Don’t Assume, Ask

7 leadership questions for more impact

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7 leadership questions for more impact

A practical, reflective do-book on leadership

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To all the leaders - at every level of every organization - who show up every day with the intention to grow their teams and their business.

Leadership rarely looks as simple as it sounds.

It is complicated, multifaceted, and often carried out under pressure, with incomplete information and competing expectations. Yet behind it all is the same quiet ambition: to make a difference. To create impact. To deliver results that matter for people, for customers, and for the organization as a whole.

This book is for those leaders.

For the ones who try, who adjust, who learn along the way.

For the ones who believe that progress is possible,
even when the path is not always clear.

The seven questions in this book may appear simple. But simplicity is often where the essentials live. These questions are meant to help you pause, reflect, and gain clarity on how to move forward, for yourself, for your team, and for the results you want to achieve together.

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At the heart of this book lies a simple conviction: the best way to know something is to ask.

Questions open doors. They connect perspectives. They allow different ways of thinking and being to meet, not as obstacles but as sources of strength.

So this book is dedicated to leaders who are willing to ask.

Leaders who embrace diversity in people, ideas, and viewpoints. Leaders who understand that better questions can bring better answers, and ultimately better results.

May these seven questions help you lead with clarity, curiosity, and courage.

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PRELUDE



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Before we go anywhere near the seven questions, we need to talk about hygiene.
Not the kind with soap. The kind that keeps leadership from going sour.

Most leadership failures do not start with bad intent. They start with a tired brain, a rushed meeting, a story in your head that feels like the truth, and a reflex that turns that story into action.

Organizations are full of stories:
“He is difficult.”
“She doesn’t care.”
“They will never change.”
“This won’t work here.”
“We tried that before.”

Some of these stories might even be true.
But the moment you treat a story as a fact, you stop learning.

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That is why this book begins with three hygiene factors that underlie everything:

- Self-reflection – the ability to notice your own story before it becomes someone else's problem; knowing yourself with your strengths and pitfalls, your preferences and convictions, and understanding where they might come from.
- Curiosity – the habit of replacing certainty with questions, based on an authentic interest in others: in what they think and how they feel, in what their strengths are, and what their pitfalls and their preferences are.
- Courage – the willingness to ask what is awkward, to hear what is uncomfortable, to call out the tension, to review your initial thoughts and beliefs, and to do what is right; the courage to take a stand and to dare to jump.

Think of these three hygiene factors as the soil.
The seven questions we will discuss are the petals of our flower.
You need the soil for the flower to grow.

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SELF-REFLECTION

A few months ago, my daughter was late. I was waiting for her to come home after school. It is about half an hour by bike, but she was already an hour late. No message. No call. And she wasn't picking up her phone.

My reflex? I was worried. All kinds of scenarios went through my head. And when she finally showed up, I was relieved. But also irritated. "Why didn't you pick up your phone? Why didn't you let us know you would be late?" almost came out of my mouth.

But I paused, I looked at her, and instead I asked, "Everything okay, my love?"

She sighed. "Yeah... Sorry I am late, Dad, but a friend of mine was having a rough day. We stopped on the way home and sat down on a bench for a while. I stayed with her to listen to her story until she felt a bit better."

My story ("careless teenager") was replaced by the truth: "compassionate friend." And I hugged her, proud of my girl.

That moment reminded me of something I keep learning the hard way: real leadership often lives in those two seconds when you stop assuming and start asking.

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Reactive self-reflection

In organizations, these micro-moments happen every day, and you can train your reactions:

- when someone's email triggers you
- when a meeting goes quiet
- when a deadline is missed
- when a colleague says "I'm fine" with a face that says "I'm not."

You have the possibility "in the moment" to consciously decide how to react, by simply building in some extra steps: ASSUME → NOTICE → ASK → ACT

1. Assume: you feel a story forming ("They don't care," "He is sabotaging," "She is lazy," "They are not committed").
2. Notice: name it as a story in your head. Not a fact.
3. Ask: replace it with a question that can reveal reality. No judgment.
4. Act: take one step, based on what you learned, not on what you thought or feared.

If you skip these steps your unexamined assumptions can quickly become policies, processes, and cultures that might harm the safety of the space for those around you.

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Proactive self-reflection

But it goes deeper than consciously reacting. Self-reflection is also proactive. Not as in an annual retreat, but as a micro-skill you can train, every day.

Being aware of "why" you think or act in a certain way will open up visibility to your inner compass. Who am I? What drives me forward? What holds me back? What are my strengths? What are my pitfalls?

Our past, our education, our life experiences, our context will all influence our current behavior. Creating awareness around these dynamics will serve not only yourself but also the other person, your team, and your organization.

A simple yet powerful technique for this is JOURNALING: consciously reflecting and even formalizing what went well and where you struggled. This can be done at the end of the day, the end of a meeting, the end of a project, or whenever you have a moment.

1. Positive - What went well? And why?
2. Negative - Where did I, or we, struggle? What made it difficult or problematic?
3. Energy IN - What gave me energy? Why was this?
4. Energy OUT - Where was I frustrated? What caused this?

