

FIVE STRATEGIC QUESTIONS THAT EVERY LEADER SHOULD MASTER

Curiosity may have killed the cat, but it makes a great leader. Unfortunately, too many leaders fall into the trap of “I Know.” I know what my customer is thinking. I know how my employees are feeling. I know the best strategic action to take. And it is this mindset that causes many successful leaders to veer off course, oftentimes, right off a cliff.

If you think about it, it isn't surprising why leaders are susceptible to the “I Know” mindset. Most leaders get those higher jobs because they have had a long track record of high performance. They succeeded when others might not have. They made the right strategic decisions and led their teams to success. And when an employee comes with a difficult situation, oftentimes the leader has already experienced something like it and knows what to do.

This kind of success actually leads people to actually believe “I Know,” even when they don't. And because they believe they know better, their curiosity starts to fade. New ideas or new ways of thinking fall by the wayside. What is left is a leader who is stuck in the past, missing opportunities because they couldn't see them, and running straight into problems because they weren't asking questions.

So how can you break free from the “I Know” mindset? The answer is simple. Ask more questions. In this month's article, we will review five powerful types of questions that leaders should always be asking. Instead of “I Know,” we believe leaders should say “I DON'T Know” and then follow it up with a question.

Type 1 - Discovering Questions

- **Purpose** - These types of questions are focused on exploring a key issue or concept that is being discussed. Discovering questions helps everyone better understand the problem that is being discussed. Without asking these types of questions, teams can be misaligned on the real problem, and ultimately work on solutions destined to fail.

- **Tips & Tricks** - Discovering questions should be asked early in meetings or discussions. At the same time, these kinds of questions are great to help pull a team back to the larger discussion if they have gone down a rabbit hole.

- **Examples of Discovering Questions -**

- ◇ Can you help me understand the ramifications of this problem? How do you see it impacting us?
- ◇ What kind of roadblocks are we going to face if we don't solve this issue?
- ◇ What have we done in the past to address this problem, and why did those actions fail?

Type 2 - Clarifying Questions

- **Purpose** - Often people will say something that needs to be clarified further. What did you mean by that? Would you explain this further? Can you tell me more about X? These kinds of questions ensure you are clear at what they are saying, and help you understand their whole perspective.

- **Tips & Tricks** - Asking Clarifying Questions is often the skill that most people have the easiest time with, as they do this naturally. But where people struggle with Clarifying is that they do it with the wrong mindset. You need to remember that asking Clarifying Questions is about building your understanding of their perspective, not about building your counterargument to their perspective.

- **Examples of Clarifying Questions -**

- ◇ What is the main source of data that is leading you to conclude this is the right decision?
- ◇ Can you give me an example to illustrate what you mean?
- ◇ When you said X, how is that different from Y?

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Type 3 - Refocusing Questions

- **Purpose** - Sometimes during a meeting, people lose track of what is truly important. Maybe they are getting hung up on some small details or some technical issue. Other times, they may be spending too much time focused on some big issue that they lose sight of what they can accomplish in the moment. Refocusing Questions are great at bringing the conversation back to the critical topic at hand.

- **Tips & Tricks** - We recommend starting every meeting by framing the discussion, 'For the next 15 minutes we need to discuss issue X and what we are going to do about it.' This initial frame allows you to refocus the conversation back to the critical topic.

- **Examples of Refocusing Questions** -

- ◇ Let's go back, what's the problem we are trying to solve?
- ◇ I understand Y is a big issue we should discuss. Does issue Y need to be fully resolved for us to resolve issue X?
- ◇ Can that small detail be discussed offline, and we refocus on the larger issue?

Type 4 - Stress Testing Questions

- **Purpose** - Stress Testing Questions are designed to help you test whether an idea is relevant and do-able. Some people call these questions being the Devil's Advocate, but I don't think that name does Stress Testing Questions justice. Being the Devil's Advocate can sometimes come across as poking holes in an idea and just trying to trash the idea. When done correctly, a leader asking Stress Testing Questions isn't trying to be a jerk, but instead they are seen as trying to ensure the idea is successful.

- **Tips & Tricks** - Stress Testing is a critical step in avoiding the biggest pitfall in team decision making: Groupthink. Groupthink is when a team quickly aligns around an idea, and any contrary information or differing ideas are silenced. Even when they think it's a bad idea, team members will go along with an idea, because the team is aligned. In essence, they don't want to rock the boat. By asking Stress Testing Questions, the leader gives people the cover needed to question the team's ideas and ultimately reach the best solution possible.

- **Examples of Probing Questions** -

- ◇ What do we lose by not going with X idea?
- ◇ What are the potential risks and downsides of the proposed solution?
- ◇ Will this idea have adverse impact on other teams within our company?

Type 5 - Confirming Questions

- **Purpose** - Often people think Confirming Questions are all about summarizing a point before moving the topic on, but that isn't its main purpose. Confirming Questions are great at ensuring you have accurately understood the other person's perspective or idea. By asking them to confirm you have understood their perspective, you are letting them know that they have been heard, and you are also giving them a chance to correct any misunderstandings.

- **Tips & Tricks** - Too often I have listened to someone, and when I confirmed my understanding of their perspective, they told me I got it wrong. But instead of being disappointed that I didn't understand them, they are often happy for the chance to clarify what they meant. Ultimately, people want to be understood, and asking Confirming Questions demonstrates to them that you want to understand them.

- **Examples of Refocusing Questions** -

- ◇ Just to confirm, what you are saying is that we should do X?
- ◇ To paraphrase, you are saying the problem is Y and Z?
- ◇ So, what's important to you is ... Have I got that right?



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Slow Down So You Can Ask More Impactful Questions

Asking thoughtful and provoking questions is hard. If you feel like you already know the answer, it is too easy to want to solve it quickly so you can go onto something else. But this can lead to trying to solve something before you think you know before you have all the information. If you truly want to understand the situation, you need to give other people our full attention and be curious. Unfortunately, curiosity and paying full attention to someone requires one thing that almost every leader hates to do... slow down.

Leaders have a lot to do, so they are naturally biased towards keeping a conversation flowing and solving problems quickly. How else will they get everything else on their list done? But as you now know, the more you think about what you are going to say, the less time you are actually listening to the other person. So, my last piece of advice is to truly listen to the other person, and when they are done speaking, wait five seconds. This little pause allows you to think about your reply or more questions you want to ask.

Now, this will be tough for most of you. Five seconds sounds like a miniscule amount of time, but five seconds of silence might feel like an awkward lifetime. You'll be tempted to fill the silence with the first thing that pops into your head, but don't. Slow it down so you can truly understand what the other person is saying and allow yourself the time to think of smart provocative questions.

When you can do that, you will become a leader that makes your people better, and not just a leader that solves problems for them.

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