a way to shift any future blame. This will stifle growth and prevent your organization from being adaptable. Remember the old adage, "Praise in public, correct in private." Speak to team members privately when one of their solutions does not provide the best outcome. Emphasize the idea that mistakes are opportunities to learn. Hold team members accountable to their decisions by using mistakes as teaching opportunities. Call attention to the lesson learned, and make sure it sticks, but if the decision was ethical and made in good faith, be supportive and empathetic.

By implementing these four strategies, you'll be able to minimize interruptions from your direct reports, and you'll create more opportunities to focus on the thoughtful work your leadership position demands. In the process, you'll inspire confidence, innovation, and creativity in your team members. When you empower your team to work more independently, you improve as a leader and ultimately, you contribute more to the success of the organization.

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