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# QUESTIONS *EVERY* LEADER SHOULD ASK: LEADERSHIP

By Krysta Fox & Sally Mitchell-Wolf

Asking the Right Questions About Your Leadership Reaps Rewards



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## QUESTIONS CAN BE POWERFUL

As leaders, questions are often directed at us. Becoming caught up in only answering questions is a trap which dynamic, agile leaders actively avoid.

Truly effective leaders unleash the power of questions by asking the right types of questions. Clearly, questions are a key component of dialogue, as well as for gaining knowledge and understanding.



When mastered, asking good questions seems to be an artform.

If we visualise someone displaying mastery of asking questions, the brilliant lawyers or perceptive detectives encountered in fiction may spring to mind, or ancient Socratic, Skeptic and Stoic philosophers, perhaps.

Questions do not belong only in a courtroom or classroom, however. They have value and power in all aspects of our life, and especially in business.

*Questioning is a uniquely powerful tool for unlocking value in organizations:*

*It spurs learning and the exchange of ideas, it fuels innovation and performance improvement, it builds rapport and trust among team members.*

*And it can mitigate business risk by uncovering unforeseen pitfalls and hazards.*

*(Wood Brooks & John, 2018)*

Arguably, leadership, let alone effective leadership, isn't possible in the absence of questions.

However not all questions are created equal.

Worse, the wrong question, including wrong phrasing, wrong timing or limited relevance, can do more damage than good.

Thus, the very first question one might consider is: *"What question would be most helpful to ask, right now?"*

Fortunately, asking the right type of question, at the right time and in the right way is something any leader can, and should, become adept at.

Even if you routinely ask questions, reflection on the types and focus of questions you habitually ask can be helpful in bumping yourself out of what could become a rut. Further, it can open you up to different insights and different ways of thinking.

Asking questions of yourself as a leader if not about self-doubt.

Asking questions of yourself, about yourself is a way to both implement quality control and growth.

Questions are part of self-reflection. Exploring them opens up the possibility of being the best possible leader you can be, here and now.

So here, in the first of a series of articles, are some of our favourite questions for leaders to ask about Leadership.



### **What's my leadership style?**

Perhaps the most obvious time to ask yourself this question is when you're interviewing for a new position. However, the role of a leader is to drive change in some form, be it in terms of financial results or helping to create a better world.

Therefore, we strongly encourage you to think less narrowly. Ask this question in your current role and examine how you're impacting colleagues and the people you lead.

Reflecting on this question can be particularly powerful when you're experiencing conflict or communication break-down in your team.



Another way to think about this question could be to ask: *Five years from now, what decision would I have wanted myself to make?*

This question is about shifting perspective, avoiding a knee-jerk response in a heated debate and making a better choice of which you, as a leader, can be proud.

We work with leaders to develop concepts and skills relating to managing yourself. Part of developing Emotional Intelligence (EI), also referred to Emotional Quotient (EQ), is recognised as being very important for leadership development (Harvard PD, 2019).



### ***What kind of behaviour from me would lead to the best outcomes for the business and the team?***

This question prompts a shift into situational leadership and helps avoid being only 'one type' of leader.

It's a reminder of the importance of pausing to 'read the room' and adjust your behaviour to achieve the best outcome, one that is right for here and now.

Bringing people to account if expectations are not being met will call for different leadership behaviours than more normal circumstances a leader encounters. Here, it is best to be clear, direct and respectful.

If the actions of a staff member are out of character, or unexpected emotions or tensions become apparent, choosing a curious approach to leadership can be best.

In inquiring with an intention to coach or mentor, a leader may identify something occurring in the background of which they'd been unaware.

Rather than reacting and escalating or worsening a situation, choosing an alternative leadership behaviour empowers a leader to consider what would be appropriate support to achieve the best outcomes for the individual, team and organisation.



### ***What do people think of my leadership style?***

It's sad, and perhaps surprising, how many leaders believe they know the answer to this question. Especially if a leader hasn't thought about their leadership style nor attended to how they are impacting others, they can have it so very wrong!

Gaining insights and finding an answer can be tricky. Certainly, one could just be upfront and ask people, but depending on the relationship and office dynamic you simply may not get a frank answer.

