



LEADING WITH QUESTIONS

How Leaders Discover
POWERFUL ANSWERS
BY KNOWING HOW
AND WHAT
TO ASK

THIRD
EDITION

MICHAEL J. MARQUARDT
AND BOB TIEDE

WILEY

Praise for *Leading with Questions*

The third edition of *Leading with Questions* is a must-read book! The wisdom of 45 questioning leaders is intertwined with the latest theories on questioning—resulting in a book that will provide wonderful guidance on the way we lead and communicate in our increasingly complicated world.

—**Howard Schuman,**
Senior Consultant to World Bank

Questions are the most powerful yet underutilized leadership tool. Michael Marquardt and Bob Tiede are kings of questions. In this new edition of *Leading with Questions*, they equip us with unique and powerful questions that elevate our leadership and our relationships.

—**Dr. Lee J. Colan,**
Coauthor, *Healthy Leadership*

Leading with Questions is a fantastic read—relatable, digestible, and with concepts that fit seamlessly into your daily practice. In my role at Google, I regularly utilize the power of asking questions to check my team's assumptions, to support equity by giving a voice to all roles and levels, and to ensure understanding amongst partners in the face of cross-functional, complex projects.

—**Veronica Haight,**
Senior Training Program Manager, Google

Today's employees respond to leadership through questions because it addresses their desire to learn as they work. I've successfully used this book's questioning ideas and strategies with leaders in the executive suite through the frontline to enable them to more effectively drive results and engage their workforce.

—**Milynn Swofford,**
former HR executive with Bank of America, Johnson & Johnson, and Disney

A brilliantly written, indispensable guide to help us be successful leaders and human beings, through the use of questions. Leaders everywhere will benefit from the third edition of *Leading with Questions*. This book belongs in your library.

—**Lisa Toppin,**
Global Head of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Illumina

I love *Leading with Questions*. Life is uncertain and all of us experience problems. Devour this book and internalize the questions so that you can live a more fulfilled life.

—**Tom Ziglar, CEO,**
Zig Ziglar Corporation

Every leader needs a toolkit of great questions to inspire, develop talent, coach, delegate effectively, and even set strategy. My two favorite writers have joined forces in the all-time best book on the questions you need to ask to lead effectively.

—**Wanda Wallace,**
Managing Partner, Leadership Forum

This third edition of *Leading with Questions* masterfully incorporates the new complexities in the world, including virtual and hybrid work. This book provides ideas and resources to take your leadership to the next level.

—**Dr. Agata Dulnik,**
Forbes Coaching Council

Marquardt and Tiede have outdone themselves! I didn't think *Leading With Questions* could be improved upon . . . but *I was wrong!* The third edition provides even more examples, more questions, and more resources to propel my mastery of questions as a leadership tool. Kudos!

—**M. Kent Stroman, Founder,**
Conversational Fundraising

Questions are the path to healing relationships, to solving challenging organizational issues, to providing breakthroughs to nagging problems, and to opening the door to deeper learning and understanding. This book is a gentle guide to growing in the art of asking questions, so that you can be a wise learner, gracious conduit of healing, and a skillful problem solver. You will enjoy the wisdom of two authors who have made the science of asking questions a practical art in a world that needs to slow down and grow in curiosity and inquisitiveness.

—**Marc Rutter,**
U.S. National Director of Leadership Development and HR, Cru

Leading with Questions describes a very powerful and practical tool that has taken Constellation Power Generation to the top rank of energy companies worldwide.

—**Frank Andracchi,**
Senior Vice President, Constellation Energy Group

Leading with Questions is a must-read book to develop a must-have skill. Leaders are finally learning the way to a value-creating answer is by asking the right question, in the right way, and at the right time. This new edition provides the practical framework to develop this critical skill.

—**Terrence Donahue,**
Corporate Director, Leadership and Learning, Emerson Electric

This book has changed how I *think* when I interact with others. It has changed how I *deliver* messages. It has changed the *outcome* of so many conversations. If you want to upgrade your life, *Leading with Questions* is the answer.

—**Mark Stephens,**
International Director, FCA

The two authors exquisitely and clearly define the paradigm shift away from the traditional perspective on leadership. In a time when we expect successful leadership to give answers and solutions, *Leading with Questions* strikes you as a counterintuitive concept, leading to a stimulating and inspiring book on how the power of questions builds great leaders.

