

THE INSIDER'S GUIDE



Asking the Right Questions

**IS YOUR QUESTION AN INVITATION,
A REQUEST, OR A WEAPON?**

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Introduction

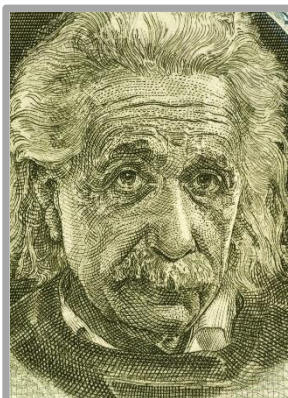
The power of questions – *your* questions – can either make or break your career. **Questions have the power to create teams in a collaborative way ... or crumble them.** They are in part a good reason why you may be able to recover from a [hostage situation](#).¹ Questions can even help you win over a sticky situation at home.

Why are some of us not skilled in the art of asking questions, much less asking the *right* questions?

Do you remember when you were three years old and you were told to “stop asking questions and do as you are told”; when in childhood you were told that a particular question “was inappropriate”; or when in a job they instilled a culture of “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”?

Packed with practical tips, tricks, and tools, this Insider’s eBook will help you improve your conversations, build relationships, and get potentially amazing results that get noticed.

Corporate culture pressures us into believing that we must have *all* the answers as leaders. **Having all the answers is simply unreasonable and unattainable.** From



More the knowledge
Lesser the ego,
Lesser the knowledge
More the ego ...
- Albert Einstein

[Leading with Questions](#)² to [Wisdom of Crowds](#)³ to other noteworthy sources, it has been proven that **collaboration and variety help make better decisions** and help move organizations forward together.

Fear sets in where we can no longer ask the questions we want, which results in us being out of practice in asking great questions. Fear also prevents us from asking questions where the answers are ones 1) we will not like, 2) where “we” are shown to be the problem, or 3) that indicate that a project has gone awry.

Why do these fears seem real to you? In one word: **Ego. The act of courage is the willingness to *take action* by asking questions that might challenge – or destroy – current perceptions and patterns.**

