

The eBook

# Character Trumps Credentials

**171 QUESTIONS THAT HELP LEADERS  
TELL GREAT STORIES THAT  
INFLUENCE, ENGAGE AND INSPIRE**

Shawn Callahan  
and Mark Schenk



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**TO OUR CUSTOMERS:  
THANKS FOR A MILLION STORIES.**

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## INTRODUCTION

We started collecting questions just over 10 years ago. The ones that interested us the most were those that prompted a story rather than just an opinion. Being a little geeky, we installed a wiki and whenever we discovered a new story-eliciting question, we'd add it to our collection. We are often employed by our clients to collect stories in their organisations, and our collection of story-eliciting questions grew with each assignment.

Over the years, we discovered which questions really worked and which were duds. Some principles emerged too. We learned that questions that brought the listener to a point in time worked well. So did questions that conjured an emotion or a strong mental picture. And simple questions using plain language were much more effective than complex ones.



Our goal is a simple one. We want to help leaders become good storytellers, and for this to happen, leaders must find good stories to tell – they need to be story collectors.

One way you can do this is to start noticing your own experiences as they happen and then link those experiences to business points. This level of mindfulness requires practice, but if you can convert your flow of experience into relatable and relevant anecdotes, then you will never be short of a story to tell. There is, however, another natural resource that you can sustainably harvest: your personal history.

People want to know what their leaders stand for. What do they care about? What have they done? What are they capable of doing? And most importantly, what are they likely to do next? That's why people will listen when a leader tells stories that reveal their own character, stories that can then be shared. This happens all the time – naturally.

If a leader is not relating such stories, their colleagues can still observe their behaviour and then describe it in their own way, as best they can. Human beings have active minds; we love to create stories to explain the snippets of action we see. But the process of interpretation is a tricky one, and it can lead people astray.

So what stories could you share? This book should help you answer this question. It contains 34 categories of questions, each one providing a different perspective on your character and on your values as a leader. Use these questions to dig into your personal history and dust off valuable memories – memories that may prompt stories about lessons you've learned, or insights into what motivates you, or your experiences of innovation, diversity, courage or trust.



You could work through each question from the first to the last, hoping to make a Tutankhamun-like find. But a better approach is to explore a category that's relevant to something you need to speak about in the near future. Look around for a relevant story and at the first opportunity, tell it and see how it feels. You will know immediately if it's a keeper.

Don't write your story out in full. Just make some notes to help you remember the details when the time comes to tell it. Jot down your notes and make your own personal story bank. We recommend the *Friends* approach to naming stories: 'The one where Joey eats a sandwich'. Sometimes you just need a one-liner to remember a story, especially if it's your own, and you can use the categories presented here to tag your stories.

The best way to recall a story, though, is to tell it a few times, then talk to people about what the story means. Remember that your stories will have the greatest power when you can tell them off the cuff to make a business point – don't ever just read them out.

We hope you enjoy these questions, and that you find new ones that open up other experiences for you to share. We would love to hear what you've discovered, and any favourite questions you have. Please send us an email at [people@anecdote.com](mailto:people@anecdote.com).

**Shawn Callahan and Mark Schenk**





# Leadership

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Have you ever been in a situation where someone without formal power is the one who inspires people to take action?

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When have you found yourself following someone when you didn't expect to?

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We are defined by the challenges we take on. What challenges have you taken on that have defined you as a leader?

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Think of an impressive leader you've worked with. What examples do you remember that show why they were so good?

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When have you seen a leader make a gutsy move against the odds and come up trumps?

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# Principles before rules

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Have you ever laid out your principles or values and used them to make an important decision? What happened?

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Have you ever met a person who insists on doing everything by the rulebook? When has that worked or gone terribly wrong?

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Have you ever been forced to follow the rules even though you thought they were dumb? What happened?

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Did you ever do something the right way, only to find out later that the right way was the wrong way in that context? If not, did you ever see someone else do this?

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Rules are for the guidance of the wise and the blind obedience of fools. When have you bent the rules to get a job done?

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# Power

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Leaders need to 'walk the talk'. Have you ever had a leader who demands behaviour from others that they are not prepared to demonstrate themselves?

