



# LEADING WITH QUESTIONS

How Leaders Find the  
**RIGHT SOLUTIONS**  
BY KNOWING WHAT TO ASK

REVISED  
and  
UPDATED

MICHAEL MARQUARDT

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## More Praise for *Leading with Questions*

“Great leaders ask great questions. *Leading with Questions* has enabled our leaders at Sony Music to learn how to ask better and better questions. We are indeed a greater organization with greater leaders because of the powerful ideas in this book.”

—Kathy Chalmers, executive vice president, Sony Music

“Marquardt presents a questioning technique that works and will enable leaders to grow from being good to being great.”

—Lisa M. Toppin, financial services professional, New York Life

“How many books have forever changed your life? *Leading with Questions* forever changed my life and my leadership by shifting my focus from the burden of trying to have all the answers to the simplicity of only needing some of the right questions!”

—Bob Tiede, director, global operations leadership development, Cru, and  
blogger, [leadingwithquestions.com](http://leadingwithquestions.com)

“In *Leading with Questions*, Michael Marquardt maps the future of leadership. ‘The leader of the past was a person who told,’ Peter Drucker once said. ‘The leader of the future will be a person who asks.’ Read this book if you want to see the future.”

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“I have learned that leadership is not about knowing all the answers. It’s about knowing what great questions to ask, and carefully listening to those answers. This book is a timely piece of management wisdom that shows leaders how to ask great questions—questions that inspire, motivate, and empower the organization.”

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“This book skillfully bridges scholarly theory and down-to-earth common-sense tactics to provide a crystal clear guide to a very powerful leadership technique that changes people and organizations.”

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"*Leading with Questions* describes a very powerful and practical tool that has taken Constellation Power Generation into the top ranks of energy companies worldwide."

—Frank Andracchi, vice president, Constellation Energy Group

"Successful questioning is one of the most powerful skills, not just for leaders but for all people, and Mike has spent his career both studying the power of questions and asking questions effectively. This book captures the wisdom of his experiences."

—Keith M. Halperin, senior vice president, Personnel  
Decisions International

"I have experienced the tools and techniques of *Leading with Questions* firsthand and highly recommend this book to new as well as experienced leaders. It has dramatically changed our leaders as they learn how to embrace Marquardt's questioning technique."

—Liz Cicco, training and development specialist, Bowne & Co., Inc.

"From the days of Socrates, our ability to ask the right questions has been revered as one of the greatest skills a person should possess when leading others. Marquardt's latest book is an invaluable 'how-to' resource for those intent upon finding solutions through reflective questioning."

—Eric Charoux, executive director, Charles Telfair Institute, Mauritius

"*Leading with Questions* is brilliant and thought-provoking. It is a huge wake-up call to all leaders that smarter questions are the best recipe for lasting success."

—Alastair Rylatt, author, *Winning the Knowledge Game: Smarter Learning for Business Excellence* and *Navigating the Frenzied World of Work*

"This book is a terrific guide and magnificent resource for those who wish to explore the power and benefits of leading with questions!"

—Dan Navarro, vice president and general manager, Pragmatics, Inc.

"*Leading with Questions* provides wonderful illumination on a subject often hidden in the shadows. In this book the genius of the author is his ability to capture the essence of what successful leaders do with questioning, and how

they can use questions to change their lives and those around them for the better.”

—Kenneth L. Murrell, professor of management and MIS, The University of West Florida, and author, *Empowering Employees*

“The ability to frame and ask the right question is a desired skill for everyone in life. *Leading with Questions* is a must-read book for those engaged in developing people to their maximum potential.”

—Mohammed Effendy Rajab, director, Adult Resources, World Organization of the Scout Movement, World Scout Bureau, Geneva

“Marquardt has powerfully expressed how to reach the heart of effective leadership. This is a book not just to enhance existing leadership power but to develop everyone’s latent leadership qualities.”

—Francesco Sofo, University of Canberra, Australia, and author, *Six Myths of Critical Thinking*

“Marquardt has discovered the way to effectively lead the twenty-first century organization through questions and reflective learning. This book captures the essence of the questioning process and sets a practical basis for the long-sought-after learning organization!”

—Harry Lenderman, president, The Elk Forge Group; advisor, Sodexho University; and author, *Breaking the Educational Glass Ceiling*

“By focusing on the right questions, Mike Marquardt has peeled back the onion to reveal the true power of questions. This book shows leaders how to give their organizations the cutting edge that makes the difference between a good company and a great company.”

—Bea Carson, president, Carson Consulting

“The ideas in *Leading with Questions* will provide leaders with new perspective on leading in the challenging twenty-first century.”

—Lim Peng Soon, president, Learning & Performance Systems

“This is a must-read book! *Leading with Questions* will change the way you manage in your organization. This book is Marquardt’s latest contribution to improving the way we work and communicate in our increasingly complicated world.”

—Howard Schuman, managing director, Jodoh Investments LLC

“This book is the ideal guide for the corporate executive who would like to create a winning organization by asking the great questions.”

—James Y. Lim, human resource manager, Arrow Asia Pac

“Leaders worldwide will be especially well served to master Marquardt’s art of leading with questions!”

