

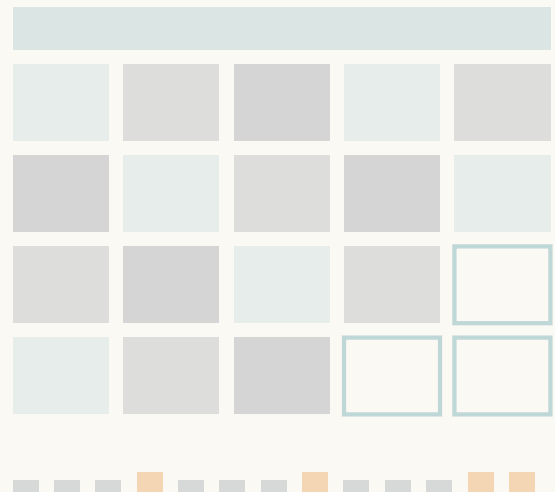


AN ARDENT WORKSHOP PRODUCT

First-Week Listening Questions

The three conversations of week one, and what to ask in them.

Free guide · 15 questions · 3 conversations



The Three Conversations of Week One

Everything you learn for the next year is filtered through what people decide about you this week.

You were promoted for being good at something. Almost certainly not for this — and week one is almost entirely about what you do not do. The single highest-return thing available to you is also the cheapest: sit down with people, one at a time, and ask better questions than anyone expects.

This is the week-one slice of a larger bank. **15 questions** across the three conversations you cannot postpone, each with what it is really asking, what a useful answer sounds like, and the follow-up that gets past the first answer.

Five rules that decide whether it works

- 1 Say what the conversation is for, before it starts.** A half-hour invitation with no stated purpose from a manager who is one week old reads as an assessment, and people prepare for assessments by saying nothing. Write one line in the invitation: you are trying to understand how the work actually runs, you are not evaluating anyone, and nothing said here goes into a performance record.
- 2 Ask fewer questions than you planned.** Six questions with real follow-ups beats sixteen asked at speed. The bank is deliberately larger than any one conversation so you can choose, not so you can get through it.
- 3 Write it down afterward, not during.** Typing while somebody describes a problem with their last manager changes what they are willing to describe. Take five minutes after the conversation instead, while it is still exact.
- 4 Separate what you heard from what you concluded.** Keep two lists. The first is quotes and facts; the second is your interpretation. In week six you will find that some of the second list was wrong and the first list is still true.
- 5 Close the loop within fourteen days.** This is the step that gets skipped and the one that determines whether the whole exercise built trust or spent it. See the report-back below.

THE TWO THAT GET SKIPPED

The first of these three is the one that reliably gets run; the other two are the ones that get postponed. The manager you now report to is the one who decides what your ninety days are measured against — ask in week one, before you have opinions. Your new peers are the relationships you will need suddenly, in month four, and will not be able to build in a hurry. Thirty minutes each, now, is the cheapest they will ever be.

Each person who reports to you

One conversation each, 45 minutes, inside the first two weeks. Do not batch them — the order you see people in is itself a message.

Open with: "I want to understand how this actually works before I change anything. I am going to ask a lot and say very little."

What does a good week look like for you? What does a bad one look like?

What it is really asking: What the work feels like from inside it, described in their words rather than the org chart's.

A useful answer sounds like: Concrete: a specific week, what happened in it, what made it good. Vagueness here usually means they are still deciding how safe this is.

Follow up with: "When was the last bad one?"

Do not ask it when: Do not open with this if they are visibly braced for bad news about their job. Deal with that first.

What is the part of your job you would keep if you could only keep one thing?

What it is really asking: Where their motivation actually sits, which is frequently not where their job description sits.

A useful answer sounds like: A specific task or kind of problem, with a reason attached.

Follow up with: "How much of your week is that at the moment?"

Do not ask it when: Not in the same conversation as anything that sounds like a restructure.

What is slowing you down that you have stopped mentioning?

What it is really asking: The friction that has been raised before and gone nowhere, which is where the fastest wins are.

A useful answer sounds like: Something small, specific and boring — a permission, a tool, a handoff, a meeting.

Follow up with: "Who did you tell, and what happened?"

Do not ask it when: Not useful if you cannot fix anything for a month; ask it when you can act.

What do you think I am going to change, and what are you hoping I do not?

What it is really asking: The rumor, and the thing they are quietly protecting.

A useful answer sounds like: A direct answer. If you get 'nothing, really', you have not earned it yet — come back in week six.

Follow up with: "What would you want me to know before I changed that?"

Do not ask it when: Skip if a reorganization is genuinely in flight and you cannot answer honestly.

How do you like to be given feedback? Give me an example of it going well.

What it is really asking: Their actual preference, evidenced rather than asserted — 'direct' is the answer almost nobody has an example ready for.

A useful answer sounds like: A specific past instance, including who and roughly when.

Follow up with: "And a time it went badly — what made it land wrong?"

Do not ask it when: Never immediately before your first piece of corrective feedback. It reads as a preamble.

Where do you want to be in two years, and does this job move you toward it?

What it is really asking: Whether staying is a plan or a default — usually the earliest retention signal available to you.

A useful answer sounds like: Either a real answer or an honest 'I do not know', which is itself worth knowing.

Follow up with: "What would have to be true here for that to happen?"

Do not ask it when: Not in week one with someone who was passed over for your job.

Close with: "What did I not ask about that I should have?"

The manager you now report to

One hour in week one, before you have opinions. The most-skipped conversation on the list, and the one that most reliably prevents a bad surprise at day ninety.

Open with: "I would like to understand what you need from me and how you will know whether it is working."

What does success in this role look like at ninety days, specifically?

What it is really asking: The evaluation criteria, before you are evaluated against them.