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Has your authority ever been challenged in a way that taught you something you might not have learned otherwise? What happened?

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Think about a time when you challenged someone's authority – and were wrong to do so. What happened?

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Albert Einstein said, 'To punish me for my contempt for authority, fate made me an authority myself'. Has fate ever made you an authority?

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Was there ever a time in your life when you were not sure whether you wanted authority or wanted to escape from authority?

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# Respect

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Think of a person you respect. Can you recall an experience that explains why you respect them?

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Did you ever suddenly lose respect for someone? What caused you to lose respect?

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Did anyone ever lose respect for you? What did you do that made them lose respect? What did you do about it? What did you learn from it?

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Have you ever found yourself reassessing someone and having more respect for them than you had previously? What happened that made you rethink this?

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Small things can make a big difference. Has there been a time when an otherwise innocuous act made you feel valued and respected? What happened?

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# Perspective

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When have you glimpsed a situation from a totally new perspective and been surprised at what you saw?

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Were you ever so sure of something that you thought no argument could shake you, and then something did shake you?

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Have you ever suddenly realised that you've made a major change in your life, not having been aware the change was happening?

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Tolstoy said, 'Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no-one thinks of changing themselves'. Does that quote resonate with something you've done or seen?

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Have you ever met someone from another walk of life who really helped you to see things differently?

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# Coaching and feedback

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Think of a time when you got a great piece of advice from an unexpected source. What happened?

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Did you ever overhear someone giving another person advice and learn something important from it yourself? What happened?

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What was the best, or worst, advice you ever got, or gave? What happened as a result?

---

When have you seen someone do something and thought, 'Wow, I should do that too'?

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Will Rogers said, 'Never miss a good chance to shut up'. When have you decided to keep your mouth shut and been glad you did?

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# Collaboration

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Did you ever finish something, working with someone else, then look back and say to yourself, 'Neither of us could have done that by ourselves'? How did it unfold?

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Have you ever collaborated with someone on something and at the end thought you could have done a better job working alone? What happened that caused you to feel that way?

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Helen Keller said, 'Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much'. When was collaboration magical for you?

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Can you remember a time when a collaboration went from working well to a disaster?

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When were you surprised by a collaboration you thought would never happen? How did it play out?

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# Delegation and letting go

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Think of a time when someone trusted you with a job that you thought was way out of your league. How did it turn out?

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When have you known, in your gut, that you should delegate a task but were unable to let it go, and suffered as a result? What happened?

---

Did you ever give a task to someone else and come to regret it? What was the task and what happened?

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Have you ever been in a situation where everyone said you should give up, but you wouldn't – and you were right? How did it turn out?

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You try and try, and only when you give up do you find the answer. Has this ever happened to you? What were you trying to do, and how did the answer come to you?

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# Efficiency

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Good enough or perfect? Have you ever had to make this choice? What happened?

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Have you ever made an improvement which really saved time and effort?

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It's been said that it's better to do the right things rather than just doing something right. Have you ever done this?

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Where have you seen efficiency (repeatability, automation etc.) make a real business difference?

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When have you seen performance compromised by too many changes of direction?

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# Customer service

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When was the last time you had a great customer service experience?

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When you chat about customer service with your friends, is there a particular story you find yourself telling?

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Have you ever been angered or upset by a customer service representative? What did they say or do, and how did you respond?

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Have you ever sworn at a customer service representative? If not, have you ever wanted to? What happened that made you want to do that?

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Have you ever gone out of your way to commend a customer service representative to his or her manager? What did the person do to make you want to do that?

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# Quality

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Have you ever been forced by circumstances to turn out low-quality work?

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Think about a time when you finished something, then turned it round and round (in your hands or in your mind), marvelling at the excellence of what you had produced. What were the circumstances?

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Have you ever had a project where managers are pushing to stay on schedule and you are pushing for a quality product? How was it resolved?

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Did you ever look back on something you'd created and feel that it could have been done better?

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Henry Ford said, 'Quality means doing it right when no-one is looking'. When have you done something right when no-one was looking? What happened?

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# Rewards

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When have you felt really appreciated for your work?  
When have you felt your organisation, or your boss,  
couldn't care less?

---

Did you ever get a reward you felt you didn't deserve?  
What was the reward? How did you feel, and what  
did you do as a result?