—**Dan Tavsancea,**
Director, Global Fund Capacity

When working with people to become better problem solvers, and more effective, curious, and inclusive leaders, I often recommend *Leading with Questions*. In this edition, the authors combine their skills and experience to make this book an even more insightful resource for leaders everywhere.

—**Shannon Banks,**
Managing Director and Founder, Be Leadership

Every good corporate strategy starts with a *great* question. *Leading with Questions* offers leaders the concepts and actionable tools to empower their organization and expand their business value through the art of asking the best question.

—**Simon Reese,**
Lecturer in Strategy Management, Jones Graduate School of Business, Rice
University

Marquardt and Tiede have remarkably brought together their collective wisdom in leading with questions and the input from executive leaders from diverse professional backgrounds. *Leading with Questions* helps you understand why and how to ask good questions, how to build engaged relationships and energizing communication between leaders and followers, and how to create an enabling environment for people to be better thinkers and, thereby, to better solve problems.

—**Bekele Shanko,**
President, GACX

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**MICHAEL J. MARQUARDT
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INTRODUCTION TO THE THIRD EDITION

Do you feel that people aren't providing the information you need? Do you wonder whether the people in your unit really understand your vision for where things need to go? Do you speculate about what your boss is really thinking?

Have you ever thought about getting all this information, and more, by asking questions?

Questions can elicit information, of course, but they can do so much more. Astute leaders use questions to encourage full participation and teamwork, to spur innovation and outside-the-box thinking, to empower others, to build relationships with customers, to solve problems, to develop leadership skills, and to change organizations and communities, as we will show in this book. Recent research and the experience of a growing number of organizations are now concluding that the most successful leaders lead with questions, and use questions more frequently. Successful and effective leaders create the conditions and environment to ask and be asked questions. When the Center for Creative Leadership studied nearly 200 successful executives, researchers discovered that the key to the executives' success was asking questions and creating opportunities for others to ask questions.¹

Consider these successful leaders:

- Chad Holliday, chairman of the board and CEO of DuPont:
"I find that when someone engages me in a question, it wakes me

up. I'm in different place. Throughout the day, I try to do the same thing. I ask questions: I rarely make statements until I have sized up the person's energy and focus, and whether they are open-minded; only then can I move. If I don't ask questions, I could be underrating the situation and problem, and miss the key issues."

- Michael Dell, founder of Dell Inc.: "Asking lots of questions opens new doors to new ideas, which ultimately contributes to your competitive edge That's why you must encourage the free flow of information at all levels."
- Pentti Sydänmaanlakka, director of human resources at Nokia Networks: "Leading with questions has been always part of my leadership because I believe that leadership is not telling, but inspiring and showing others new places where they haven't been earlier."
- Eric Schmidt, cofounder of Google: "We run this company on questions, not on answers."
- Robert Hoffman, executive director for organization development at Novartis: "Questions have changed me immensely. I have greater self-confidence and a more relaxed attitude. I don't feel that I always have to have the answers in conversations or in situations where I need to speak on the spur of the moment. I feel this has increased my communications skills, especially listening and persuading."

These leaders have discovered the amazing power of questions. Questions wake up people. They prompt new ideas. They show people new places, new ways of doing things. They help us admit that we don't know all the answers. Questions build great people, great organizations, and great communities.

Unfortunately, many leaders are unaware of the amazing power of questions, and how they can generate short-term results and

long-term learning and success. If you have never considered making questions a tool in your leadership kit, this book is for you.

Of course, many leaders do ask questions but, unfortunately, disempowering questions such as these:

- Why are you behind schedule?
- Who isn't keeping up?
- What's the problem with this project?
- Whose idea was that?

Too often, we ask questions that disempower rather than empower our subordinates. These questions cast blame; they are not genuine requests for information.

Other sorts of questions are often really just thinly veiled attempts at manipulation: *Don't you agree with me on that? Aren't you a team player?* If you tend to ask these sorts of questions, this book is for you.

So the point isn't that we just don't ask enough questions. Often, we don't ask the right questions. Or we don't ask questions in a way that will lead to honest and informative answers. Many of us don't know how to listen effectively to answers to questions—and haven't established a climate in which asking questions is encouraged.

