

# SMART LEADERSHIP

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Four Simple

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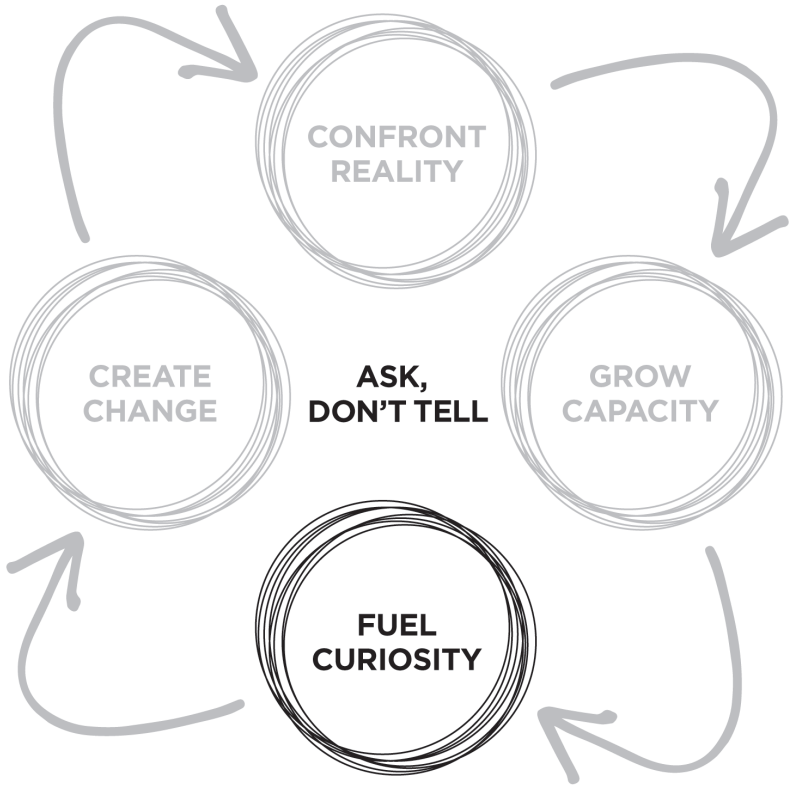
Choices to Scale

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Your Impact

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**MARK MILLER**



# ASK, DON'T TELL

*"The important thing is to not stop questioning."*

Albert Einstein

**J**im Collins is a global thought leader in the field of leadership. *Built to Last* and *Good to Great* are two of his books that have had profound impacts on millions of leaders. To know Jim personally and to have him speak at our annual event on two occasions has been a privilege. He has challenged and inspired me and all our leaders.

One of my favorite moments came when Jim began to talk about questions. He asked all of us to consider our question-to-statement ratio. He encouraged us to not only be aware of our current ratio—how often we ask a question versus making a statement—but he also suggested we double the number of questions. While I and the thousands assembled were still pondering the implications of a shift of that magnitude, he added, “And then double it again.”

In a side conversation, Jim began to tell me about his sleep patterns. I was interested but wasn't quite sure why he was sharing this information. He then revealed that he was also tracking his questions, and apparently grading them based on their value. Jim had

committed to getting more sleep, because when he did, he said he asked more good questions. Jim is no doubt a fan of questions.

How important are questions to you? How central are they to the way you lead? For me, the more questions I ask, the better I lead.

## WHY QUESTIONS MATTER

Questions to a leader are like a pickaxe to a frontier miner. They can serve as your primary tool to unearth the nuggets of truth and insight you seek. Following are some of the reasons you should make questions an essential tool as you attempt to Fuel Curiosity and scale your impact.

### Questions Make You Smarter

Whether we want to admit it or not, we don't know everything. When you ask a question, you have the opportunity to get smarter faster. If you ask someone about a project, an idea, a conference, a book, or a relationship, the answer they provide shortens the amount of time required for you to acquire the same information through personal experience. A software analogy may be helpful. When you ask a question and actually listen to the response, you are essentially adding a new line of code to your own programming.

### Questions Make *Others* Smarter

When we ask a question, the recipient of our query will have to think. Even if their answer is, "I don't know," this revelation itself is knowledge. What if your follow-up question helps them understand a way forward or a next step? "How could you find the answer?" Or, "Who could help you find the answer?" Or, "Why do you think it might be important for you to know the answer?" These questions and countless others will help the people around you grow.

