

Application Guide

GREAT LEADERS ASK GREAT QUESTIONS, PART 1



BOTTOM LINE:

Great leaders use questions strategically to invite curiosity, reinforce what matters, and create better opportunities for organizational success.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- I. Great leaders **incite and invite curiosity** rather than cap it.
 - A. To do that, leaders should ask questions and encourage others to ask questions.
 1. Allow for space for bad questions, awkward questions, and even questions that disrupt the paradigm and current culture.
 2. A question that is off-limits becomes a constraint for the organization. When people can't ask their questions, it prevents ideas and possibilities from being explored.
 - B. People will still ask difficult questions. If they can't ask them in the room, they will ask them in the hallway, where the leader won't have an opportunity to be a part of the conversation.
- II. How a leader **responds to questions** is just as strategic as the questions they ask.
 - A. Questions that challenge a decision or assumption can trigger defensiveness, but a leader's response sends a message to everyone in the room about what is safe to ask or what is off-limits.
 1. A leader's response can either encourage people to speak up or teach them to stay quiet.
 2. Emotional responses unintentionally place a lid on the whole organization.
 - B. Leaders should create an environment where people feel free to **express their ideas rather than suppress them**.
 - C. When a question feels loaded or agenda-driven, resist the temptation to assign a motive to the person asking it.
 1. Assume the best, respond to the question itself, and avoid adding emotion or judgment.
 2. When you respond as if it's a sincere question, it's disarming to the one asking it.
 - D. Your response to one difficult question can determine whether someone else has the courage to ask the question the organization actually needs to hear.
- III. Questions are usually the pathway to the future.
 - A. A question is an **invitation** rather than an **instruction**.
 1. **Questions invite.** They honor a person's agency by creating space for them to contribute their knowledge, perspective, and ideas as they offer a response.
 2. **Instructions limit.** They tell someone what to do, how to do it, and potentially end the conversation.
 - B. Leaders should begin meetings with questions and reserve their conclusions or instructions until the end.
 1. Asking before telling gives the people around you an opportunity to contribute more ideas to the conversation.
- IV. **The questions you ask repeatedly reveal and reinforce what you value.**
 - A. Every leader has "frequently asked questions," and over time those questions become instructions because people will begin anticipating what the leader is going to ask.
 - B. Leaders should evaluate whether the questions they ask most align with what they say matters most.

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C. Questions are going to direct people's behavior and create habits.

1. Organizational values can become more actionable when they are connected to questions that reinforce specific behaviors.

V. One culture-shaping question is: **"What can I do to help?"**

- A. This question communicates the power of mutual submission—the idea that "I'm going to bring my resources to support you and you're going to bring your resources to support me regardless of where we are in the organization."
- B. This question gives people permission to ask for access, influence, or assistance they might otherwise hesitate to request.
- C. When modeled consistently, this question can become part of the culture as other leaders begin asking it as well.

VI. Two uncomfortable but necessary questions can bring clarity to difficult leadership decisions.

A. **Who's not keeping up?**

1. Sometimes someone hasn't done anything wrong but is no longer keeping pace with what the organization requires.
2. Asking this question can expose situations leaders have been accommodating rather than addressing. Leaders must be more committed to the success of the organization than to any one individual in the organization.
3. Related questions can bring additional clarity. Two that Jim Collins encourages asking are: "Would I hire this person again?" and "If this person resigned, would I be secretly relieved?"

B. **Who should be at the table?**

1. The organizational chart shouldn't automatically determine who participates in an important conversation. Leaders should consider who has the knowledge, perspective, and experience most relevant to the decision being discussed.
2. Inviting the right people, even several levels down in the organization, can introduce fresh perspectives and improve decision-making throughout the organization.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR TEAM DISCUSSION

1. Think about the meetings or conversations you lead. What signals might you be sending about which questions or ideas are safe to bring up?
2. What are some of your current "FAQS"? What do they communicate about what you value?
3. Where could you replace an instruction with a question to create room for someone else's perspective?
4. What is one question you could begin asking consistently that would reinforce a behavior you want to see more of on your team?

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