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Did you ever reward someone, then later realise that  
you had made a mistake in doing so? What caused you  
to change your mind, and what did you do about it?

---

Have you ever known a person who should have been  
rewarded but wasn't? Why weren't they rewarded?  
How did you feel about it?

---

Have you ever tried to reward someone and it backfired?  
What happened?

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# Sales and selling

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Have you ever felt guilty about a sale you made? For example, perhaps you sold the more-expensive model when the cheaper one would have been perfectly adequate.

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When have you sold something that was even better for your customer than expected?

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Have you ever experienced a 'bait and switch', where you didn't get what you thought you were buying? What was it like?

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Recount an experience of a sale, either by you or to you, in which all parties felt the deal was fair. What happened?

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Have you ever thought you knew what someone wanted, steered them towards it, then later realised that they needed something other than what you sold them?

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# Strategy

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When has a strategy worked far better than you expected? What was the surprise?

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When have the strategic choices you've made as a group contributed directly to the group's success? What happened?

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Have you ever had the realisation that the leadership team is pursuing a different strategy to yours?

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Did you ever create a strategy that looked good on paper but was impossible to execute? What did you do?

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When have you had to abandon a strategy?

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# Success

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When have you seen success snatched from  
the jaws of failure?

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Looking back on your life, think of something you  
are proud of that nobody knows about. What was it?

\_\_\_\_\_  
When have you seen failure snatched from  
the jaws of success?

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Have you ever failed by succeeding,  
or succeeded by failing?

\_\_\_\_\_  
Have you ever succeeded and failed at the same time?



# Diversity

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Think of a time when you were surprised by how much diversity mattered. What happened?

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Have you ever achieved a goal that would have been impossible to achieve had your group not been as diverse as it was?

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When has diversity been helpful but burdensome in practice?

\_\_\_\_\_  
In what practical ways have you injected diversity into work, and what happened?

\_\_\_\_\_  
Can you think of a time when diversity went wrong?





# Inclusion

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Have you ever been excluded from anything?  
What happened?

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Have you ever explicitly excluded someone from something? How did it work out?

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When has including someone been a big mistake?

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When have you seen true inclusion as opposed to inclusion in name only?

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Have you ever met a person who never excludes anyone? How does this work?

\_\_\_\_\_



# Connecting

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Think of a time when you took a chance on making a connection you weren't sure would work out. What happened?

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Have you ever met someone who turned out to be the missing piece of the puzzle for you, and then discovered that you were the missing piece of the puzzle for them too?

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Think of a connection you thought would never happen until it did. How did the connection come about?

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Have you ever been sure that meeting with someone will benefit you both, only to find out that you have nothing to offer each other?

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Can you think of a time when you connected with someone and the connection was right but the timing was off?

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# Purpose

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When has your purpose been clear and strong? What happened?

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Have you ever seen a group whose purpose is unclear and weak? What was the situation?

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Have you ever found yourself at cross-purposes with someone you respect? What was their purpose, what was yours, and how did events play out?

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Friedrich Nietzsche said, 'He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how'. When has that quote had meaning in your life?

---

Think of a time when a team you were in found a common purpose the members could all work towards. How did the common purpose emerge?

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# Innovation

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When has a small innovation made a big difference?

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When have you seen a group fail to innovate?

---

Did you ever try too hard to innovate?

---

Voltaire said, 'Our wretched species is so made that those who walk on the well-trodden path always throw stones at those who are showing a new road'. When has that statement had meaning in your life?

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Have you ever encountered a new idea but could not see its value until some time had passed?

---



# Learning

---

When have you said to yourself, 'At least I know not to do that again!'

---

Say you have written a memoir called *The Most Important Lessons I Have Ever Learned*. What's an experience you would describe in that book?

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Do you keep any objects around you because they remind you of lessons you never want to forget? Choose one of those objects and recount the experience that led you to keep it.

---

Can you think of a person who taught you a valuable lesson? Who was the person, and what lesson did they teach you?

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When was the last time you did something for the first time?

---



# Values

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Have you ever had to make a choice between what is most advantageous and what you most value?

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Have you ever learned about your own values by interacting with a person whom you respect but who has different values? What's an example of this?