## Questions Reveal Additional Information

Regardless of how much knowledge, information, and experience you have with a topic or subject, a few well-placed and thoughtful questions will reveal more information. I mentioned in an earlier chapter about the leadership development group I've been in for more than twenty years. We use a question-based study method. As a result, I continue to discover there is so much I do not know about this mysterious thing we call leadership. The answers have not been nearly as helpful as the questions for opening new paths of discovery.

## Questions Can Transport You to a Place You've Never Been

There are many questions that can take you to another time and place (e.g., How do you think people will solve this problem in a hundred years? How do you think people would have solved this a hundred years ago?). Others are even more bizarre and thought-provoking. This is fantastic. Questions of this nature can jolt your imagination and shake you free of the shackles of today. Einstein said, "Problems cannot be solved on the same level of thinking at which they were created." These transport questions can really set your mind free. Even more pedestrian versions surrounding budgets, timing, and people in modern times can create an entirely new frame of mind and put you in a scenario you have probably never considered. Find more examples of these on the following pages.

## Questions Spawn More Questions

A good question responded to thoughtfully almost always opens the door to another question. The ethnographic interviewing course I referenced earlier drilled this into my head. While listening to a response, we are actually listening at several levels: content, emotional charge, tone, word choice, and more. One of the most helpful things we should be listening for is an open door to ask another

question. The insight you are seeking is often not behind the first, second, or third door but many layers deep into the conversation. The key to each door is another question.

## Questions Demonstrate Your Openness and Humility

The prideful leader doesn't ask a lot of questions. When your team sees you willing to ask authentic questions, your stock will increase. Asking questions is not a sign of weakness—it is a sign of wisdom. People always watch the leader; when they see your willingness to be vulnerable and ask honest, thoughtful questions, they will do the same. This inquisitiveness will strengthen your leadership, your team, and your organization.

## Questions Can Spark Creativity

The mind is a self-optimizing memory system with its hardwired tendency to follow known patterns and routines. Questions are one of the easiest ways to redirect your thinking. The questions don't even need to be particularly clever or thought-provoking. Simple questions such as “What else could we do?” Or, “What if . . . ?” can be monumental. Once you've been able to escape the ruts within your own thinking, amazing things can happen. Often, alternatives will flood your imagination—that is the promise and the product of creative thinking.

## Questions Can Clarify a Problem

In the face of an issue or difficulty, have you ever been unclear as to the essence of the problem? Questions can help you pinpoint the root cause. They can help you move past the surface indicators and ensure you are addressing the underlying cause. If your problem is even slightly misdiagnosed, your solutions will miss the mark, and you will not see the outcomes you desire. You get no credit for doing the wrong things well.

## Questions Can Help Solve Your Most Challenging Problems

Once you have your problem defined, the fun begins. Now you and your team have the opportunity to solve it. There are many problem-solving models and tools in the world. All the ones I've used will work if you use them well. Questions transcend and permeate most problem-solving approaches. The most blatant use of questions in problem solving is the five-why approach included in the list of new quality management tools. When faced with a nonconformance (problem), ask, "Why?" Upon receiving the answer, ask why a second time, and then a third time—you can see where this is going. The premise is simple—once you get five levels deep, you are usually approaching the truth about the root cause of the problem.

## Questions Are a Hedge against Irrelevance

We live in a big world. Although some say it is getting smaller every day, I think it is getting bigger—more knowledge, more opportunity, more reach, more complexity, more choices, and so on. Questions can help us grow with the world, stay connected, and maintain relevance. When we ask thoughtful questions, it grows our heads, hearts, and our spirits of curiosity.

## PUTTING YOUR QUESTIONS TO WORK

As far as I know, there is no universally accepted list of the various types of questions. A quick Google search reveals dozens of such lists. Therefore, I've taken the liberty to create one more. This list is not as important as the idea it underscores—you can use questions in countless ways. A well-crafted and thoughtful question can be just what you need in many situations. Questions are a leader's Swiss Army knife; there's a blade for almost everything. Here's my shot at several different applications when a good question may be just what you need.

**Communications.** If you have been asked to do a presentation, there are some questions that can help you prepare and increase your odds of success.

- Who is in the audience?
- What is the theme of the event?
- Who will speak before me?
- Who will speak after me?
- What is the objective of my presentation?
- What does the audience already know about the topic?
- What do they know about me?
- Who will introduce me?
- What type of media/technology support will be available?
- How will the room be arranged?
- How would I explain the premise of my talk to a small child?
- What do I want the audience to know, feel, and do after the presentation?
- What props, visuals, or activities would reinforce my key point and raise audience engagement?
- What would need to happen for the person who invited me to feel like my presentation was a success?
- How could you convey this information without saying a word?
- How could this message be communicated visually?

