



Book Just Ask Leadership

Why Great Managers Always Ask the Right Questions

Gary B. Cohen
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Recommendation

The Greek philosopher Socrates, father of the famous Socratic method, never met a question he did not like. Executive coach and consultant Gary B. Cohen shows a similar enthusiasm for the power of questions, believing that you should measure great leaders by what they ask rather than how they command. And to that end, he provides a number of specific leadership questions designed to accomplish five broad goals: “improve vision, ensure accountability, build unity and cooperation, create better decisions and motivate [people] to action.” Although Cohen’s writing style is quite basic, his colorful anecdotes and case studies effectively tackle an often overlooked facet of leadership. If you are uncertain about which question to start with, *BooksInShort* has one for you: Why not check out this book?

Take-Aways

- No one likes receiving orders, but everyone likes an opportunity to offer input. However, the majority of leaders prefer to issue commands rather than to ask questions.
- This authoritarian form of leadership is passé. To lead modern workers, “just ask.”
- By asking questions, you acknowledge others’ expertise and show them respect.
- Questions enable you to “improve vision, ensure accountability, build unity and cooperation, create better decisions and motivate [people] to action.”
- When you face a decision that could affect your reputation or your firm’s, consider how you would feel if the “issue made the front page of the newspaper,” and act accordingly.
- If your employees are repeating mistakes, “provide choices with real consequences.”
- Increase participation in the meetings you organize by opening with a question. Then encourage everyone to respond.
- Be a good listener. Stay alert and pay attention to nuances in the conversation.
- Ensure that the questions you ask are authentic and are not meant to demean others.
- Eliminate “escape routes,” so employees stop asking why they should do a task and focus instead on how they should do it.

Summary

Ask, Don’t Tell

Do you like being told what to do? Or do you prefer that people ask for your thoughts and opinions instead? Ninety-five percent of leaders interviewed prefer the latter. Ironically, nearly 60% of the same individuals would rather issue orders than ask others for input. Isn’t it time for leaders to extend the same courtesy and respect to others that they want for themselves? Don’t lead by telling; lead by asking. Learn from Jack Chain’s example. When he was a Pentagon staff officer, he described his job thusly: “I answer questions.” He has since become a four-star general and says, “Now, I ask the questions.” The best advice for any leader is “just ask.”

“Improve Vision”

Asking questions can help you better understand yourself, your colleagues and your company. Use questions like the following to test your values and goals:

- **“Are our values as strong as our profits?”** – Marketing Architects, a Minneapolis-based firm, buys radio time on behalf of direct-response advertisers.

When the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks occurred, many other advertisers quickly pulled their ads. However, Marketing Architects continued to honor previous agreements to buy airtime. The firm even said it would compensate for any shortfalls its clients experienced due to low response rates. To the company, values trump profits. As things turned out, more people tuned in to radio after 9/11 than before. So Marketing Architects' altruism paid off for the company and its clients. How would your firm have handled this situation? Consider this guideline: Ask yourself, "What is the right thing to do?" Then do it.

- **"Is there a gap between our stated values and our operating values?"** – The business decisions you and your employees make should align with your firm's stated values. If your company doesn't have stated values, change that. Involve your staffers in establishing a firm ethos for your organization.
- **"How true are the stories we tell?"** – People's viewpoints take "the form of stories." With each retelling, such stories seem less subjective and more real to the individual. Encourage your employees to share the stories they've formed about your organization by asking questions such as, "What responsibilities or daily tasks are you tied to, and why?" or even, "Why did you react so strongly to the speech our CEO gave?" Discuss any misperceptions they may have.
- **"How would I feel if this issue made the front page of the newspaper?"** – Apply this question to any decision that could have an impact on your reputation or the company's. Basing your actions on the answer may help you avoid negative publicity.
- **"Am I leading into the future or am I managing the present?"** – CEOs and other senior leaders must take a long-range view and decide their organizations' actions accordingly. As you move up within the ranks, adopt an increasingly macro viewpoint. Whereas a manager should maintain a "day, week, month and quarter perspective," a president should have a "month, quarter, annual and three- to five-year perspective."

