General Manager interview questions

careertips.com.au: common questions and what they're really testing

What to expect

General Manager interviews assess whether you can run a whole operation, not just one function. Expect questions that test your financial judgement, your ability to lead other managers and your comfort with accountability for results.

- **Strategic and financial:** Questions about budgeting, forecasting, reading financial statements and making trade-offs across business units.
- **Operational and process:** Questions on how you improve workflows, manage resources and use KPIs to guide decisions.
- **People leadership:** Questions about hiring, performance management and developing a leadership team.
- **Client and stakeholder:** Questions on managing key accounts, partners and board or head office relationships.
- **Scenario and judgement:** Hypothetical situations that test how you handle competing priorities or unexpected problems.
- **Behavioural:** Past examples of turning around performance, leading change or resolving conflict.

The process usually starts with a screening interview with a recruiter or HR, then a panel interview with direct reports, peers and sometimes the board chair. Final rounds often include a presentation on a strategic or operational challenge and a meeting with the most senior stakeholder. Some employers use a case study or a psychometric assessment before making an offer.

1. Walk me through how you approach building an annual budget across multiple business units.

Why they ask

This tests your strategic and financial process, and whether you can align competing departmental priorities.

How to structure your answer

Walk-through: set the context, outline your steps, explain how you handle trade-offs, then state the outcome you aim for.

Example answer

“I start by reviewing the previous year's actuals and the board's strategic priorities. Then I meet with each business unit leader to understand their plans and pressures. I build a draft budget that reflects growth targets, known cost changes and a realistic contingency. When competing requests come in, I ask each leader to justify the return against the strategic plan, and we agree on a final set of numbers. Throughout the year I track monthly variances with the finance manager, so we can adjust early rather than at year end. The goal is a budget that every department head owns, not one that finance imposes.”

2. Tell me about a time you had to turn around an underperforming division or team.

Why they ask

This looks for evidence of operational leadership and your ability to diagnose and fix performance issues.

How to structure your answer

STAR: Situation, Task, Action, Result. Focus on the diagnosis, the people steps and the measurable outcome.

Example answer

“In a previous role, one of our five divisions had missed its targets for two quarters and morale was low. I spent the first two weeks meeting the manager and frontline staff to understand the bottlenecks. I found that approval delays were causing work to stall and that the manager was overloaded with administrative tasks. I restructured the workflow so that approvals sat with team leaders, not the manager, and brought in a weekly KPI review to spot problems early. Within three months the division was meeting its monthly targets again, and staff turnover in that team dropped noticeably. The manager was able to focus on client relationships and coaching, which lifted team performance further.”

3. You notice that monthly KPIs show a key department is missing its targets, but the manager insists the numbers are wrong. How do you handle it?

Why they ask

This tests judgement under pressure, your approach to data and your ability to handle a sensitive conversation.

How to structure your answer

Judgement under pressure: stay calm, verify the data, listen to the manager, then agree on action.

Example answer

“I would not assume either side is right. First, I would ask the finance or BI team to walk me through how the KPI is calculated and check for any reporting error. Then I would sit down with the manager, show them the data and ask them to explain where they think it goes wrong. If the data is correct, we would look at what is driving the miss and agree on two or three practical steps to get back on track. If the data is flawed, we fix the reporting. Either way, the conversation is about solving the problem, not blaming anyone.”

4. How do you use financial statements and KPIs to guide operational decisions?

Why they ask

This checks your financial literacy and whether you can translate numbers into action.

How to structure your answer

Explain your method, then give a concrete example of a decision you made based on the numbers.

Example answer

“I begin each month by reviewing the profit and loss, cash flow and balance sheet with the finance manager, then I look at the operational KPIs that sit behind those numbers, such as sales conversion, cost per unit or staff utilisation. If I see a variance, I ask the relevant manager to explain what is driving it. For example, in one business a rising cost per service was not due to supplier prices but to rework. I worked with the operations manager to introduce a quality check at the start of the process, which reduced rework and brought the cost per service back in line. The numbers are a prompt to ask better questions, not a scorecard to punish people with.”

5. How do you manage a leadership team where one member is not meeting expectations?

Why they ask

This assesses your people leadership, your fairness and your willingness to have difficult conversations.

How to structure your answer

Clarify, support, consequences: describe how you set clear expectations, offer help, and act if performance does not improve.

Example answer

"First, I make sure the expectations are clear and that the person knows what good looks like. I would have a private conversation to understand what is getting in the way, whether it is capability, resources or something outside work. Then I would agree on a plan with specific milestones and offer coaching or training if needed. I check in regularly and give honest feedback. If performance does not improve after that support, I would follow the organisation's performance management process. It is not fair to the rest of the team to let underperformance continue, and most people would rather know where they stand."

6. Describe how you have managed a difficult relationship with a major client or partner.

Why they ask

This tests your stakeholder management and your ability to protect the business relationship while solving a problem.

How to structure your answer

STAR: Situation, Task, Action, Result. Focus on listening, problem solving and the outcome for both sides.

Example answer

"We had a long-standing client who was unhappy about repeated delays in our delivery schedule. I asked for a meeting and listened to their concerns without interrupting. It turned out that our internal approval process was adding time that we had not communicated to them. I apologised, explained the changes we would make to speed up approvals, and gave them a direct contact for any future issues. We also agreed on a weekly progress update so they were never surprised. The relationship recovered, and they renewed their contract the following year. The lesson was that transparency and a single point of accountability matter more than promises."