**Strategy/Planning.** A good working definition of strategy is your chosen path to a predetermined goal. With this as our starting point, here are some questions that may help you build a credible plan.

- What do we want to be true in a decade that is not true today?
- What is our current competitive advantage? How can we sustain it? How can we enhance it?



- What are our strengths? How can we leverage them?
- What are the most pressing threats we will face as a team/organization over the next twelve months? Thirty-six months? Sixty months?
- What do we think our competitors are working on? Why would we care?
- What is our time horizon for this planning cycle?
- What are our three to five overarching goals for the next year? Five years?
- Who will serve as our champion for each goal?
- What are our key strategies for each goal/objective?
- What tactics will be required to bring the strategies to life?
- How will we generate buy-in for the plan?
- How will we communicate the plan across the team/organization?
- Who is accountable for plan communications?
- How well have we executed our current plan?
- What will we need to do to execute at a higher level on future plans?
- What does our plan scorecard look like?
- When will we review the plan for progress?
- How will we celebrate our success?

**Problem-Solving.** The right questions can help with both defining and solving a problem. The next time you or your team is about to begin tackling a problem, try some of these questions.

- What is the presenting problem? By the way, the presenting problem is rarely the real problem.
- What does the data reveal about this problem?
- What is the most expansive way to state the problem?

- What is the narrowest, most pinpointed way we can express the problem?
- What are potential root causes of this problem?
- Which of these potential causes is most likely the primary cause?
- What do the people closest to the problem say about it?
- What has already been tried, if anything, to solve this problem?
- How have others successfully solved this problem?
- If we hired an outside consulting firm to solve this, what do we think they would do?
- What metrics will we use to determine the effectiveness of our intervention(s)?
- Who is responsible for implementing our recommended action plan?

**Discovery.** This is a broad category of open-ended questions to aid in exploration. You can use them in numerous situations. Try some of these the next time you are planning your vacation, looking for a book to read, or shopping for Christmas gifts.

- What are the options?
- What are the possibilities?
- What are the boundaries?
- What are the nonnegotiables?
- What are my preferences?
- What are the preferences of others?
- What has worked in the past?
- What has failed in the past? Why?
- If time and money were not an issue, what would the right answer be?
- Why are we doing what we are doing?

- What happens if we do nothing?
- How would the situation change if we only had twelve hours to prepare?
- How would the situation change if we had twelve months to prepare?
- If we crowdsourced this issue, what would the general population suggest?
- Can we crowdsource this?
- What else, if anything, have we ever addressed that was similar? What worked in that situation and what did not? Why and why not?

**Stimulating (Creativity) Questions.** There is a long tradition of using questions in the midst of creative sessions to free our minds and stimulate ideas. I'm sure hundreds of thousands of questions have been used for this same purpose. Here are some for your reference.

- What would the opposite indicate?
- What happens if we make it smaller?
- What happens if we make it bigger?
- How would the most creative person solve this?
- How can we break the problem, and potentially the solution, down into its elemental parts?
- How would you approach this situation if you had an unlimited budget?
- How would you approach this situation if you had *no* budget?

Often these stimulating questions can border on the bizarre. When they do, you may think they will never add any value. Sometimes they do, and sometimes they don't. One fun example is from a session I facilitated when we were discussing how to successfully onboard a new person. The question was "How would you do this underwater?" You can't get much crazier than that.

The conversation that followed included: You don't go scuba diving without a buddy—let's be sure every new person has a buddy. You don't go scuba diving without a pre-dive checklist—let's prepare an onboarding checklist of things that need to happen before the first dive (day). Before we were finished, there were several good ideas sparked by our crazy question.

If you are up for an unorthodox brainstorming session, try some of these stimulating questions.

- How would we solve this on the moon?
- How would this problem have been addressed two hundred years ago?
- How might this problem be solved two hundred years from now?
- If we assume the role of an inanimate object connected to the problem, what solution would we recommend?
- How would a child solve this problem?

**Interview Questions.** To quote Peter Drucker again, “The most important decision a leader makes is who does what.” If you believe this, and even if you debate his conclusion regarding “most important,” the interview becomes a pivotal moment in your career as much as the candidate’s. Even with the advent of more project-based interviewing, group interviewing, and simulations in the interview process, at the end of the day, we still need to have hardworking questions for the candidate. Here are some favorites from famous people.<sup>1</sup> I’ll close this section with one of my own.