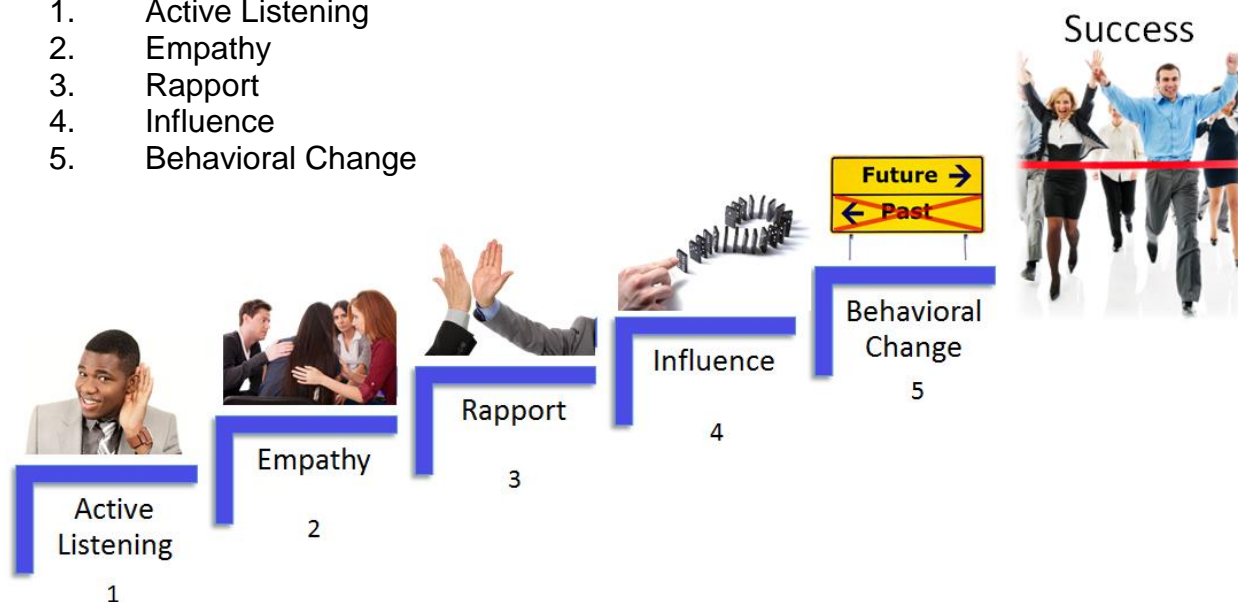
The Questioning Leader

It's time this cycle of suppressing questions stopped and that you became an even better leader by asking the right questions, and becoming comfortable with this process for the long term. The best news is that giving up control in exchange for freedom and creativity, and sharing the *burden* of responsibility, is the outcome of the questioning leader.

In another paper, I shared with you [some insights on the Behavioral Stairway Model](#),¹ which was developed by the FBI's hostage negotiation unit. Additionally, I outlined the **five steps to getting someone else to see your point of view** and change what they are doing.

To recap, here are the five progressive steps:

1. Active Listening
2. Empathy
3. Rapport
4. Influence
5. Behavioral Change



In particular, a key stepping stone to the success of **Number One (Active Listening)** is asking the right questions. **Those in leadership positions can make real change happen based on *the questions they ask, how they ask them and when they ask them.*** By asking the right questions, leaders can begin to *share the responsibility* and *burden* of leadership with their followers, thereby increasing the capacity and performance of the organization. Effective questions are those that accomplish their purpose, as well as build a positive relationship between the questioner and the person being questioned, creating a better working relationship among problem-solvers.

To get proficient at the skill (and it is definitely a skill – a skill that can be learned, but one that few people can tout), it takes intent and practice. That's it.

Enter Stairway Model Number Two: Empathy. It is great when you know your side of the argument or case and can undeniably state the details on why you have made up your mind on this particular point. However, if you are unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side, you have no ground in which to stand. So you need to understand the other side and be able to *feel* that same conviction.

The right question, asked at the right time, in the right way, to the right person ... can have rippling effects on an organization. Think how different things would be for General Motors and its customers had a questioning culture been adopted years ago.



The Power of the Right Question: Culture



Asking the right questions reduces the need to have *all* the answers. One of the best questions to ask is, “**Why do we do it this way?**”

What you will probably find out is that there is a nonsensical, outdated answer out there. A good example of this is from Apple. While years ago most companies heard that people desired to have more music available to them at any point in time, most companies were contemplating making a larger CD or a CD that holds more music. Instead, Apple took the ingenious route of creating the iPod, which provided more music on a smaller, handheld and on-the-go device. Revolutionary.

John F. Kennedy asked a different kind of question. He flipped the “we’ve always done it this way” statement to “**think about things differently to improve more than just yourself.**” In other words, he said, “Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.”



Working towards the right cultural mindset is encouraged from the top down. Wal-Mart encourages its employees to look for things that do not seem right and to ask questions. Their mantra is ETDT: Eliminate the Dumb Things.

When I worked at American Airlines, the company had a suggestion program where employees could question nearly everything. Ideas and suggestions were constantly encouraged by senior management and, as appropriate, rewarded. We learned that there was no downside in making a company stronger – e.g., personal payout, recognition, promotion, better work environment, less hours wasted, less overtime or less rework. It's all good.

Flip your thinking to think about things differently to improve more than just yourself, and you will begin to ask the right questions.

