7 Ways Leaders Can Ask Better

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Many of today's business leaders want to be collaborative. They want to harness the skills and independent thinking of the people on their teams to make intelligent business decisions. And yet, in my work with leaders around the world, I've noticed that when they attempt to collaborate with their teams, they often end up skipping the divergent part ("What does everyone think?") of collaboration and jump straight to the convergent part ("Here's what I think. Does everyone agree?").

This represents the language of too many brainstorming and decision-making meetings, where the boss states an opinion and others fall in line. They ask leading and self-affirming questions. They suppress dissent and push for consensus. In short, they are compelling instead of curious. This is not collaboration. This is all coercion disguised as collaboration.

Coercion, as I am using it here, means using my influence, power, rank, talking first, talking more, or talking louder to bring people around to my way of thinking.

Here's what we don't want as a decision-making model: The boss decides and seeks validation from the group. Those kinds of meetings exist only so that the boss can say later on, "Well, you all were there. You could have said something."

When I hear bosses say things like "get everyone on board" or "build consensus," that's coercion. That's trying to convince people that "I'm right, and you need to change your thinking."

We don't need anyone in the group to change their thinking. As long as the group supports whatever decision comes out of the meeting with their behavior, leaders are happy if individuals think differently from them. Otherwise, they're just in an echo chamber of their own ideas. There is power and resilience in a diversity of ideas.

Stephen R. Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, considered this concept of "curiosity first" so important that he titled his fifth habit "seek first to understand, *then* to be understood."

The 7 Sins of Questioning

Being curious about what someone else thinks is the foundation of asking good questions. There is such a thing as a bad question: one that is less curiosity-driven than others. Here are seven common mistakes leaders ask when asking questions and how they should phrase them instead.

1. Question stacking

> *Example: "So, how much testing has been done? I mean, do we really have all the bugs identified? Yeah, I just really think it's important to know that — are we good to go?"*

Question stacking is asking the same question repeatedly in different ways or drilling down a logic tree that you think defines the problem. Just ask one question once, then button it.

We observed a meeting where an executive was prone to question stacking. It went something like this: “We really need to understand why clients don’t buy this service, and what our team is doing to address this, whether it’s to do with our communications, or is it because they don’t have the skills which are needed, or do they think it’s not important and if we asked them what would they say, and what are our measures of success for this anyway, and who is leading on this?” By the second or third question everyone had turned off and tuned out, and he ended up getting really frustrated that people didn’t respond.

Put a question mark on it. Then go silent. This takes practice because you have to think of the question before you start talking and then resist the urge to step in after two seconds. Rest comfortably in the quiet.

Don’t try using the Socratic method as a “teaching moment.” It’s annoying and arrogant.

2. Leading questions

Example: “Have you thought about the needs of the client?”

A leading question comes from a place of thinking the person is wrong or that you have the answer. I hear this a lot from people who think they have the right answer but don’t want to just say so, so they try using the Socratic method as a “teaching moment.” It’s annoying and arrogant.

Instead, have a learning moment for yourself. Ask questions that assume the other person might be right, not you. An easy start is the neutral, “Tell me about that.” Temporarily set aside judgment, and then be curious about what they see and think that you don’t. Since it is temporary, you can immerse yourself in that belief, and when it is over, you do not need to agree with them or approve the action.

Another approach is to start the question with “how.” Ask, “How would that work?” Or “How does that align with our objectives?” This is the “inquisitive how.” The inquisitive how sounds like, “How does ____ affect ____?” Or “How do you see that?”

3. “Why” questions

Example: “Why would you want to do that?”

This type of question puts people on the defensive and reveals that you think “that” is a bad idea. In such cases, it’s best to reserve judgment and simply say, “Tell me more about that.” Another option is to ask, “What is behind your decision?” Or “How do you see the issue?”

4. Dirty questions

A dirty question is like a leading question but does not overtly carry the message that the other person is wrong — but it does carry subtle and often unconscious biases and anticipates a particular answer. The phrase “dirty question” comes from clean language, a way of speaking and asking questions in psychological counseling that eliminates the counselor’s biases from the question and allows the patient to develop his or her own response.

