"Leading with Questions"
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Recent research—and the experience of a growing number of organizations—now points to the conclusion that the most successful leaders lead with questions, and they use questions more frequently. (1) The purpose of *Leading with Questions* is to help you become a stronger leader by learning how to ask the right questions effectively, how to listen effectively, and how to create a climate in which asking questions becomes as natural as breathing. (3) What I came to realize is that solving others' problems is exhausting. It is much more effective to provide the opportunity for them to solve their own problems. …a growing number of leaders recognize that their organization's success, if not survival, depends upon creating a learning organization, an organization that is able to quickly adapt to the changing environment. (12) A learning organization is only possible if it has a culture that encourages questions. (13)

The list goes on. *Groupthink* was the term Irving Janis (1971) chose to use for the phenomenon: the kind of flawed group dynamics that lets bad ideas go unchallenged by questions and disagreement and can sometimes yield disastrous outcomes. (15) I would never assume that having the title would mean that I had all the answers. I truly think that the leader who tries to know it all and tells everyone what to do is doomed to failure. (17) Did I clearly articulate the goals I was trying to achieve? Did I give people the time and resources they needed to succeed? Did I give them enough training to get the job done properly?" Asking rather than telling, questions rather than answers, has become the key to leadership excellence and success in the twenty-first century. (23) Contrary to much received wisdom, effective leaders do not have all the answers. Instead, effective leaders make it a practice to ask questions. (25)

 In answer-driven organizations, curiosity, risk taking, challenging the status quo, and even the willingness to be wrong takes a back seat… Leaders, through questions, can build a culture in which questions are welcomed, assumptions are challenged, and new ways to solve problems are explored. (27)Unity is forged, not forced"… (29) "I care about what you think, and your opinion is important and it counts around here"—motivates people and builds positive attitude as well as enhancing their personal satisfaction. Asking people questions shows them that you value them. (36) Leaders at all levels who question others and are able to accept questions exhibit a desire and ease in learning and improving themselves. (42)

Questions provide a person with leadership skills that encourage fresh thinking, and thus enable us to "avoid responding to today's problems with yesterday's solutions while tomorrow's challenges engulf us." (45) "Those who have the inability to ask questions have problems with their ego." A leader needs to be courageous and authentic, and not intimidated by the rank or expertise or character of the person to whom the question is posted. (53) Leaders must be willing to "not know" or "not be right." (54) "The capacity to ask fresh questions in conditions of ignorance, risk, and confusion, when nobody knows what to do next" is at the heart of great leadership. (56)   …in empowering others, the leader has to resist the urge to give people advice. When people ask for help, the leader needs to ask questions so that they come up with their own answers. (65) Several effective questions work well for me, including the following:

● What is a viable alternative?
● What are the advantages and disadvantages you see in this suggestion?
● Can you more fully describe your concerns?
● What are your goals?

● How would you describe the current reality?
● What are a few options for improvement?
●What will you commit to do by when? (67)
● Can that be done in any other way?
●What other options can we think of?
● What resources have we never used?
● What do we expect to happen if we do that?
●What would happen if you did nothing at all?
● What other options do you have?
●What is stopping us?
● What happens if. . .?
● Have we ever thought of. . .? (71)
● What's good or useful about this?
● What possibilities does this open up?
● What can we do about this?
● How can we stay on track?
● What can we learn from this? (79)

But notice, finding out *what* happened and *why* does not mean finding out *who*. Even when issues of who must be addressed, effective leaders know that the best approach is to be the supportive coach rather than the judging boss. (81) Asking about how to make things happen instead of focusing on why they don't work is the type of questing that a leader should possess. (87) It is much harder to ask skillful questions than to give advice. And for many years managers have received positive feedback for having the answers and giving advice. (90) …the art of questioning is really not about tips and techniques at all. It all comes down to being sincere in wanting to learn rather than blame, in wanting to listen to responses openly and nonjudgmentally, and in following up on the conversation with action. (95) A questioning culture has six hallmarks.

● Are willing to admit, "I don't know."
● Go beyond allowing questions; they encourage questions.
● Are helped to develop the skills needed to ask questions in a positive way.
● Focus on asking empowering questions and avoid disempowering questions.
● Emphasize the process of asking questions and searching for answers rather than finding the right answers.
● Accept and reward risk taking. (98)

Create an environment that enables people to challenge the status quo, take risks, and ask more questions.