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Did you ever discover you held a value you'd been unaware of holding? When did your own actions teach you about your own values?

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Choose a value that's central to your existence. How did you come to believe in that value? What led you down that path?

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Mahatma Gandhi said, 'Your values become your destiny'. Can you think of a time when that statement has rung true in your life?

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# Individuality

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When have you faced barriers that arose from who you are?

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Can you think of something you did that nobody else in the world would have done (or could have done) in exactly the same way you did?

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If you were able to tell each person you met one story about you that would help them understand you better, what would that story be?

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When have you experienced uniqueness in your life?

---

Was there ever a time when you solved a problem because you were the only person with just the right combination of strengths to find the right solution?

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# Caring

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Have you ever sacrificed your own reputation in the service of an important principle?

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If you were to recount one moment that explains why you do what you do, what would it be?

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Have you ever felt like giving up but you just kept going? What happened?

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When have you been surprised about what you truly care about?

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What have you done that has demonstrated to other people that you care?

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# Courage

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When have you put your reputation on the line for a greater cause?

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Can you recall a time when you found the courage to bring something back from its lowest point?

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Have you ever risked your life to help someone else?

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There's a saying: 'Courage is contagious'. Think of a time when you experienced the truth of this. What happened?

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Have you ever found courage you didn't know you had?

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# Inspiration

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Who has inspired you in your life? When has somebody inspired you to take action?

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Can you remember a time when you had to really motivate yourself, when you had to dig deep and find the will to do something?

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Have you ever inspired someone else to take action?

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Thomas Jefferson said, 'Do you want to know who you are? Don't ask. Act! Action will delineate and define you'. When have you learned about who you are through the actions you've taken?

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Have you ever tried to motivate somebody and failed?

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# Trust

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Have you ever trusted anyone with your life?

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Have you ever been ready to trust someone, only to find that they are not ready to trust you?

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An old proverb says, 'Trust takes years to build but can be broken in seconds'. When have you experienced the truth of that proverb in your life?

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What experiences have you had that have taught you that you are trustworthy?

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Think of someone you trust. How did you come to trust that person?

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# Responsibility

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It's said that to be an adult is to be responsible.  
Can you think of a moment in your life that stands  
as an example of that statement?

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Can you remember a time when you didn't want  
to take responsibility for something, but knew that  
you had to and pushed yourself to do what you  
knew was right, and benefited in the end?

---

When did you see something fail because nobody  
was willing to step up and take responsibility for it?

---

Have you ever taken on too many responsibilities?  
What happened?

---

Have you been in a situation where the person  
who should have been responsible for something  
was not the person who took responsibility for it?  
What happened in the end?

---



# Caution

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When have you been overly cautious?

---

When have you felt grateful for using caution?

What made you grateful?

---

When should you have been cautious but you just went in like a bull in a china shop?

---

Robert Frost said, 'Don't ever take a fence down until you know why it was put up'. When has that statement applied to you?

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Caution is a double-edged sword: it can harm us as easily as it can protect us. When has caution either protected or harmed you?

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# Action

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As the saying goes, 'He who hesitates is lost'.  
When have you hesitated?

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Think of a time when you 'seized the day'.  
What happened?

\_\_\_\_\_  
Have you ever taken a bold move only to  
discover that the timing was not right?

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Think of a time when you waited too long to act.  
What was the outcome?

\_\_\_\_\_  
When has your timing been perfect?



# Communication

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When have you seen someone tell it straight when it would have been much easier to pussyfoot around?

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When have you seen someone deliver a message and the recipients just got it?

\_\_\_\_\_

What's the worst attempt at communication you've seen?

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Have you ever seen an attempt at communication backfire?

\_\_\_\_\_

It's great to see a leader make progress with a tough crowd. Have you ever seen that happen?



# Loyalty

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Has someone ever betrayed you? What happened?

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Think of a time when someone stood by you when it wasn't easy for them to do so. What happened?

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Leaders often need to be accountable for their people's mistakes. What stories could your people tell about times when you 'took the heat' and protected them?

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Loyalty doesn't always last forever. People can do things that cause you to question your loyalty to them. When have you experienced this?

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Think of a time when you stood by someone and it cost you. Do you have regrets about this, or was loyalty worth the price?