Clean language was devised by David Grove in the 1980s and has since been expanded. A good book to read on the subject is *Clean Language: Revealing Metaphors and Opening Minds* by Wendy Sullivan and Judy Rees, published in 2008.

Here's an example: Let's say a colleague has expressed frustration with another colleague and said that they are at a dead end when it comes to getting the other person to complete work that a project depends upon. You ask, "Do you have the courage to stand up to them?" That is a dirty question.

It's "dirty" because that question presumes your friend should confront them by speaking up, that the metaphor is "stand up to" instead of, say, "partner with," and finally, that the needed resource for your friend is courage. It also implies that it is your friend's responsibility to get this person to do their job.

A clean question would eliminate those biases and would sound like this: "What do you mean by dead end?" Or "What do you want to have happen?" The structure of the clean question is designed to remove your biases and preconceptions.

Clean questions are a technique specifically designed for therapy when there is a lot of time and dedicated listening resources. We rarely have the luxury of this at work but paying attention to the biases that might be present in your questions will make your everyday questions much more collaborative. For me, listening to my own questions reveals just how much I picture what the other person has told me (and what we should do about it) based on scanty knowledge.

Self-affirming questions seek to make the asker feel good rather than to reveal the truth of the situation.

5. Binary questions

Examples: "Are we good to launch?" "Will it work?"

Binary questions narrow the available responses to two: yes or no. They are convenient for the one asking but put the one answering in a bind. In a sense, it is getting the receiver to take responsibility for a successful launch by eliciting a "yes." We hear these all the time. Another is, "Is it safe?"

Instead, start your question with "what" or "how." This makes it impossible to ask a binary question. For example: "How safe is it?" Or "How ready are we to launch?" "What" versions of the question might sound like, "What might go wrong?" Or "What do we need before we're ready to launch?"

We have found that the simple rule of starting a question with "what" or "how" significantly improves the questions and the quality of the information coming from the team.

When we use "how" in this way, we call it the "probabilistic how." We are using "how" to invite a response that sees the future in terms of probabilities, not a deterministic yes/no.

6. Self-affirming questions

Example: "We're good to launch, right?"

Self-affirming questions are often binary questions with a special motivation: to coerce agreement and make us feel good about the decision we have already made.

Self-affirming questions seek to prove what we want the case to be. The purpose is to make the asker feel good rather than to reveal the truth of the situation.

- "Right?"
- "Does that make sense?"
- "You have what you need?"
- "All good?"
- "Is everything tasting great tonight?"
- "Did you have a wonderful stay?"

Instead, seek enlightenment by asking questions that make it easy to bring up challenging information. I call this "self-educating," not "self-affirming." Some examples would be:

- "What am I missing?"
- "What would you like to hear more about?"
- "What could go wrong?"
- "What could we do better?"

When Captain Sullenberger was piloting an airplane that had lost both engines and he was attempting to land in the Hudson River, he asked the co-pilot, "Got any ideas?" He did not ask, "So, we're good, right?"

7. Aggressive questioning

Example: Straight to "What should we do?"

This might be too aggressive for some people, because it provokes them to make assessments about the future before they are ready. When inviting someone to share their thoughts, start from a place where they feel secure, and move gradually toward areas of uncertainty and vulnerability. One way to do this is with a technique I call "pause, rewind, fast-forward."

Start with pause. This invites simple observation of the situation. "What do you see?" "How do you see it?" Description feels safe because the part of our brain used for description is not connected to emotions. It also feels quite "knowable."

Once you've gotten them talking about what they see, the next phase is rewind. Rewinding is about reviewing how we got here. "How did we get here?" or "What happened before this?" The past has more uncertainty, but it is still bounded.

Finally, fast-forward to the future with what will happen next or what everyone should do. This requires assessments about what is least knowable and is therefore most likely to be wrong — and so requires the most vulnerability. Jumping straight to "What should we do?" might get an "I don't know" response. Instead, try moving from less vulnerable to more vulnerable with pause, rewind, fast-forward.