And that's where this book comes in. The purpose of *Leading with Questions* is to help you become a stronger leader by learning how to ask the right questions effectively, how to listen effectively, and how to create a climate and culture in which asking questions becomes as natural as breathing.

Research on and with Leaders Who Lead with Questions

Both of us have spent our careers training managers all over the world, more recently developing leaders who ask questions. Mike was

a global leadership consultant for twenty years and then served as a professor for the Executive Leadership program at George Washington University for over thirty years. Bob has served in a variety of positions at Cru, and is currently managing the organization's senior leadership program. His biweekly blog, *Leading with Questions*, recently celebrated its tenth anniversary.

Over these many years, we have noted more and more frequently that leaders of the more successful companies tend to question others and themselves more often. We have made a concentrated effort to discover why questions are so important to leaders, why they result in such success, and what questions are the most powerful and used most frequently.

Among the questions that we asked of the 45 leaders highlighted in this book:

- When did you start using questions and why?
- What are some of the ways in which you use questions?
- What questions have been most effective?
- What has been the impact of leading through questions on (a) your organization and (b) you as a leader?
- How has the use of questions changed you as a leader?

Their responses to these questions and their stories are interwoven throughout the third edition. As you read this book, you will discover the wisdom of the question-asking leaders. Among those who shared their experiences as questioning leaders are senior executives from DuPont, Marriott, Popeye's Chicken, Alcoa, Box of Crayons, Novartis, and Cargill; public leaders from global and national agencies, coming from every corner of the world, including Brazil, Finland, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, Mauritius, South Korea, Canada, Norway, Switzerland, Singapore, and the United States. We also sought out the latest and best research on

questions from many of the leading authorities and gurus in the world. Brief biographies of these 45 leaders are contained in Resource A.

What's New in the Third Edition?

There are many exciting differences and additions to the third edition of *Leading with Questions*. First, we have a wonderful new co-author, Bob Tiede, who is a leading advocate, practitioner, and author in the field of questions. His blog, *Leading with Questions*, began just before the second edition was written. Over the past ten years, there have been over 1,000 posts guest-written by over 500 leaders and authors in the areas of questioning and leadership.

We both continue to identify and admire great questioning leaders. Fifteen additional leaders were interviewed for this edition, and have been added to the 30 who were highlighted in the second edition. The wisdom of these new leaders on how to increase the power and impact of questions is integrated throughout this edition.

The impact of the pandemic worldwide between 2020–2022 has made work life more virtual. This edition explores the latest and best research and practices for asking questions in this new environment—research on how to ask questions, what questions to ask, the skills of great questioners, and the use of questions in diverse settings and situations. Over the past ten years, there has also been new research and ideas on the best ways for developing questioning leaders, especially the advancements in action learning, which is described in Resource B.

Key Aspects of Leading with Questions

This book is composed of three parts. In Part I, we explain why questions can be so powerful for individuals and organizations.

Chapter 1 examines why leaders often prefer to provide answers rather than ask questions and how limiting—and disastrous—that can be. We show why questioning is actually the ultimate leadership tool. Chapter 2 details the benefits for leaders and organizations of creating a question-friendly organizational culture. A questioning culture strengthens individual and organizational learning; improves decision making, problem solving, and teamwork; promotes adaptability and acceptance of change; and helps empower people by strengthening self-awareness and self-confidence.

Part II offers practical guidance on asking questions effectively. Chapter 3 explains the stumbling blocks many of us face in asking questions and tells the stories of several leaders who have overcome them and benefited enormously. Chapter 4 shows how effective questions are empowering while ineffective questions disempower; offers a thorough analysis of different types of questions; and describes the roots of great questions. Chapter 5 explores the art of asking questions effectively, examining how one's attitude, mindset, pace, and timing all affect the impact of asking questions. As this chapter demonstrates, active listening and following up are integral parts of the art of asking questions. Chapter 6 turns from the personal level to the organizational, offering detailed advice on fostering an organizational culture that is conducive to questions.

Part III presents guidelines for leaders on using questions to achieve specific results for individuals, teams, and organizations. Chapter 7 discusses how leaders can use questions in managing their staff, strengthening relationships with direct reports, helping them grow, and encouraging action and innovative thinking. This chapter also reviews the use of questions in orienting new staff, setting goals and objectives, conducting performance appraisals, and leading staff meetings, among other topics. Chapter 8 describes how leaders can use questions to improve team functioning, energize team meetings, solve problems, help teams overcome obstacles, and resolve conflict.