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# Mistakes

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Have you ever had a near miss, a time when you made a big mistake but got away with it?

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Albert Einstein said, 'Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new'. When have you tried something new and made a mistake? What happened, and what did you learn?

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What is the single most-valuable mistake you ever made in your life?

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Have you ever realised that someone is about to make a mistake and you let them make it?

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Have you ever failed to take responsibility for a mistake? If not, have you seen someone else do this?

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# Helping

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Think of a time when you wanted to help someone but couldn't. What happened?

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When would you have failed without someone's help?

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When have you been justly proud of the help you gave to someone who needed it?

\_\_\_\_\_  
When has someone stood by you when it seemed like the whole world was against you?

\_\_\_\_\_  
There is a saying that goes, 'No man stands so tall as when he stoops to help a child'. When has that saying had meaning for you?



## FINAL THOUGHTS

Our first hope is that these questions help you find lots of stories about yourself and the people you spend time with.

Hearing these stories will help you understand what you really stand for. In fact, any story you tell reveals something about your character. We are what we do, and who we think we are is based on the stories we tell ourselves and others. Alignment of the two equals self-awareness.

Our second hope is that you will be inspired to create and share your own story-eliciting questions. We would love to hear what you come up with. Please send us an email at [people@anecdote.com](mailto:people@anecdote.com).

We would like to leave you with one last question that should result in a few more good stories to tell to really help people understand what you stand for: **What three events have shaped the person you are today?**



## THANKS

We first learned about collecting stories at IBM and were taught how to run anecdote circles by a colleague, Sharon Darwent. Sharon felt you just needed to be comfortable with silence and would ask for examples, but we soon learned that the questions you asked made a big difference. In that same group was Cynthia Kurtz, who has since become a leader in the field of narrative inquiry and an expert in story-eliciting questions. Cynthia has contributed many questions to Anecdote over the years as part of projects she has done for us, and we thank her for her creativity and openness. We would also like to thank all of our clients, whose varied and interesting projects have pushed us to craft a wide range of story-eliciting questions and made us marvel at the magnificent stories we are privileged to hear.

A big thanks to Paul Smitz, who tightens up our words and makes them sparkle. Thanks also to our long-term friend and designer extraordinaire, Kerenza Smith, who crafted the look of this book. Finally, we are blessed to coordinate a network of practitioners who deliver our Storytelling for Leaders program around the world, and who keep us thinking and creating because they are helping leaders in the world's most interesting companies.



## THE AUTHORS

Shawn Callahan lives in Melbourne, Australia in a house of women. Even his pets are female. Back in 2004 he kicked off Anecdote so that he could use stories to return humanity to the corporations he'd once inhabited.



Mark has recently returned to his hometown of Melbourne and is soon to be married. 'Managing director' doesn't sufficiently sum up his role at Anecdote. You could also say he is its chief motivator, sagacious advisor, community cajoler and business magician.



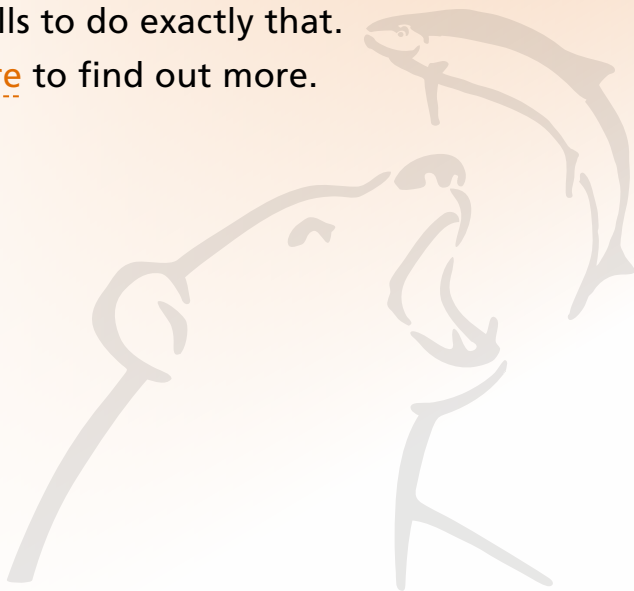


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