—Banu Golesorkhi, director, Research and Development,  
Pharos International

# Leading with Questions

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SOLUTIONS BY KNOWING WHAT  
TO ASK

Revised and Updated

Michael J. Marquardt

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# Contents

Introduction	1
<b>Part I</b> The Power of Questions	
1 An Underused Management Tool	11
2 Benefits of a Questioning Culture	31
<b>Part II</b> Asking Questions Effectively	
3 Why We Have Trouble with Questions	63
4 Asking the Right Questions	83
5 The Art of Asking Questions	103
6 Creating a Questioning Culture	129
<b>Part III</b> A Guide for Leaders on When and How to Ask Powerful Questions	
7 Using Questions in Managing People	151
8 Using Questions to Build Teams	177
9 Using Questions to Solve Problems	199
10 Using Questions to Shape Strategy and Enable Change	213

## CONTENTS

Conclusion: Becoming a Questioning Leader	239
Resource A: Biographies of Leaders Interviewed	247
Resource B: Action Learning: A Powerful Training Program for Developing Questioning Leaders	255
Resource C: Resources for Training and Information on Questioning Leadership	271
Notes	275
Acknowledgments	283
About the Author	287
Index	291

*To my mother, who taught me to love questions, and to my nine  
grandchildren, who love to ask questions of their grandpa*



# Leading WITH Questions

Revised and Updated



# Introduction

Do you feel that people aren't providing the information you need? Do you wonder whether the people in your organization 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 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, and more. Recent research—and the experience of a growing number of organizations—now points to the conclusion that the most successful leaders lead with questions, and they 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 191 successful executives, its

researchers discovered that the key to the executives' success was creating opportunities to ask, and then asking questions.<sup>1</sup>

Consider these comments from among the successful leaders interviewed for this book:

- 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 a 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."

- Pentti Sydänmaanlakka, former 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."

- Isabel Rimanoczy, partner, Leadership in International Management: "I was working with pragmatic engineers who initially were upset that they were not able to get immediate answers and solutions to their questions. By focusing on questions rather than on answers, we inverted the process they were accustomed to. We put the focus on them, trusting their knowledge and wisdom. And, even when they did not think they had answers, they dived into themselves for the answers, and—not surprisingly—they always found the answers. . . . They had increased their self-awareness and realized that there was wisdom inside them that could be unearthed with questions."

- 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 at 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 people up. 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. They help us become more confident communicators. 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 constantly—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 no more than 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 leaders 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 the 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 in which asking questions becomes as natural as breathing.

## RESEARCH ON LEADERS WHO LEAD WITH QUESTIONS

Over the past twenty-five years, I have been involved in research and developing leaders around the world, both as a professor and as a consultant and adviser to corporate executives. I have noted more and more frequently that leaders of the more successful companies tended to question others and themselves more often. I have sought 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.

Who are some of the leaders who ask questions? And when and why did these leaders first begin using questions in their leadership work? What questions did they find to have been most powerful and successful? Why do these leaders ask

questions, and what has been the impact of those questions on them and their organization? Over the past several years, I have asked individuals and audiences from around the world to identify leaders they believe use questions effectively. I then contacted professional colleagues who worked with leaders worldwide to identify leaders who both asked lots of questions in their work and were seen as successful leaders by their colleagues and subordinates. Occasionally the leaders I interviewed would refer me to another leader whom they saw as someone who also led with questions. I made an effort to get leaders from large and small companies, from public and private organizations, and from all parts of the world.

Among the many leaders who were identified, I interviewed a total of thirty from all over the world. I prepared the following list of questions to use in my interviews:

- 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 your organization?
- How has the use of questions changed you as a leader?

Their responses to these questions and their stories are interwoven throughout this book.

Throughout the pages of this book, you will find the experiences of leaders who lead with questions—and the questions they ask. Among those who shared their experiences as questioning leaders are CEOs and top leaders from DuPont,

Alcoa, Novartis, and Cargill; public leaders from global and national agencies, as well as the political arena; and academic leaders at the secondary and college levels. They come from Brazil, Finland, Malaysia, Mauritius, Singapore, Korea, Australia, and Switzerland as well as North America. Brief biographies of these leaders are contained in Resource A.

Based on my quarter-century of experiences and interviews with scores of leaders who do indeed lead with questions, *Leading with Questions* provides a comprehensive foundation on ways to employ questions effectively when leading others. The book offers a variety of principles and strategies for asking questions as well as numerous stories of how leaders from every type of organization have used questions to attain organizational success and personal fulfillment.

## **KEY ASPECTS OF LEADING WITH QUESTIONS**

This book is composed of three parts. In Part I, I 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. I 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; it 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 whereas ineffective questions disempower. It offers a thorough analysis of different types of questions, and it 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 to 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 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 thirty leaders who shared their experiences in asking questions. Resource B describes how action learning develops questioning skills with leaders. Finally, Resource C identifies organizations, training programs, and websites for developing questioning leaders.

## **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 endure a fractious, pressure-filled existence. My hope is that readers will change their style of leading and be more easily 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. 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 the great questions. And great questions can help you become a great leader!

# **PART I**

## The Power of Questions



# An Underused Management 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 even before others have thought of the questions.

Ironically, if we respond to these pressures—or believe the hype about visionary leaders 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, we feel that we are supposed to have answers, not questions.

I 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 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 church, as this is 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. We feel 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 me: “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 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 its very survival, depends on 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 possible only 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.<sup>1</sup> It is more important that leaders ask questions that move others to action and answers. We should recognize that

the employees that 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—and 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. Recent disasters at Lehman Brothers, Barclays, WorldCom, Enron, 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 question, 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, 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 fifteen 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, though 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 OK. 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?”<sup>2</sup>

### **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 between NASA, Morton Thiokol, Inc. (MTI), and the Marshall Space Center. MTI, the contractor responsible for the component that failed during the launch, depended on Marshall for the contract, and Marshall in turn 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. On further testing, they confirmed that the O-ring *was not* reliable, particularly when the temperature 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 questions that they had determined, before entering the room that morning, that they would ask.