1 Why Questions are the Answer

The leader of the past was a person who knew how to tell.
The leader of the future will be a person who knows how to ask.

—Peter Drucker[1]

Millions saw the apple fall, but Newton was the one who asked why.

—Barnard Baruch[2]

In a sleek office tower nestled in the heart of a bustling city, two employees worked side by side in the Strategy Department of a large corporation.

One was Mara, a rising analyst known for her relentless curiosity. She asked questions—lots of them. Some found her inquiries tedious, but her manager appreciated her hunger to understand.

The other was Jeff, a charismatic senior associate. Jeff was the kind of person people listened to. He had answers ready before a question

was even fully formed. Clients trusted him, and junior staff admired his confident presentations.

One day, the team encountered a significant problem. A long-standing client had abruptly withdrawn from a partnership, citing dissatisfaction. The CEO demanded answers about why this happened and what was going to be done about it by the end of the week.

Jeff took the lead. "They didn't see the value," he declared confidently in the team meeting. "Our model must've confused them. Let's simplify it and repackage."

Mara raised a hand. "Do we know why they left? Has anyone actually asked them?"

Jeff shrugged. "We can guess. We know the product. Let's focus on fixing what we think went wrong."

But Mara wasn't satisfied. She spent a day calling the client's team. She asked open-ended questions—about their expectations, their experience, their goals. She listened.

What she found surprised everyone.

"It wasn't the model," Mara reported. "It was the assumptions we made about their needs. We talked too much. We didn't ask enough. They felt unheard."

The room fell silent.

Jeff cleared his throat. "But I've been talking to them for months."

Mara nodded. "Talking to them. Not with them."

That week, the team restructured their strategy, not based on assumptions but on real insights born from better questions. The client returned, this time feeling valued.

Later that evening, as they packed up for the day, Jeff turned to Mara. "I forgot how much we used to ask questions as kids," he said. "Somewhere along the way, I started thinking having the answers mattered more."

Mara smiled. "The right answer can only come from the right question. Knowing how to ask—that's where it starts."

And from then on, the team didn't just chase solutions. They chased understanding.

Moral: Before you can find the correct answer, you must first learn to ask the right question.

This paradox occurs throughout organizations, even at the most senior levels, as exemplified by the reflections of Martin Luther King Jr. In discussing the need for a voting rights bill with Presidents John F. Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, he recalled that the former asked questions for an hour, while the latter spoke for an hour: "That's the difference between them."[3] Just like Mara and Jeff.

Asking questions, so easily practiced when we are children, who often drive parents, teachers, and adults generally batty with questions of "why?" (estimated at asking around 30 questions per hour), gives way to reticence as we grow older. We begin to assume that asking questions is a sign of weakness, that it makes us feel vulnerable, and that only people who don't know what is going on are the ones who ask questions. We look around and presume we're in some sort of competition with our co-workers, and if they aren't asking any questions, we don't want to ask ourselves for fear of appearing stupid or unprepared. "Smart" people, you say to yourself, don't have to ask questions because they already know the answers. Think about what people do these days when they stumble across something they don't know. Most would rather ask Siri, Alexa, or Google or spend 15 minutes with ChatGPT figuring it out, than five minutes asking around the office and admitting it's not in their skill set yet.

Researchers have found that asking questions, particularly seeking advice, actually makes people appear more competent and intelligent to others.[4] This somewhat counterintuitive finding stems from the positive impact on the person being asked for advice, who often feels flattered and assumes the questioner is insightful for seeking their expertise. Few things bring more satisfaction to someone than to be asked something about which they have knowledge or experience; it feels good: "They're asking what I think because they believe I'm smart and I know the answer. In turn, I think they're smart for asking because I'm going to tell them things that will be useful." Additionally, individuals who ask questions are often perceived as more likable and engaged, which leads to more positive interpersonal interactions.

There's this myth that as we grow up, as we move up the organizational ladder, we are supposed to know the answers to "everything." We assume, moreover, that no one wants to answer our questions or that we don't want to embarrass anyone by asking something for

which they might not readily have an answer. Given their own fears of not knowing what to say, others are as reluctant to solicit questions as we are to ask them freely.

When you ask questions, you send the recipient on a mental journey. Your questions choose the path that people will follow and focus their search for answers. If you were to ask, for example, "How are you partnering with a colleague on getting this project completed?" you are sending a signal about the importance of collaboration. If you ask, "What have you done today to reduce the costs of doing business?" you are sending a very different message. Both are legitimate questions, but they indicate very different priorities. Your questions let people know what is top of mind for you and how they should be directing their attention and energy.

In *Leadership Conversations: Challenging High-Potential Managers to Become Great Leaders*, the authors point out that in a neurological sense, your mom was correct when she complained, "Everything I tell you goes in one ear and out the other. If she had asked questions instead, you would have retained more of her messages. That is because the brain functions with the obstinacy of a child: tell it what to do, and it starts analyzing the implications; if, instantly, you ask the brain a question, it will treat it as a problem to be solved—a game to be played. People like solving problems because doing so gives them a rush when the brain releases neurotransmitters that act like adrenaline."[5]

The lesson for leaders, they maintain, is to "ask your people questions and let them decide the course of action, rather than telling them what to do, how to do it, and when it should be done." Asking questions is a vital part of the repertoire of the most effective leaders, whose conversations are littered with questions.