As consultants, when it's the right approach for the individual, the culture and environment, we can

support leaders in answering this question by obtaining 360-degree feedback. This approach, however, is not without its challenges and does need to be implemented with care. (Peipal 2001). It's a step into discomfort and it can be very confronting for leaders.

Where trust, or a culture marked by psychological safety exists, leaders can gain valuable insights into how others view their leadership style through a more formal survey or an informal question in a casual conversation.

Alternatively, where a leader has a trusted mentor, a conversation around this question of leadership style could offer insights and opportunity for growth. It's a good question to revisit once or twice a year.



### ***How am I helping others to grow and develop?***

This is a question we strongly recommend leaders ask often.

Reviewing productivity and monthly reports, provides an opportunity for getting into the habit of asking this question regularly.

There are many ways to facilitate growth and development in a team.

Formal PD opportunities and training are part of the mix but are not the whole picture.

'How' can look like conversations to confirm you understand what members of your team are passionate about.

'How' can be reviewing delegation to ensure people are working on projects that capitalise on strengths and unlock potential.

'How' may take the form of coaching or formalising peer mentoring in the organisation and providing opportunities for people to contribute in different capacities.

Conscious and deliberate thinking and action to provide learning and development opportunities are key to leadership which multiplies productivity, amplifies job satisfaction, retention, etcetera, etcetera, and so benefits the team and the organisation.



### ***How do I maintain a healthy mindset?***

This may seem a selfish question, but we'd argue that it is investment in and prioritising of their own health, not just physically but mentally, which gives exceptional leaders an edge.

It's easier to be your best leader-self, one who chooses a behaviour according to situation if you have good self-awareness and tools, such

as mindfulness practice, to bring yourself back on track when you are having a day where you're feeling less positive or more stressed than is healthy.

Fortunately, there's a wealth of concepts and tools, programs and resources which are about this kind of self-development and work well, especially for leaders.

They can take the form of books, apps, article, podcasts and be self-directed and solo.

Choosing to take a leadership development course with other leaders or work one-on-one with a coach are pathways some leaders decide to take and find significant benefit in for growth, including maintaining a healthy mindset.



### **Who is my mentor?**

A mentor is someone you have a professional relationship with, someone whom you can reach out to for advice and have confidence that their experience, knowledge and advice is relevant to you.

Trusting their interest and commitment in supporting your growth and learning means you can be honest and vulnerable about the challenges you are working through on your leadership journey.

You may work, or have worked, with a person who would be willing to be a mentor. Ask them and discuss what that could look like! It's also possible meet potential mentors through a professional organisation and networks.

A co-coaching relationship is an alternative which some find works well. Here two leaders act as sounding boards and mentors for each other, particularly if they're struggling with a specific situation or decision.

And, of course, leaders may approach an organisation such as Changeosity for coaching and training and mentoring can become part of that.



### **AM I ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS?**

The framing of a question inevitably sets boundaries.

Even our first, general suggestion, *"What question would be most helpful to ask, right now?"* assumes

a question is the best course of action!

Mindful of the warning that the “most serious mistakes are not the result of wrong answers. The truly dangerous thing is asking the wrong questions.” (Corporate Learning Network, 2019).

Therefore, to those suggested in this article we would add “*Am I asking the right question?*”.

Sometimes the right ‘question’ is more of an invitation to continue a conversation: “*Can you tell me more?*” or “*Why do you think that is?*”.

By asking good questions themselves, leaders can model

these behaviours and establish such a culture.

Even more importantly, thoughtful use of the power of questions can build some really good insights into the organisation and help the organisation do better!

While it is useful to ask many of the questions in this article of yourself as a leader, remember that the richest and most fruitful answers to many good questions are likely to arise through asking members of your team.

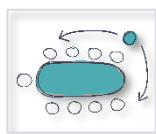
This is especially true for many of the questions which will be included in subsequent articles in this series.

### WANT TO LEARN MORE?

So much of the most exciting and rewarding work we do is in coaching leaders like you who want to grow, challenge themselves and be the best leader they can. If you’re interested in leadership development, contact us now discuss the ways in which our Changeosity consultants can support you on your journey.



STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT



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