The Benefits of Questions

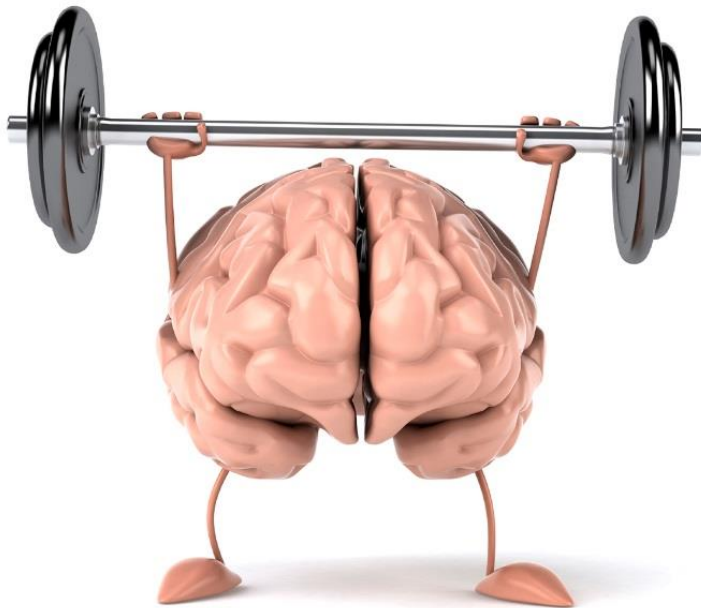
Benefit	Description
Reduces the need to have all the answers	Do you ever feel pressured to have all the answers all the time? If not – good for you! If you do, asking questions encourages collaboration and shared responsibility. If you are a leader or a manager, questions help you share the responsibility <i>and burden</i> of leadership with your followers.
Builds stronger relationships	Effective questions are those that accomplish their purpose, as well as build a positive relationship between the questioner and the person being questioned, creating a better working relationship among problem-solvers. How welcoming is it that someone has the humility to understand that they don't have all the answers, but is willing to listen and contribute based on what he/she heard?
Demonstrates a willingness to learn	Sincere asking demonstrates a willingness to learn, a desire to serve and a humility that can be an inspiration at every level within an organization.
Improves individual and team performance	Questions help make you – and your organization – smarter. When others feel they are being listened to, they are more willing to make an effort. Increased job satisfaction almost always results in increased productivity and improved performance. Asking questions helps others want to take ownership and be part of driving the change, as opposed to letting change happen to them.
Increases innovation	Constantly questioning “why do we do it this way” helps keep our minds fresh and instills a healthy culture for new ways of doing business.
Enables more effective problem-solving	Questions also generate alignment with a shared focus and make it more likely that the right problem will be solved. Too often, individuals and organizations run into trouble because they solve the <i>wrong</i> problem. It's the <i>combination of questions you ask</i> and the questions you <i>fail to ask</i> that will get you in trouble – or, perhaps, shape your destiny.

Why It's Easier to Avoid Asking Questions

Constantly questioning “why do we do it this way?” helps keep our minds fresh and instills a healthy culture for new ways of doing business. Why is this important?

Have you ever created something of value after researching online and gotten the same feeling as if you were the original innovator? Do you ever wonder about the long-term effects of simply being a “**consumer of a decision**” versus being a “**creator**?” In the long run, your potential will be severely stunted until you make a cognizant and actionable change. (Hint: Choose to be a creator. You’ll thank me later for making that decision.)

Questions move people from dependence to independence. The key is to focus on asking empowering questions.



At this point, it is worth taking a moment to discuss two terms. **Replication creators (RCs)** and **skilled creators (SCs)** are important concepts to understand from a cognitive perspective. **RCs are those who learn from others** by reading the Internet or a book, and then creating something from the inspiration that comes. **SCs on the other hand are using the space between their ears** like a muscle and producing something new with it, without the help of someone else. It does not necessarily need to be groundbreaking, but

the key difference is that you used your brain and came up with a solution. In other words, you are flexing your brain “muscle.”



Questions help make you – and your organization – smarter. No longer is “we’ve always done it this way” acceptable. That is the lazy way. The brain needs a workout for best results. The leader of the past knew how to “tell”; **the leader of the future will be the person who knows how to ask.** Sincere asking demonstrates a willingness to learn, a desire to serve and a humility that can be an inspiration at every level within an organization.

When you adopt a questioning culture, you are willing to admit that you do not know everything. How refreshing is that, not only from your perspective, but from others’ perspectives? In this day and age where

nearly everyone has an “opinion” (note – this is different from sharing well-researched facts) and can share that opinion with untold numbers of people with the click of a mouse, how welcoming is it that someone has the humility to understand that they do not have all the answers, but are willing to listen and contribute based on what they have heard?

The key here is to **focus on asking empowering questions and to avoid disempowering questions.** Emphasize the process of asking questions and searching for answers rather than finding the right or easy answer. Finally, accept and reward risk-taking.

