

Leadership: How to ask the right questions

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Question-based leadership only works if managers don't provide all the answers. Here's how to focus on being a facilitator, not an oracle.

What are the right questions for leaders to ask?

Like notorious law school professors who interrogate their students until the "truth" appears, many business leaders hold meetings where they pepper employees with rapid-fire questions. But too often managers' questions are designed to show off their own knowledge rather than actually solicit new information or ideas.

Question-based leadership is certainly preferable to the command-and-control model but not when leaders provide both the questions and the answers. It's what I call "Just Ask Leadership." Leaders can't know all the answers—not when information, tools, and practices change so frequently. Nor does it serve an organization to count on receiving answers from a single individual or a small leadership team. Centralizing power results in hasty, ill-informed decisions due to the sheer volume of decisions being made. It also yields instability when leaders leave abruptly. Worse, perhaps, it creates a culture of approval-seekers, not independent thinkers.

Leaders need to take their ego out of the equation and focus on being facilitators, not oracles. They should start asking questions they don't know the answers to. What follows are some pointers on how to make this work.

How do I ask questions without knowing or seeming to know the answers?

Challenge your certainty. Our beliefs and assumptions are skewed by personal biases and not to be fully trusted. Often they haven't been tested or revised based upon new information. They reflect partial knowledge and are only partially wise. Resist acting instinctively on your beliefs and assumptions, and open your mind to the subject's potential complexity. Before registering your opinion, enter into a state of not knowing. Zen Buddhists call this the "beginner's mind." Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey (*Immunity to Change*, Harvard Business School Publishing, 2009) would describe this as moving from the "self-authorizing mind" to the "self-transforming mind."

Once you learn to distrust yourself, it's easier to trust others. The goal isn't to locate the most trustworthy or least fallible individual and hand all decision-making to this person; the goal is to share the load and get everyone to feel ownership in the organization's direction and operations. This doesn't mean that everyone should participate in every decision, but decision-making needs to be more evenly distributed.

If my answer is better than my co-worker's, should I reveal it?

Before getting into answer mode, ask, "Whose decision is it?" If it is your decision to make (based upon your job description), ask questions that will help you arrive at the best answer. If it's your co-worker's decision to make, ask questions to help him or her—referencing his or her particular skills and tendencies. The best answer usually comes from the people responsible for employing it. Ownership of an idea creates more engagement, drive, and efficiency. So communicate trust in your co-workers' decision-making abilities and assure them you won't arrive at an answer independently. But encourage them to subject their ideas and answers to a vigorous questioning process, and hold them accountable for the results of their decisions.

What if I don't trust a particular co-worker to make sound decisions?

It doesn't make sense to ask questions of people you don't trust since you won't believe their answers. Provide your co-workers with increasingly important tasks and decision-making opportunities. Chances are they will rise to the challenge, provided your expectations for success are realistic. If they fail repeatedly, however, it's time to find a replacement or embark on training. Otherwise, you will be doing more of their work and less of yours than you should.

Why do co-workers keep coming to me with decisions they should make?

At first glance, everyone profits from your answer-providing habit: They get to hold you responsible for poor decisions, and you get to feel indispensable and powerful.

But the best minds in the organization will leave for places where they can take more risks, receive more credit, and learn more. And your ability to stay abreast of everyone's concerns will eventually wane, especially as the organization grows. Learn to distrust your own certainty and to trust your co-workers. Resist the urge to make others' decisions and they will stop relying on you to do their work. Moreover, the good people will stick around to grow with you.

What does Just Ask Leadership look like in practice?

It takes a while for leaders not to ask leading questions. They find it hard to resist providing answers—which may save time in the short run but doesn't harness the intellectual power of the organization at large or motivate co-workers to achieve their best. When Just Ask Leadership is working, though, questions are heartfelt invitations to contribute and collaborate. They are open-ended and diverse. They no longer feel like commands in disguise.

What types of questions should I use and under what circumstances?

Questions typically fall into one of four categories. Two are process-based: Perspective and Evaluative. Two are outcome-based: Action and Knowledge.

Perspective Questions: In the brainstorming process, it's important to take stock of one's perspective and to consider others'. The goal of these questions is to broaden horizons and explore possibilities. Example: "What new products are our competitors introducing and why?"

Evaluative Questions: The evaluative process narrows the focus by measuring against standards. The goal here is to form conclusions, prioritize actions, and create alignment. Example: "Why didn't you meet your expectations for last quarter?"

Action Questions: These questions focus on future outcomes. They attempt to motivate others, generate experience, and build accountability. Example: "How might you improve job performance without increasing costs?"

Knowledge Questions: Here the focus is on understanding current or past states. The goal is to interpret information and reach consensus about the effects of past actions. Example: "What did we learn from the customer-service survey with regard to e-mail contact preferences?"

Naturally, the situation will dictate what type of question you ask, but knowing the type of question you're asking serves several functions:

1. Your intent will be clearer to co-workers;
2. You can shift to a different type of question when a discussion stalls;
3. You learn to recognize what types of questions your co-workers respond to best.

What are the right questions to ask?

The right questions rely on the leader's ability to communicate authentic interest in learning the answer. They come from a place of not knowing. The right questions are open-ended, carry the possibility of true discovery, and demonstrate a willingness to share and bestow credit.

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