A useful answer sounds like: Named outcomes. If you get adjectives, keep asking — 'settled in' is not a criterion.

Follow up with: "If we met in three months and you were disappointed, what would have happened?"

Why did the previous manager leave, as much as you can tell me?

What it is really asking: The shape of the hole you are standing in.

A useful answer sounds like: Anything factual. Expect a bounded answer and accept the boundary.

Follow up with: "What would you not want repeated?"

Do not ask it when: Do not push past a first refusal. There may be a legal reason for it and you will be told what you need.

What problem were you trying to solve by promoting from inside?

What it is really asking: The actual mandate, which is often narrower or wider than the job description.

A useful answer sounds like: A specific reason — continuity, cost, speed, a person they wanted to keep.

Follow up with: "Which of those matters most if they conflict?"

What am I allowed to change without asking you?

What it is really asking: The autonomy boundary, in writing if possible. Not asking this is how first-time managers discover it by crossing it.

A useful answer sounds like: A threshold: spend, headcount, process, anything visible outside the team.

Follow up with: "And what would you want to hear about before it happens rather than after?"

How do you prefer to hear bad news, and how quickly?

What it is really asking: The escalation contract. Agreeing it in calm weather is the entire point.

A useful answer sounds like: A channel and a timeframe.

Follow up with: "Has anyone ever told you too late? What did that cost?"

Close with: "What is the thing you are worried I will get wrong?"

Your new peers — the other managers and adjacent leads

Thirty minutes each with the four or five leads whose work touches yours. Postponed by nearly everyone and urgently needed by month four.

Open with: "I am new to this, and I would rather learn how we work together from you than from a mistake."

Where do our two teams hand work to each other, and where does that go wrong?

What it is really asking: The interface, which is where cross-team failure usually shows up first.

A useful answer sounds like: A specific handoff and a specific failure mode.

Follow up with: "When did it last go wrong?"

What does my team do that makes your job harder?

What it is really asking: The complaint they would not otherwise volunteer to a new manager in week two.

A useful answer sounds like: Anything concrete. Do not defend; write it down.

Follow up with: "How long has that been true?"

Do not ask it when: Do not ask this and then argue. Asking and arguing is worse than not asking.

What did the previous manager and you agree that I should know about?

What it is really asking: The undocumented agreements you are now party to without having seen them.

A useful answer sounds like: A named arrangement, standing exception, or informal deal.

Follow up with: "Is that still working for you?"

Who actually decides things around here, as opposed to who signs them?

What it is really asking: The real decision map. Ask it lightly and only once you have some rapport.

A useful answer sounds like: Names, and the distinction between influence and authority.

Follow up with: "Who do I need on side before a proposal goes anywhere?"

Do not ask it when: Not in a first conversation with someone visibly guarded, and never in writing.

Close with: "What is the thing my team does that annoys yours?"

Closing the Loop

The step that gets skipped, and the one that decides whether the whole exercise built trust or spent it.

A listening tour with no visible consequence is worse than no listening tour. The team has now told a new manager what is wrong, watched nothing happen, and learned something durable about how much saying so is worth. The report-back is not a nicety; it is the part that converts information into credibility.

Bucket	The rule
Fixed already	Name the thing and the date it changed. Keep this list short and true; one real fix outranks five promised ones.
Fixing, with a date	Name an owner and a week. A date you might miss is more useful than 'soon', because a missed date is a conversation and 'soon' is a shrug.
Not changing, and why	The most important bucket and the one people skip. Saying 'I looked at this, here is the constraint, it stays' is respected. Silence is read as having been ignored.
Not mine to change	Say whose it is, whether you raised it, and what happened when you did. Escalating and losing is a result you should report.
Still thinking	Allowed exactly once. Carry it to the day-ninety review with a decision attached.

Format. Fifteen minutes at a team meeting, plus the same content written down. Anonymize anything that would identify who said it — including by being the only person who would have said it.

ANONYMIZE PROPERLY

Removing names is not enough. In a team of seven, "someone raised the handover to the adjacent team" identifies whoever owns that handover as surely as a name would. Read each item and ask who in the room will be assumed to have said it. If the answer is one person, aggregate it with something else or ask that person first.

What This Leaves Out

Honestly, because a free tool that pretends to be the whole thing is not much of an advertisement for the paid one.

This is week one of thirteen. **The New Manager's First 90 Days Playbook** ([see it](#)) is 108 pages across four PDFs, and the parts it adds are the parts that are hardest to work out alone:

- **The arithmetic of your week.** Every standing obligation of the job with a minute cost and a cadence, totaled against the week you are paid for, and run across a span of control from three to twelve reports so you can find your own row. For the worked example it leaves 3.2 hours of a 40-hour week for everything else — and the whole book is the answer to that number.
- **The delegation payback ledger.** Seventeen rows of the job you were promoted out of, ranked by how fast a hand-over repays its own cost, then run through a transfer schedule under a realistic weekly budget.
- **The other three conversations** — the people who were your peers last month, the team together, and the manager who left — plus the rest of the 62-question bank.
- **Thirty changes, pre-sorted** into week one, week six, day ninety, and not yours, behind a five-question screen that tests the change rather than your confidence.
- **The chapters nobody prepares you for:** inheriting a performance concern nobody wrote down, 1:1s that have gone quiet, your first piece of corrective feedback, auditing the meetings you inherited, and a day-ninety self-review.

One payment, four PDFs you keep. No login, no seat, no renewal — and it will still open the next time you promote somebody. The rest of the Team and Talent tools are at ardentworkshop.com.

A note on what this is. General management guidance, not legal, HR, or employment-law advice. It does not replace your employer's policies, your HR team, or qualified counsel. Where a conversation touches conduct, a protected characteristic, an accommodation, or a grievance, that is an HR conversation before it is a management one.

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