Genuine, positive inquiries and collaborative action go hand-in-hand. It is difficult to collaborate with others without asking and answering questions. Questions increase communications and listening, as well as prevent us from misjudging each other’s motivation. People feel included in the process and typically buy into the final decision much easier than if they had just been told what the final decision was. People want to feel valued. This is a great way to win their heads and hearts. Astonishingly, **questions move people from dependence to independence.**



Types of Questions

Type	Description
Affective	For the purpose of understanding emotions, moods, feelings, and attitudes
Exploratory	Encourages others to consider things we do not know yet, such as possibilities or solutions
Probing	Used to dig deeper; builds on the foundation of information gathered to drill down and uncover additional information
Analytical	Begins with why or how. Asks another to use their abilities to consider facts and rules, to determine what could be or must be true
Clarifying	Similar to probing, seeks to further understand and gain clarity for anything vague or not fully understood
Fresh or Challenging	Challenges the status quo and encourages consideration of how the current state could be altered
Reflective	Asks someone to think, usually about an opinion or how something relates to the past

Sincerity



As group members engage in asking questions of one another, they gradually gain a group consensus on answers and strategies, since they now more clearly see each other's perspective. They also gain greater clarity of their own. **The questioning processes causes us to become more interested in that person's problems;** and when we listen to someone respond to our questions, we appreciate their efforts and their attention.

Questions also generate alignment with a shared focus and make it more likely that the *right* problem will be solved. Too often, individuals and organizations run into trouble because they solve the *wrong* problem. It is the combination of the questions you ask and the questions you *fail* to ask that will get you in trouble – or, perhaps, shape your destiny.

Self-reflection, self-awareness and action are necessary when asking great questions. Astute and clear understanding of personal motives is one of the most critical of all leadership skills. **It encourages an open dialogue.** Over time and with practice, asking questions will become natural for the organization.

People who consciously self-reflect are much more attuned to their inner feelings than those who do not, and are likelier to recognize how these feelings affect them. This inner knowledge helps us become aware of our limitations and strengths. **Questioning leaders are more comfortable with addressing conflict, acknowledging the feelings and views of all sides and then redirecting the energy toward a shared idea.** This moves the team toward a collaborative style of conflict management, which is helpful in achieving [Number Two \(Empathy\) and Number Three \(Rapport\) on the Behavioral Stairway Model](#).¹

Questioning leaders are more comfortable addressing conflict and redirecting energy towards a shared idea.

Genuine Curiosity



By now, you might start to see how this process works. **By showing genuine curiosity and attempting to understand the other side's point and feelings, you are able to show your "quiet leadership" side.** Rather than telling people what to do, the leader must have the courage to ask them what needs to be done, and then make a serious attempt to remove any obstacles that are in the way.

No longer do you need to *state or dictate* your intent. Rather, the group collectively comes up with – more chances than not – a better idea; all by making them think through the issue and solve it, and thus gaining their buy-in along the way. You will probably discover that there is no such thing as the correct answer; it is all a matter of perspective. And by getting above the fray, a leader can comprehend the big picture and ask what is really going on in the organization, rather than going for the quick fix.

The Problem | The Solution

Admittedly, asking questions can create problems, either with the actual questions themselves or by not having a questioning culture.

Problems include:

- ✓ Asking leading questions, such as “Do you agree that Sam is not pulling his weight?”
- ✓ Only asking questions when selfishly I know I have to make a decision
- ✓ Provoking defensiveness in others, e.g., “Why did this happen?”
- ✓ Corporate cultures may have an aversion to bad news
 - Executives may find it easy to accept good news unquestioningly and investigate only when there is a problem (Enron, WorldCom, General Motors)
 - If a Board refuses to ask questions, a powerful message is signaled throughout the organization for people to keep their heads down



Solutions include two critical skills:

- ✓ Knowing *what* questions to ask
- ✓ Knowing *how* to ask questions



Knowing what questions to ask comes from *listening* to conversations and then thinking of questions to obtain even more information. Listening also involves [hearing what is not being said](#)⁴, and allowing people to complete their thought, which keeps focus on them versus you. You may then reflect back on what you heard and observed. By doing this, you will learn, know and improve more. In addition, you will probably “interfere” less during meetings and conversations. **Switching to questioning versus telling will take your**

leadership abilities to a new level; not to mention will help build a more collaborative culture within the organization.