Recognize that many standard practices, policies, and procedures are no longer valuable to the company—if they ever were. (99) …ask questions out of a genuine desire to learn, in a positive manner, and give people time to respond. (103) Loyalty to the organization, or to the truth, may not hamper a questioning culture. When loyalty is focused on supporting the current leadership, however, a questioning culture may be impossible. Here are some important questions for people in organizations to wrestle with together on an ongoing basis:

● What inspires us?
● What challenges us?
● What encourages us?
● How certain are we of our conviction about the vision and the values?

- What gives us courage to continue in the face of uncertainty and adversity?
- How will we handle disappointments, mistakes, and setbacks?
- What are our strengths and weaknesses?
- What do we need to do to improve our abilities to move the organization forward?
- How solid are our relationships among ourselves?
- How can we keep ourselves motivated and encouraged?
- How prepared are we to handle the complex problems that confront our organization? (105)
- What are our beliefs about how people ought to conduct the affairs of our organization?
- Where do we think the organization ought to be headed over the next ten years? (106)
- What is a viable alternative?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages you see in this suggestion?
- Can you more fully describe your concerns?
- What are your goals?
- What is the current reality?
- What are the few options for improvement?
- What will you commit to do by when? (122)

"Leadership is…inspiring and showing others new places where they haven't been earlier. Good leadership is showing the way to self-leadership." (123)

- How does your work contribute to our success?
- How could you make your job more effective?
- Who do you see as our competitors, and how do you see them?
- What gets in the way of doing your job? (126)
- What does our leadership team do that gets in the way of your job?
- How could we communicate management decisions more effectively?
- If you could change one thing about the organization, what would it be?
- What's a potential benefit that we could offer that would be helpful to you?
- What is it like to work on a team in our organization?
- What makes you proud to work for this organization?
- What's something you've learned in the past week?
- What brings you joy in your work?
- What gives your life meaning? (127)

When giving feedback there are some basic rules, and the first one is that people should first give their own corrective feedback. (128) Marshall Goldsmith…suggests that the leader have a conversation built around six discussion points, starting each conversation by describing them so that the other person doesn't feel set up or trapped in a game of "guess what the leader wants." 1. *Where are we going?* 2. *Where are you going?* 3. *What are you doing well?* 4. *What suggestions for improvement do you have for yourself?* 5. *How can I help you?* (129) 6. *What suggestions do you have for me?* Clark-Epstein (2002) suggests that those who bring in new leaders ask them some of the following questions:
- Why do you think we made you a new leader?
- What did the greatest leader you ever had do?
- What do you need to learn to be a great leader?
- How can we support you to grow as a leader? (130)

 Peter Senge (1990) remarks that teams have become a critical component of every enterprise, that teams are now the predominant unit for decision making and getting things done. (133) The traditional leader focuses on control, seeks to minimize risk, and pushes to be the initiator of action. Such a leader tends to give commands via statements, to control change, hoard

information, and foreclose debate. (134) To help establish unique and strong group norms, norms that are powerfully ingrained and provide strong cohesion for the group, ask, *How well are we doing? Are we listening to each other carefully? What is not working in how we deal with each other? How can we improve? Are we excluding ideas or approaches without giving them full consideration?* (138) As consultant and author Patrick Lencioni points out, "Teams that fail to disagree and exchange unfiltered opinions…find themselves revisiting the same issues again and again" (2003…). (139) Unless you encourage and enable the members to reflect on the just-concluded meeting by asking a few questions, little or no learning or improvement will occur—and your meetings will never get any better. At the end of each session, help the group learn by asking some of the following questions:

● How well has this session gone?
● What has the group done well?
● What could the group do better?
● What are we not doing that we could be doing?
● What actions are we going to take as a group next time that will improve our performance? (142)

The acquisition of a wide, panoramic view of the problem can be accomplished only by openly and freshly questioning each other and then reflecting on the responses. (145) Questions are the mode of healthy group conflict. Statements are the common communication mode of unhealthy conflict. (150) When we ask questions of others and invite them to search for answers with us, we are not just sharing information, we are sharing responsibility. (151) Questioning leaders are able to let go of their ego-driven need to have their own answers. They drop their need to be right, and so they can allow others to be right. (172) The training programs seek to develop eight characteristics that IIL research shows to be important for inquiring leaders:

● An insatiable, nonjudgmental curiosity that places a high value on continuous learning… (186)
● A commitment to establishing an inquiring culture…
● An ability to challenge assumptions and beliefs in thinking and communication,…
● An ability to listen carefully and thoroughly,…
● A commitment to take *reflecting time*…
● A commitment to institute standard, inquiry-based problem-solving and learning practices,…
● An ability to intentionally ask themselves and others questions that open thinking, to challenge assumptions,…
● The strength to be decisive and committed to strategic rather than reactive action. (187)