Chapter 9 explores how and why questions can be effective in solving problems. Chapter 10 shows how questioning can strengthen entire organizations—sharpening strategy, vision, and values, and building the capacity for change—focusing on questions with both internal and external stakeholder groups. The Conclusion encourages and guides the reader to begin the journey to becoming a questioning leader.

Three resources are included in the book. Resource A provides brief biographies of the 45 leaders who shared their experiences and wisdom in asking questions. Resource B describes how and why action learning programs are the most effective way to build great questioning leaders. Resource C identifies a number of training programs, organizations, and websites related to leading with questions.

A New Level of Leadership

Leaders who lead with questions will create a more humane workplace as well as a more successful business. Leaders who use questions can truly empower people and change organizations. Most leaders are unaware of the potential of questions and needlessly engage in a fractious, pressure-filled existence. Our hope is that readers will change their style of leading, and be more successful and fulfilled as leaders.

There is no doubt that all of us, especially those of us who are leaders, need to ask more questions—questions that will assist in the development of individuals, teams, organizations, and ourselves.² Questions have become essential for our success. Poor leaders rarely ask questions of themselves or others. Good leaders, on the other hand, ask many questions. Great leaders ask great questions. And asking great questions can help you become a great leader!

I The Power of Questions

1 A Powerful But Underused Leadership Tool

We live in a fast-paced, demanding, results-oriented world. New technologies place vast quantities of information at our fingertips in nanoseconds. We want problems solved instantly, results yesterday, answers immediately. We are exhorted to forget “ready, aim, fire” and to shoot now and shoot again. Leaders are expected to be decisive, bold, charismatic, and visionary—to know all the answers before others have even thought of the questions.

Ironically, if we respond to these pressures—or believe the hype about visionary leaders that is so prominent in the business press—we risk sacrificing the very thing we need to lead effectively. When the people around us clamor for fast answers—sometimes *any* answer—we need to be able to resist the impulse to provide solutions and instead learn to ask questions. Most leaders are unaware of the amazing power of questions, how they can generate short-term results, and long-term learning and success. The problem is that we feel that we are supposed to have answers, not questions.

Over the past thirty-five years, we have interviewed leaders around the world about their use—or avoidance—of questions. This comment by Gidget Hopf, president and CEO of the Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired—Goodwill Industries, is typical: “I just automatically assumed that if someone was at my door with a problem, they expected me to solve it.”

Hopf thought it was her job to provide answers. Then she realized that there was another, more effective, way: “Through coaching I realized how disempowering this is, and how much more effective I could be by posing the question back to the individual with the problem What I came to realize is that solving others’ problems is exhausting. It is much more effective to provide the opportunity for them to solve their own problems.”

Unfortunately, from an early age, we are discouraged from asking questions, especially challenging ones, be it at home, school, or at church, as they are considered rude, inconsiderate, or intrusive. Thus we become fearful of asking any questions. As we ask fewer questions, we become ever less comfortable and competent in asking questions.

And then when we become leaders, we feel that it is important for us to have answers rather than questions or that asking questions—or being unable to answer questions addressed to us—may show that we are somehow lacking as leaders. But this attitude leads to inertia. Consider what Jeff Carew, a vice president at Collectcorp, told us: “The easy way to lead, particularly if you are competent at your job, is to tell people how to do things in the way you have been successful.” Usually, as Jeff has observed, people become successful either through a very capable boss who taught them the ropes or through their experiential learning that resulted in a successful track record and steady career advancement.

Successful executives think they know the answers. “The problem with this,” Jeff noted, “is that if you do not create and maintain a working environment where you are always asking questions of your

employees and forcing them to think, then you will probably never be any better tomorrow than you are today. Yesterday's solutions will not solve tomorrow's problems. I learned that you need to get to a different level of thinking if you are going to tackle tomorrow's problems—and who else is better to teach you how your environment is changing than the managers on the floor or in the trenches?"