Let’s focus momentarily on dictatorship or a “telling” culture. Do you want to know how to [win every argument](#)⁵ and persuade everyone into thinking that your ideas are the right ones? Stop trying. It will not work. Communication will absolutely breakdown ... every time.

Once you are in a heated debate or are being told what to do, the team is no longer focused on the best solution and exercising its brain power; they just want to win by any means necessary. Everybody wants to win, including you. The source of the difficulty lies in who comes up with the solution, *but only if credit is demanded for the idea*. **You will not get any wiser by verbally bludgeoning people.** You get wiser by learning through questions. Winning an argument is a short-term ego victory.



Losing an argument can be a learning experience that benefits you for the rest of your life.

Empowering and Disempowering Questions

Empowering	
How do you feel about the team?	What has worked well in getting the team motivated?
How do you feel about the project's Stage One outcome?	How can we duplicate our successes from Project X to Project Y?
I recognize there have been some resources we need to backfill. What will you commit to do and by when?	You said you had some issues come up. Can you more fully describe your concerns about proceeding on this critical path?
What is a viable alternative?	What do you think about ...?
Which objective do you think will be easiest or most difficult to accomplish?	What kind of support do you need to be successful?
Tell me more about ...?	What would happen if ...?
What do you plan to do next?	What other ways can we achieve the outcome we desire?
Have you ever thought of ...?	What other resources can we tap into?
Why must it be done this way?	Why has this happened?
What specifically did you mean by that?	
Disempowering	
Why are you over budget?	What is wrong with the project?
Why are you behind schedule?	Who is not pulling their weight?

A 360° Look at Questions

The words we choose⁶ disclose a lot about how we think and what we believe, and it also may reveal our attitude. **Many times the way our questions are worded suggests how we expect people to behave** and the outcome we believe is imminent. The goal of questions is not to appear clever, feed the ego or elicit an interesting response. Rather, it is to be selfless and supportive in learning and internalizing different perceptions, so that a better outcome can be achieved.

The goal of questions should NOT be to appear clever, feed an ego, or elicit an interesting response.

Rather, the goal of questions should be to learn.

Questions can be a lens that focuses attention on a particular area. When people are asked questions, they are sent on a mental journey in search of the answer. That



journey can be positive, productive and inspiring, and can produce fresh perspectives. **Empowering questions get people thinking and allow them to come up with their own answers** (bonus: instant buy-in); and, thus, **they sign up for the ownership of the results.**

Personally, in my marketing research and competitive intelligence interviews, I have found that the best questions are the ones that you base on what was just provided as an answer. You listen to what was said and then build on that foundation. By doing this, I am saying, “I heard what you said, and am interested in what you had to say by asking deeper questions to ensure I understand your perspective completely.”

Classifying Empowering Questions

Affective Questions

- How do you feel about the team?
- How do you feel about the project's Stage One outcome?
- What do you think about ...?

Explorative Questions

- What has worked well in getting the team motivated?
- How can we duplicate our successes from Project X to Project Y?
- Which objective do you think will be easiest or most difficult to accomplish?
- What kind of support do you need to be successful?
- What is a viable alternative?
- What would happen if ... ?
- What do you plan to do next?
- What other ways can we achieve the outcome we desire?
- Have you ever thought of ... ?
- What other resources can we tap into?

Reflective Questions

- You said you had some issues come up. Can you more fully describe your concerns about proceeding on this critical path?
- I recognize there have been some resources we need to backfill. What will you commit to do and by when?

Probing Questions

- Tell me more about ... ?

Fresh / Challenging Questions

- Why must it be done this way?

Analytical Questions

- Why has this happened?

Clarifying Questions

- What specifically did you mean by that?