- *“What didn’t you get a chance to include on your résumé?”* Richard Branson, CEO, The Virgin Group <sup>1</sup>
- *“On a scale of one to ten, how weird are you?”* Tony Hsieh, founder and former CEO, Zappos <sup>1</sup>
- *“How would you describe yourself in one word?”* Dara Richardson-Heron, CEO of YWCA <sup>1</sup>

- “*What would someone who doesn’t like you say about you?*” retired general Stanley McChrystal <sup>1</sup>
- “*What did you do to prepare for this interview?*” Suzy Welch, author and speaker <sup>1</sup>
- “*Why would you want to work for . . . you?*” Jack Welch, former CEO, General Electric <sup>1</sup>
- “*What do you want to be when you grow up?*” Stewart Butterfield, founder, Flickr and Slack<sup>1</sup>
- “*What’s your dream job?*” Jeff Weiner, CEO, LinkedIn <sup>1</sup>
- “*Why are you here?*” Jack Dorsey, CEO, Twitter <sup>1</sup>
- “*So, what’s your story?*” Brian Chesky, CEO, Airbnb <sup>1</sup>

Now, it’s my turn. I wanted to include a small break to avoid putting my question alongside Jack Welch, Richard Branson, and the like. One of my favorite interview questions is:

*What questions do you have for me?*

I believe you can learn so much about someone based on *their* questions. If they don’t have any or they are clearly practicing their improv skills in their response, I probably don’t have any more questions for them.

## ASK BETTER QUESTIONS

Much has been written about asking outstanding questions. Read all you can find and consider making the quest for the right questions a lifelong pursuit. Here are a few tips to jump-start your practice.

### Open versus Closed Questions

A question that leads someone to answer with a single word is a closed-ended question, for example, “Did you go to college?” As a general rule, the better way to ask that question and learn more would be to ask an open-ended question—one that invites a more

complete response: “What did you do after high school?” In this second, open-ended example, you may learn about a gap-year program in which the interviewee served in an emerging country or hiked the Appalachian Trail. One more thought—if you have to ask if the person went to college, you obviously didn’t look at their résumé. Remember: they are sizing you up as well—be prepared.

### Single-Barrel versus Multibarrel Questions

I learned this term from Jeff Swatsky. He was the first “question expert” I ever met. At one point, Jeff was traveling the globe, teaching journalists how to ask better questions. He told us the right next question is singular—a *single* question. He showed us video after video of professional journalists asking two, three, or more questions in a single query. These he termed double-barrel or multibarrel questions (I assume after a double-barrel shotgun). The fundamental problem with this approach is twofold: people almost always answer *only* the last question, and in many cases, the last question was not the best question. Single-barrel questions are the best; you can always come back with another.

### Leading Questions

I guess these may have a place in editorial journalism, but I don’t see them serving leaders very well. In these situations, the person asking the question isn’t really trying to discover the other person’s point of view. He or she is trying to steer the recipient to a predetermined answer. This is more a technique of advocacy than true inquiry. The reason I include this here is to remind you: Don’t use leading questions if you are truly interested in learning something.

## SOME OF MY FAVORITE QUESTIONS

I am always looking for a better question. And as we established above, different types of questions serve different purposes.

However, having been a student of this topic for a long time, I still find myself going back to some tried and true questions that have served me well. Here is my *current* list of favorites:

### **For the Team**

- *What specifically are we trying to accomplish?*
- *What do we want to be true in a decade that is not true today?*
- *What one thing could we do in the next ninety days that would have the most impact?*

### **During a Curiosity Conversation (the topic of our next chapter)**

- *What has been your greatest insight in your career thus far?*
- *What advice do you have for me?*
- *Which books have had the biggest impact on your life and career?*
- *How can I serve you?*

### **For Me**

- *How can I add value for this person?*
- *How can I add the most value in this situation?*
- *What did I learn today?*

Questions are in ample supply. And they are free. They work for everyone—rich, poor, young, old, underresourced, affluent, educated, and not. Once you have made the Smart Choice to Fuel Curiosity, you are going to need questions in your toolbox if you want to escape the quicksand and scale your impact.

## BE SMART!

Make a list of your favorite questions; three or four will be enough for this activity. If you don't have any favorites, pick a few from the chapter and write them down (or put them in a note on your phone). See how many times you can use these go-to questions over the course of the next week. See what you learn.

Also, if you want bonus points, I would love for you to compile your top-ten questions list and send it to me at [Mark@SmartLeadershipBook.com](mailto:Mark@SmartLeadershipBook.com).