

Six Questions Every New Fire Officer Must Ask

Making a first impression in a new position sets the tone for leadership;
base that impression on engaged listening

By Steve Prziborowski

Whether you are a veteran supervisor, a new supervisor or someone who aspires to be a supervisor, there are several things you must do upon taking a new position or a new rank. One of the best things you can do within your first few weeks in your new position is to get together with those you are now supervising and ask them these six key questions.

1. What's going right?

Start off on a good note. Find out what they think is going right within their company or area of work and within the organization as a whole. This information can be very valuable and should give you a pulse on what is going right.

Look for similarities as well as differences of opinion with the different individuals you talk to. If they don't clarify or support why something is going right, ask them to expand so that you can find out more about their opinion.

If something is going right, try to capitalize on it and make sure it continues going right. It is also good information to share with your supervisors to keep them informed of what is happening at the station level or areas they may not interact with regularly.

2. What can be improved?

This can be tough for some to answer, especially if they don't know you too well or if your reputation makes someone not want to be honest and up front — fearing an expected reaction. We all have worked with those in positions above us who, for whatever reason, have demonstrated some behavior that has led us to lose trust in or loyalty to them.

Know your audience, be a good listener, keep an open mind, don't disagree, and just let them vent if needed. Think of this part of the questioning as the brainstorming session where ideas and thoughts can just be freely thrown out on the table. Remember, your job is not to solve all those potential issues as much as it is to be supportive, empathetic and someone your personnel can talk to when needed.

As with the previous question, look for common themes in the responses you hear from different individuals. If only one person is complaining or unhappy about something, maybe it's just that one person's issue.

However, if you start hearing a common theme, then it actually may be worth trying to solve the problem — with their assistance, of course. If someone is going to give you problems, they better be ready to share some reasonable and achievable solutions. Anyone can complain or take pot shots; not everyone can actually provide solutions and be willing to be a part of the solution.

3. What do you want or need from me?

The best advice a chief officer ever gave me was that it was my responsibility to serve those I was responsible for. This means ensuring they go home at the end of their shift and that I prepare them for future promotions or just being the best they can be.

In all the years I have been sharing expectations, when I asked this question as a battalion chief, the standard answers from captains was something along the lines of "don't disrespect us, take care of us, and don't yell at us."

Why do you think those items are so common? It is probably because of those who have been their supervisors in the past.

4. What are your career aspirations?

It is critical for you to be aware of the career aspirations of those you supervise so you can assist them with their career development. Now, the challenging part is that some personnel may want to hold their cards tight and not share their career aspirations with anyone, let alone their supervisor.

That's ok. But if you sense that is the case, explain to them the benefits of sharing their career aspirations, with the primary benefit being you can now do what you can to assist them.

5. How can I or the department assist with your aspirations?

One of the best battalion chiefs I worked for as a captain was Dan Dunlap. He knew I was preparing for the battalion chief test and took every spare moment to throw things my way in the form of, "Here is the situation, as a battalion chief what would you do?"

Most of the time, I would answer like a captain would. He would then tactfully correct me to now think like a battalion chief, think bigger picture.

I would always think of steps 1 and 2 and he would counter with adding steps 3, 4 and 5. He forced me to think like the position I was aspiring to and it definitely helped during the promotional exam, and more importantly, in the position once I was promoted.

6. What are your career-development needs?

This takes the previous question to the next level. If you are aware of the career-development needs of your personnel, do what you can in your power to ensure those needs are met.

For example, if you know they are deficient in certain areas of training and education, actively look for those classes or experience opportunities that may benefit them. For those individuals who I know have the desire to better themselves, I will do my best to share training and experience opportunities with them.

They don't have to take me up on every opportunity, but it shows that I care and it shows that I have an interest in their career development.

When to pop the questions

The question of when to ask these questions is not easily answered. There is no one right way to proceed. Some will say it's best to set up a meeting with each person you supervise within your first week or two. Some will say to wait a few weeks if not a month or more before.

I lean toward getting together in the first week or two. The longer you wait, the tougher it may be to get together, and the tougher it may be to change bad habits.

Regardless of when you decide to get together, just making the decision to do it and then asking those six questions will pay off in the long run. Send these questions to them in advance so that they have time to review them, take notes and formulate their own set of questions for you. Have them share them with those they supervise so that they can, as a crew, ensure they are all on the same page.

In considering when best to ask the questions, you can provide lunch of their choice. Having the time to break bread around the ever-important kitchen table is very valuable. There can be a small talk during the meal, and once lunch was over have a longer sit down with some great dialogue.

Private or public

Depending on your current situation, it may be appropriate to have a one-on-one session with a person you are now supervising. Or it may be appropriate to have the entire crew in on the conversation so they know what you expect of everyone.

Obviously some of the questions above may be best in a one-on-one setting, especially those that relate to the career aspirations of the supervisor, as well as their feedback on

what the department can improve upon. Some of those other questions are actually great for the entire crew, especially what they all expect of you.

Nobody said being a supervisor was going to be easy. But if you take the time to really get to know your personnel and do what you can do to be the best supervisor you can be, the rewards can last a lifetime.

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