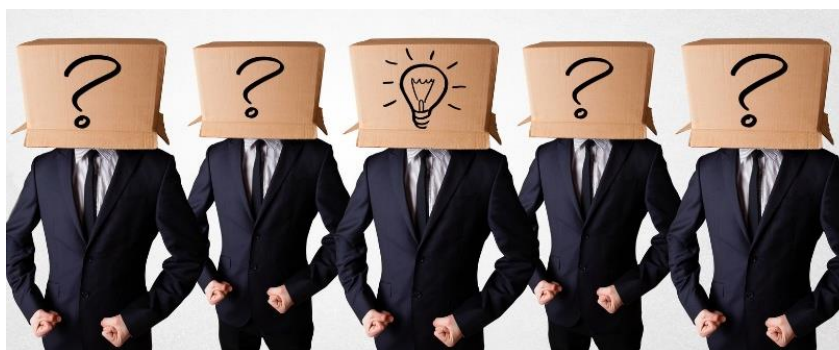
Note that these are open-ended, non-leading questions, which allow the respondent to fully think and answer the question. **Why questions are considered the most important type of open-ended questions** since they delve into cause and effect. Be aware of your tone when asking *why* questions since you want to show your curiosity and thirst for knowledge instead of your anger or frustration.

Why questions can be extraordinarily powerful, especially when you ask *why* again. In fact, **ask “why”**

questions five times in total. You will be amazed at the **real root cause** of some issues.

At the very least, you will leave those whom you have questioned feeling heard and respected. Ironically,

why questions can also help the person being questioned articulate what they have not been able to articulate before. Getting to the root cause can be tough work for all!



Closed questions tend to focus on what, when and where facts, and can be useful to the beginning and end of conversations. For example, at the beginning of a conversation, you may ask, “Is this a good time to talk?” At the end of a conversation, you may confirm the following, “If I can deliver the project by August 1, do you agree that this will be considered a success?”

However, **questions can also lead to journeys that are the opposite**, producing defensiveness and self-doubt, where people are mired in *their* problems and in being considered part of the problem versus part of the solution. Disempowering questions include:

- ✓ Why are you over budget?
- ✓ What is wrong with the project?
- ✓ Why are you behind schedule?
- ✓ Who is not pulling their weight?

It's in Your Mind

Two different mindsets exist when asking questions: 1) **learning** and 2) **judging**. In the learning mindset, natural and genuine curiosity takes place; the person seeks to understand and exudes optimism, possibilities and hope. (AKA win/win.) The judging mindset is reactive and focuses on blame. (AKA win/lose.)

A learning versus judging mindset can be heard through the following statements: “**What can we learn from this?**” versus “**Why is this a failure?**”

Finding out *what* happened and *why* does not mean finding out *who*. Eventually *who* will need to be answered; however, for the purposes of your project goal, *what* and *why* will lead you closer to devising a plan for a successful outcome. The focus remains on improvement and continuous learning, rather than on complaining and venting.



It's in Your Delivery



When asking questions, it is recommended that you **focus on the questioner and the question** to show your genuine interest. Maintain a steady pace and timing, and keep good eye contact. Be sure to show your appreciation when you receive a response. A simple “thank you” can work effectively.

Besides asking the right questions, if interested in going a step further in building rapport, I encourage you to **hone your communication skills using neuro-linguistic programming and body language** (see Forward Momentum's [Beyond Words](#)⁷ course) so that your words, tone, actions and body language are all congruent. By mastering this skill, it will help others believe your intent and trust you, and it will help boost the all-important rapport you need to successfully navigate through projects and relationships.

Conclusion

We discussed several things in this article, but here are a few high-level takeaways:

- ✓ Check your ego at the door: Lead with questions for leadership purposes, not to win for winning's sake.
- ✓ Flex your brain muscle: Use your brain to think of questions that will get you closer to your end goal. It is tough, and you might get a cramp once in a while, but you and your organization will be better off for it. Asking questions skillfully is more difficult than giving advice.
- ✓ The art of questioning is about being sincere in wanting to:
 - Learn versus blame
 - Listen to responses openly and non-judgmentally
 - Follow up on the conversation with action
- ✓ Ensure your words, tone, questions and body language are all “saying” the same thing; you will build trust and rapport more quickly.
- ✓ The difference between leaders and managers is that leaders are those who ask the right questions; managers are those tasked to answer those questions.
 - You choose which seat you would like to occupy.
- ✓ You become what you ask about.
- ✓ Practice makes perfect.



Go ahead. Take the plunge. Ask the tough – but sincere and genuine – questions. I dare you to flex your brain muscle and make a difference.

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