

The POWER of Great Questions

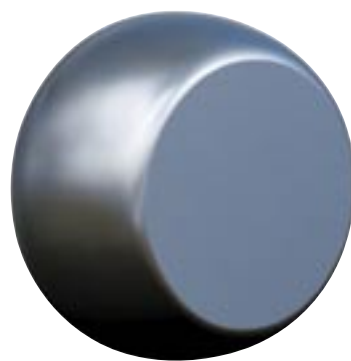
Asking rather than telling has become the key to leadership success.

The late Peter Drucker, a renowned management consultant, noted that the leader of the past may have been a person who knew how to tell, but the leader of the future will be a person who knows how to ask. Too few leaders lead with questions. They tend to dictate or debate rather than inquire and discuss.

With the growing complexity and speed of change in the world today, a leader simply won't know enough to adequately tell his subordinates or colleagues what to do. In today's turbocharged environment, no one can master all the data needed to address all globally complex problems.

Although providing employees with answers to their problems may seem the most efficient way to get things done, the short-term gain will be overshadowed by the long-term costs. By responding with statements, you may not only impede the development of your colleagues or direct reports, but also deprive yourself of access to new and powerful ideas.

So when you are faced with an employee's problem, you should respond



**Open-ended
questions allow
for creativity.**

By Michael J. Marquardt

by asking the right questions. Through these questions, you can help people find the best solutions themselves as well as help them gain self-confidence for future challenges.

The right questions

Asking the right questions depends on what you want to accomplish. Choose questions that inspire people to act in new ways, expand their range of vision, and enable them to contribute more to the organization.

Powerful questions are usually open-ended—they are not looking for a specific answer. They often begin with why, how, or what do you think about...? They help people to discover answers, which develops responsibility.

Avoid using confrontational questions—ones that are negative, put people into a defensive mode, and drain energy. Asking, “what’s wrong?” threatens self-esteem and discourages honesty, creativity, and collaboration.

So instead of asking what went wrong, ask questions that focus on what has gone well, what could be done, and how it could be improved. The focus remains on improvement and continuous learning rather than complaining and venting. By being open-minded and positive, you encourage a broader range of responses.

When asking questions, keep your focus on the question, not on the million other concerns you may have. Don't listen and think of the next thing you are going to ask or say at the same time. Ask questions that open new possibilities, explore perceptions and assumptions, and provide new ways to evaluate the same data. You must be genuinely curious and not make the employee feel as though he is being judged, interrogated, or manipulated.

Try to ask one question at a time. Too often, we overwhelm or confuse people by asking several questions simultaneously. Allow for a response before asking the next question. Many of us ask questions simultaneously because we want to maintain control, are unsure when we get the next opportunity to ask a question, or want to control or manipulate the response to the first question.

Such an approach leads to poor quality responses. People resist multiple questions because they feel like they are being interrogated. Inexperienced or impatient people ask a flurry of questions with a desire to control rather than to seek the truth.

Don't rush the responses to your questions. Allow time for reflection when formulating questions, because not all questions need to be answered immediately. Give people time to mull over your request for information and to develop some ideas. Putting them under a tight deadline inhibits creative thinking. Time permitting, it's better to say, "Let's get together in a few days and bounce this around. In the meantime, give it some thought. I would like to have a few suggestions to check out."

The quality of the response is affected not only by the content of the question, but also by its manner of delivery, especially pace and timing. Be genuinely curious. Try to maintain a steady pace. Do not let your eye contact waiver and don't be afraid of silence. Silence tells the other person that you expect her to respond and to continue. Providing time and silence allows the other person to dig deeper into her thought process to answer the question.

We often feel compelled to give constructive feedback rather than ask positive questions. If constructive feedback is needed, the best approach is to ask people what they think should be worked on. In most situations, people are aware of their shortcomings. When those areas are enumerated by them, you can suggest working on the one or two you think

would be most beneficial. This makes you a coach, not a judge.

Don't shout or raise your voice when asking questions. Often the softer the question is asked, the more powerful it is—unlike statements that may be more effective and have greater impact when delivered loud and strong. Use encouraging words.

Say "thank you" when you get a response. You'll likely get more and deeper answers the next time you ask. When your questions respect people's thought process, you support their questioning of long-held assumptions. It is much harder to ask skillful questions than to give advice. For years, managers have received positive feedback for having the answers and giving advice. But our answers work for us. The goal of questioning is for the employee to find the answer that works best for him.

Powerful questions

Great questions empower people and instill in them a sense of their own strength and efficacy. When you are truly asking, you are sending the message that the subordinate's ideas are good or maybe even better than your own. In addition to conveying respect, it encourages the person's development as a thinker and problem solver.

The most effective questions:

- create clarity (Can you explain what happened?)
- construct better working and personal relations (How have sales been going?)
- help people think analytically and critically (What are the consequences of going this route?)
- inspire people to reflect and see things in fresh, unpredictable ways (Why does this strategy always work?)
- encourage breakthrough thinking (Can that be improved?)
- challenge assumptions (Why do we always choose this method?)
- create ownership of solutions. (Based upon your experience, what do you suggest we do here?)

What not to ask

Questions that focus on why a person did not and cannot succeed force him to take a defensive or reactive stance and strip him of power. Such questions shut down opportunities for success and do not allow people to clarify misunderstandings or to achieve goals. These questions include

- Why are you late in delivering this product?
- What is your problem in implementing this program within budget?
- Who is not doing their part?
- Don't you know any better than that?

Likewise, leading questions that seek a specific answer put the other person in a negative light, push the questioner's agenda, and exert social pressure to force agreement. These types of questions—You wanted to do this by yourself, didn't you?, Don't you agree that John is the problem?, or Everyone else thinks this is the proper analysis of the situation, why don't you?—inhibit people from answering candidly and stifle honest discussion.

Leaders who are unaware of the potential of questions needlessly engage in a fractious, pressure-filled existence. Leaders who lead with questions will create a more humane workplace as well as a more successful business. Leaders who use questions successfully will truly empower people and change organizations.

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