Like Jeff Carew, a growing number of leaders recognize that their organization's success, if not survival, depends upon creating a learning organization, an organization that is able to quickly adapt to the changing environment, where every engagement becomes a learning opportunity, where learning and business objectives are necessarily interlinked. The ability to ask questions goes hand in hand with the ability to learn. A learning organization is only possible if it has a culture that encourages questions.

Gary Cohen, author of *Just Ask Leadership*, rightly observed that it is not possible for leaders in the twenty-first century to be a know-it-all, nor is it in their or the organization's best interest to try.¹ It is more important that leaders ask questions that move others to action and answers. We should recognize that the employees who work for you today probably know more than you do about their job. And, as leaders move up the ranks of an organization, they will undoubtedly end up leading people who perform tasks that the leader will not understand. Mike Stice, CEO of Access Midstream Partners, said to me, "I need to continually ask questions to become part of the organization. Questions enable me to increase alignment, engagement, and accountability. And it is not simply asking more questions. It is asking more and *better* questions."

Do you ever feel defensive when people ask you questions? Do you ever hesitate to ask a question, fearing it may reveal ignorance or doubt? If so, you are closing off the free flow of information and ideas your organization needs, and potentially undermining relationships with those around you. In fact, avoiding questions can cause serious harm, even disaster.

What Happens When Leaders Do Not Ask Questions

History is replete with tales of dire consequences experienced by leaders who did not ask questions. Disasters at companies such as Lehman Brothers, Kodak, Barclays, Blockbuster, Enron, Borders, and Arthur Andersen can be attributed to the lack of inquiring leaders. Historians who carefully examined the events and details behind the disasters of the *Titanic*, the *Challenger*, and the Bay of Pigs have determined a common thread: the inability or unwillingness of participants and leaders to raise questions about their concerns. Some group members were fearful that they were the only one who had a particular concern (when, in fact, it was later discovered that many people in the group had similar concerns). Others felt that their question had already been answered in the minds of other group members, and if they asked the question, it would be considered a dumb one, and they would be put down as being stupid or not going along with the group. Because people did not ask questions, people lost lives when the *Titanic* sank, when the *Challenger* crashed, and when President Kennedy authorized a covert attack on the Bay of Pigs in Cuba.

Sinking of the *Titanic*

Why did the *Titanic* sink? When the luxury ship went down on April 14, 1912, more than fourteen hundred passengers perished. Afterward, many questions were raised on both sides of the Atlantic. How could the allegedly unsinkable ship go down on its maiden voyage across the North Atlantic? What had gone wrong? Why couldn't the planner and builders have foreseen such a tragedy? Upon investigation, it was discovered that several of the planners and builders of the ship had indeed been concerned, although none of them had ever raised their concerns in the company of their colleagues. Why not? Because of their fear of appearing foolish by

asking dumb questions. If no other “expert” seemed unsure about the structure and safety of the ship, then everything must be okay. Once the voyage was under way, many reports came in from nearby ships describing icebergs around them. “*Titanic* received many incoming messages warning of ice,” Robert E. Mittelstaedt writes in *Will Your Next Mistake Be Fatal?*, “but there is no mention of her inquiring of others for updates or more information. What if someone was curious enough to ask for more information from the ships in the area?”²

The Explosion of the *Challenger* Spacecraft

The Space Shuttle *Challenger* was launched on January 28, 1986, and exploded seventy-three seconds after liftoff. Much of the research into what went wrong with the *Challenger* launch focuses on the lack of communication among NASA, Morton Thiokol, Inc. (MTI), and the Marshall Space Center. MTI was the contractor responsible for the component that failed during the launch and depended on Marshall for the contract, and Marshall depended on NASA for funding and support. Almost two years before the fatal launch, MTI became aware that there could be a problem with the O-ring, a sealing component that prevents hot gases from escaping the solid rocket booster and burning a hole in the fuel tank (the physical cause of the *Challenger* disaster). The engineers at MTI documented this problem and insisted that further testing needed to be done to determine the reliability of the O-ring. Upon further testing, they confirmed that the O-ring was not reliable, particularly when temperatures dropped below fifty-three degrees. Why then was the *Challenger* given the go to launch on January 28, 1986, when the temperature at launch time was thirty-six degrees, well below the safety margin? The people around the table were afraid to express their doubts or even to ask the questions that they had determined, before entering the room that morning, that they would ask.