

Leadership Tips: How to Ask the Right Questions to Get Meaningful Answers



Managers dictate answers; leaders seek them. This is a common point made when describing traits of effective leaders. Leaders, no matter how qualified or seasoned in a particular role, cannot be effective alone. Leaders do not have all the answers; those who operate as if they do have all the answers, often in a command-and-control leadership style, encourage negative outcomes, including poor decision-making and a workplace culture that discourages independent, accountable thinkers.

Engaging employees in an inclusive environment that promotes open dialogue often results in greater creativity, higher productivity, and increased morale. Unfortunately, the effort and time required to establish and sustain such a workplace environment is considerable. As a result, it does not occur as frequently as it should.

One leadership practice that can help you develop an engaged workforce is fairly simple—ask the right questions! Below are four common mistakes made when asking questions, along with alternative suggestions for demonstrating question-based leadership. These strategies can help you get the most meaningful responses when seeking relevant input and genuine buy-in from others.

1. Asking Leading Questions

Leading questions imply a desired response. Effective leaders should be self-confident enough to take risks, make decisions, and assume responsibility for their actions. However, this self-confidence should not translate to, “I already know what I want to do, so I’m just asking your opinion for validation.”

Leading questions provide the preferred answer within the question. They encourage people to simply decipher the desired response and provide it accordingly. Non-leading questions are direct and objective. They do not suggest a correct or desired answer. As a result, leaders are likely to get a variety of responses.

Examples of leading questions:	Ask this instead:
“Do we really need to wait any longer to move on to the next step in this process?”	“Given our progress up to this point, do you think we should move on to the next step?”
“Wouldn’t you agree that John Smith is the best person to lead this project?”	“Who do you feel has the appropriate skills, knowledge, and experience to lead this project?”

2. Offering Options in the Question that Dismiss Other Possibilities

This is often referred to as an “either/or” question and works great when trying to get a 3-year-old to pick an outfit to wear for the day. This approach is less effective with independent, free-thinking adults in the workplace.

Instead of sharing options, simply state the problem. Ask a non-leading follow-up question, then be quiet and allow others time to think before soliciting unique ideas.

Example of an either/or question:	Ask this instead:
“Should we start this report from scratch, or should we just submit it and hope no one notices?”	“This report doesn’t accurately reflect our work on this project. What do you think we should do?”

3. Not Asking Follow-up Questions for Clarification

Lack of understanding should not be perceived as a sign of weakness. If anything, it is an opportunity to learn and grow, and it demonstrates a genuine interest in what others have to say.

In your own words, restate to the other person what you hear in order to clarify. If you still don’t understand what is being said, be diligent about asking follow-up questions to eliminate any miscommunication. Follow-up questions indicate that others’ time and input are valued.

Situation: One of your team members suggests a new method to reach out to currently underserved clients in the community.	
Examples of good follow-up questions:	<p>What would successful implementation of this new method look like to you?</p> <p>What could be the biggest challenge we might face in implementing this successfully?</p>

4. Not Actively Listening to the Response to the Question

It is very easy to start thinking about a response to someone before the person has finished speaking. It takes practice to actively listen and process what the person says, and *then* formulate a response.

It does no good to ask the correct questions if you do not listen and hear the actual response. Attending to the words and meaning of the respondent can make the

difference between an open communication culture and an organizational culture in which no one feels it is worth the effort to voice their opinions or concerns.

A leader's ability to communicate authentic interest in seeking answers is critical to asking the right questions. Here are some parting suggestions on how to ask better questions and hear more meaningful responses:

- Focus on being a facilitator, not a prophet. Ask questions to which you don't know the answers, and genuinely seek to understand.
- Don't discount your own beliefs and assumptions, but don't rely solely on them, either.
- Respect the beliefs and assumptions of others, especially if they differ significantly from yours.
- Help others feel ownership in the decision-making process by encouraging participation.
- Be willing to be accountable for the outcomes, especially if you are the ultimate decisionmaker.

Ways to listen actively:

- Lean forward and make eye contact with the person speaking, intentionally listening to what is said without interpreting the meaning.
- Be attentive but relaxed. Mentally screen out distractions, such as background activity and noise.
- Maintain an open mind without judgement or criticism of the person or the message. Don't jump to conclusions.
- Try to visualize what the person is saying to create a mental model of the information being communicated.
- Take ample time to think and process what the person said before responding. Ask follow-up questions for clarification before you respond, if necessary.
- Give regular feedback by simply nodding or making appropriate facial expressions to let the person know you understand his or her emotions behind the information being communicated.

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