Many scholars have echoed this observation and point out that "questioning is a uniquely powerful tool" that promotes the exchange of ideas, fosters learning, drives innovation, and builds rapport and trust.[6] A leader's questions highlight particular issues and concerns, and they send messages. They ask people to consider specific focus areas, such as operating costs, customer service, inclusion, quality, trust,

or market share. Questions provide information about which values to attend to and how much energy should be devoted to them. They point people in a specific direction. The first question you ask is an obvious indicator of direction and priority. When the area manager for a large public utility firm wanted her team to shift their focus from revenue to customer satisfaction, she ensured that every staff meeting began with questions centered on how customers were feeling about their services and products.

Asking questions in the context of design thinking is referred to as *problem finding*. It is the crucial first step in understanding the user's needs and identifying the core issues before attempting to find solutions. It's about actively seeking out the real problems that need to be addressed, rather than jumping to conclusions or relying on assumptions. This involves empathizing with users, observing their behaviors, and gathering insights to define a clear and actionable problem statement.[7]

Your use of questions also develops people. Questions help them escape the trap of their mental models by broadening their perspectives in thinking about and taking responsibility for their responses. Additionally, you are required to listen attentively to what people are saying when asking them questions or otherwise you are demonstrating disrespect for their ideas and opinions.

If you are genuinely interested in what others think, you should ask for their opinions. Asking others for their thoughts facilitates participation in the decision-making process and consequently increases support for that decision ("answer"). The manager of a sporting goods store recognized the need to engage every employee in developing ideas to improve sales. For example, he asked each of them to go to the product wall and select the skis or snowboard they wanted. After giving them a few minutes to make their decisions, he asked them to close their eyes and envision what it would look like to use the new gear: "Feel the cold. Hear the wind whistle. Smell the fresh mountain air." His questions prompted them to consider how most people make emotional (rather than technical) purchase decisions.

He used questions to reframe the staff's thinking and their approach to sales. As the noted scholar and consultant Ed Schein observed, "My teaching and consulting experience has taught me that what builds a relationship, what solves problems, what moves things forward is asking the right questions."[8]

What most people in general, and leaders in particular, need is more practice in developing and asking the kinds of questions that draw usefully from the wisdom of their colleagues and constituents, enabling their thinking and resolve to move forward. To be effective, leaders must first establish a strong bond with their co-workers and constituents. Nothing builds solid relationships more than asking appropriate questions that honor the wisdom others possess. We hope that this book's collection of questions will help you navigate these challenges as you face ongoing and novel situations.

One of the questions found here in this book may be precisely what you need. Just as likely, one of these questions will trigger another question that fits your context even better. As you think about and experiment with these questions, you will become more skilled in developing and personalizing questions in your own words and finding unexpected opportunities to use questioning in a multitude of daily settings. Having an answer may be helpful, but having the right questions is where you will discover the most creative and innovative solutions.

Notes

1. As quoted in Gary B. Cohen, *Just Ask Leadership: Why Great Managers Always Ask the Right Questions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 8.
2. As quoted in Al Gini and Ronald L. Green, *10 Virtues of Outstanding Leaders: Leadership and Character* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).
3. As quoted in Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 326.
4. For example: Karen Huang, Michael Yeomans, Alison Wood Brooks, Julia Minson, and Francesca Gino. "It Doesn't Hurt to Ask: Question-asking Increases Liking." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 113, no. 3 September (2017): 430–452; and Alison Wood Brooks and

Francesca Gino, "Asking Advice Makes a Good Impression" in *SA Mind* Vol. 26 No. 2 (March 2015), 26. doi:https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamericanmind0315-26.

5. Alan S. Berson and Richard G. Stieglitz, *Leadership Conversations: Challenging High-Potential Managers to Become Great Leaders* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 180.
6. For example: Marilee G. Adams, *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life: 12 Powerful Tools for Leadership, Coaching, and Life*, 3rd ed. (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2016); Alison Wood Brooks and Leslie K. John, "The Surprising Power of Questions," *Harvard Business Review* 96, no. 2 (2018): 61–67; and John Hagel III, "Good Leadership Is About Asking Good Questions," *Harvard Business Review*, January 8, 2021, https://hbr.org/2021/01/good-leadership-is-about-asking-good-questions.
7. Jennifer Murtell, "The 5 Phases of Design Thinking," American Marketing Association. February 14, 2025. Accessed at https://www.ama.org/marketing-news/the-5-phases-of-design-thinking/; and Tim Brown, *Change by Design, Revised and Updated: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation* (New York: Harper Business, 2019).
8. Edgar H. Schein, *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2013), 3–4.