"Ensure Accountability"

Avoid micromanaging your people. That will only inhibit their creativity and development. Instead, focus on increasing accountability by asking questions such as these:

- **"Are my team leaders leaving a trail of frustrated people behind?"** – Some leaders have a good reputation with their superiors, but a bad one with their subordinates. For that reason, the U.S. Navy is now looking into the possibility of using 360-degree evaluations, which include feedback from co-workers at many levels, to gauge its leaders' performance. When evaluating your direct reports, always "ask the ones who know best – those who are below."
- **"How do I get co-workers to stop repeating the same mistakes?"** – The solution is simple: "Provide choices with real consequences." For example, if a colleague is constantly disorganized at meetings despite your repeated reminders to plan ahead, ask, "Do you want to be part of the team and start coming prepared to meetings, or would you rather move on?" He or she will quickly get the message.
- **"Am I an interrogator or an interviewer?"** – Interrogators aim to induce stress in someone else, whereas interviewers try to create a pressure- and blame-free environment. Curt Carlson, CEO of Carlson Companies, routinely interrogated his employees – for example, drilling them about various facts and statistics – to keep them on their toes. His approach unnerved his employees, but it also made them more responsible. Whether your organization fosters a culture of interrogation or of interview, be consistent. Otherwise, "your co-workers will occasionally feel misled."
- **"What am I afraid of losing?"** – Researchers say that the "fear of loss" is more influential than the "desire to gain." As a leader, examine your mind-set. If fear is ruling your decisions, it can keep you from making necessary changes. Force yourself to take risks. Keep your firm moving ahead.

"Build Unity and Cooperation"

To create a more unified workplace, seek your co-workers' opinions on issues. Treat their questions with courtesy. Nurture "a culture of trust" by asking yourself:

- **"Why am I the only one who talks at meetings?"** – The answer may be that you talk too much, so other people cannot get a word in edgewise. Follow Mike Harper's example. This former ConAgra executive started his meetings with a question and then let everyone respond. He encouraged the more reserved staffers to voice their opinions.
- **"What's the difference between good questions and gotcha questions?"** – Within boardrooms, gotcha questions rule. Often, a board member will try to outshine his or her peers by asking questions designed to stump them. People who pose such questions want to make themselves look good by making others look bad. Good questions, on the other hand, are "both challenging and inviting." Be constructive – use good questions.
- **"How can I be more present in conversations?"** – Stay fully alert during conversations, and pay attention to nuances. Don't try to multitask. If you've ever spoken with someone over the phone who was clearly occupied doing something else, you know how annoying that is. Avoid treating others in this fashion.
- **"What will it take to win over the people against me?"** – Don't assume that everyone who opposes you or your ideas is obtuse. Adopt the "GPSing" approach to home in on your "goal," "position" and "strategy" in the situation. Your goal is to earn dissenters' support. "Your position is that they are against you," but have you asked yourself why? Their reasons for disagreeing should inform your strategy, whether that's compromising, conceding a point or some other tactic. Become a bridge-builder. Work to get them on your side. If you can't close the gap, consider delivering an ultimatum.
- **"How can I learn bad news sooner?"** – Avoid responding to feedback in a thoughtless or irresponsible manner. If you engage in "public shaming" or betray someone's trust, you can't expect the individual who spoke candidly with you to do so ever again.

"Create Better Decisions"

Three factors, "context, clarity and objectivity," affect leaders' decisions. Ask these questions to make more informed, unbiased leadership choices:

- **"In a crisis, is it better to ask or command?"** – According to research from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), taking charge in a crisis, rather than asking questions, is not the best response. In a study of 1970s aviation disasters, NASA found that "the pilots learned that when a captain centralizes authority in himself, he in effect shuts out information that others are capable of contributing." The lesson: Seek information during a crisis, no matter how stressful the situation may be.
- **"Do you think, or do you know?"** – Ask your colleagues this question to understand if their information is based on sound "reasoning and research" or on emotions and speculation. The Greek philosopher Socrates always began his discussion of a topic by defining relevant terms. For example, in a conversation about great leadership, he would first develop a definition of "leadership." Similarly, you should ensure that you and your staffers are "working with the same definition" when you discuss an issue.
- **"How can I avoid getting 'wishy-washy' answers?"** – Words like "perhaps," "maybe" and "possibly" aren't worth much in business conversations. Insist on firm responses from your workers. If necessary, question them at length. Use the "Five Why" approach: Ask, "Why?" five times in your conversation until you glean the exact information you need. This may annoy your staffers, but it will train them to improve their responses.

- **“How can I seek clarification without being judgmental?”** – Judgmental questions elicit no useful information. For example, a person who asks, “You decided to send the survey to our customers even though you knew it was full of misspellings?” clearly intends to shame someone, not to gather information. Such a question will cause the other person to “disengage” from the conversation. Check whether your questions are authentic and judgment-free by ensuring that you have “genuine interest in the answer.”
- **“What should I do if I encounter conflicting data?”** – Choosing the data you are most comfortable with, and disregarding the rest, is the easiest path. However, “cognitive dissonance (the conflict of different cognitions)” enables you to expand your knowledge and understanding. Keep an open mind. Work to reconcile the data.

“Motivate to Action”

Strong leaders know how to motivate their people, create a good rapport with them and earn respect. To build an effective work environment, ask:

- **“How do I generate a sense of urgency?”** – Legend has it that Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés prodded his soldiers to fight the Aztecs by burning his own ships. By removing his men’s only escape option, he left them with one choice: Attack the Aztecs or die. This strategy worked. The Aztecs were so afraid of such a confident enemy that they immediately fled. Eliminate “escape routes” in your organization, so employees stop asking why they should do something and focus instead on how they should do it.
- **“What medium should I use – meeting, phone or e-mail?”** – Meetings enable you to judge others’ reactions. The phone lets you communicate a certain tone. E-mail messages are less disruptive, and they provide “a written register of the exchange.” Consider the pros and cons of each medium before choosing how to communicate your question.
- **“How can suspending my beliefs inspire my co-workers and resolve conflicts?”** – Apple marketing guru Jay Chiat always carried this message on a card: “What if they are right?” Even a genius like Chiat is not right every time. No one is. Put your own beliefs aside and listen to others’ opinions – you may very well learn something.
- **“Why did the Catholic Church create the devil’s advocate?”** – Until the early 1980s, the Catholic Church appointed a prosecutor known as a “devil’s advocate” to investigate candidates for sainthood. This person’s role was to “seriously challenge each candidate,” thereby maintaining impeccable standards for sainthood. CEOs often appoint their own devil’s advocates who can oppose practices and decisions without fear of retaliation. The result: improved decision making. Always “ensure that the tough questions get asked.”
- **“How do I gain respect by admitting ignorance and seeking to understand?”** – Don’t try to conceal or deny your knowledge gaps. Here again, Mike Harper sets a worthy example. The former ConAgra executive also worked at Pillsbury, where one of his jobs was to head the firm’s research efforts. His employees held Ph.D.s in nutrition and food production, and they clearly knew more about food research than Harper did. However, this did not bother him. He routinely asked questions that demonstrated his lack of knowledge while affirming the employees’ expertise. By doing so, he gained their trust.

“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.” (management consultant Peter Drucker)

All leaders should follow two heuristics: “When in doubt, ask” and “When not in doubt, ask.” Questions, not commands, build morale. Always strive to ask the right ones.

About the Author

Gary B. Cohen was co-founder and president of ACI Telecentrics and is managing partner at CO2 Partners, an executive coaching and consulting firm.