You can do some mental journaling when driving home, for example, but you will notice it is more powerful if you write it down, when you formalize it.
Writing slows your thoughts and helps to structure your emotions.

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The better you know and understand yourself, the more you will be able to surround yourself with people who complement your profile, and the better you will be able to build a strong team.

Yes, leadership is teamwork, so go through these seven questions as a team to succeed.

In order to build that team, our second hygiene factor is as essential as your self-reflection. This second factor is curiosity.

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CURIOSITY

Curiosity is not just “being interested.” It is being willing to be wrong. It is being genuinely open to other thoughts or actions.

The world today rewards fast opinions. Organizations reward confidence.
And with social media constantly rewarding certainty, it has not become easier to challenge one’s own thinking and being. We are often locked up in the echo-chamber of our own beliefs.

But leadership - real leadership - requires a more inconvenient muscle: “Help me see what I’m missing.” Real leadership looks for nuance, all sides of the story, different versions of the truth.

In a time when information is everywhere, wisdom has become rare.
Not because people are unintelligent, but because people are overwhelmed. And so they look for confirmation, and cancel what needs effort. Curiosity is the bridge you need between being overwhelmed and having clarity.

Our brains are lazy and prefer fast conclusions. Being aware of this through self-reflection is a fundamental starting point; acting on it will make the difference.
And so curiosity becomes the opposite of arrogance. It embraces and values diversity. It says: “My view is incomplete.” It invites others to connect.

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One of my favorite reminders is a principle from birdwatching.
If you want to spot a rare bird, you don't just run into the forest, hoping you will quickly spot the bird. You slow down. You look. You listen.

This is something I learned from Juan David, our guide on a birdwatching tour on a recent trip through Colombia.

At six in the morning, we began a three-hour walk through dense forest. What struck me most wasn't just the beauty of the birds, but how Juan David detected them. He heard them before we did. He saw them long before we could. He stopped. Listened in utter silence. Tuned his ears and eyes with laser-sharp focus. Then he pointed: "There." And sure enough, there it was.
He had mastered the art of listening. The art of seeing. He had trained himself to be utterly curious.

On a sidenote, though: his curiosity was extremely focused on birds. He didn't seem to notice that after two hours we were done with birdwatching and longed for coffee and breakfast...

Anyway, leadership is similar.

The most important signals are often subtle:
the small hesitation before someone speaks,
the joke that covers a fear,
the "yes" that has no energy.

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Curiosity trains you to notice what is not being said. It often conflicts with speed and action, and forces you to slow down. It is a call for empathy, to really try to understand what the other person is thinking and feeling, and where this comes from. Is this covering a fear or a desire? Is it deliberate or unconscious? Is it personal or linked to others?

Curiosity shows itself in two ways.

The second answer

When confronted with a difference in being or thinking, this form of curiosity sounds like:

- "What do you mean?"
- "Tell me more"
- "What does this mean for you?"
- "What makes this hard right now?"
- "What is holding you back?"

You then use their answer to ask another question, so that you can truly understand what they mean.
Ask open-ended questions: questions that start with "What...?," "When...?," "Who...?," or "How...?" These cannot be answered with a simple yes or no; they invite more information.
This is how journalists gather information. They know there is often more value in the second answer.

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Organized dissent

When confronted with immediate consensus or premature convergence, it is very valuable to actively look for dissent and to deliberately widen the options.
Organizing dissent in order to broaden the conversation could sound like:

- “What other options could there be?”
- “What are the best arguments against our plan?”
- “Why would this go wrong?”
- “If I were wrong, how would we know?”
- “What are we not saying?”

Make sure you invite the quieter voices in the room to speak up. Being quiet does not mean someone does not have an opinion. It might simply mean they are more reflective, or more cautious about sharing their view, especially when louder voices dominate the conversation.

And never forget: if you want to capture the collective wisdom of the team, speak last. If you enter a meeting saying, “Here’s the problem. This is how I would tackle it. What do you think?,” there may be little if any debate.

But if you say, “Here’s the problem. What do you think?,” you invite others to reflect and share their unbiased opinions. This will not only strengthen your connection with them, but above all widen your options.

As a leader, to act on your findings - or on all the options now on the table - you need our third hygiene factor: courage.

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COURAGE

Courage is not a personality trait. It is a practice.
And it has become harder in a society where we are easily labeled, where we prefer to belong to "our" camp, and where we often confuse conflict with discomfort.
But we desperately need courage: to take a stand, to have an impact, and to avoid everything becoming conventional.

It feels safe to follow the obvious path.
You know the route. You know the people. You know how to sound smart. But perhaps you are not sure you will really make a mark, though.

Bravery is a repeated choice, and it shows up in surprisingly ordinary places:

- you ask the question that makes the room fall quiet,
- you give the feedback that keeps the bar high,
- you admit you made a mistake,
- you come up with a crazy idea that might actually work,
- you call timeout when the team is pretending,
- you say "no" to something popular and "yes" to something needed,
- or you simply ask for help...

A lack of courage often leads to the Abilene Paradox in organizations.
The Abilene Paradox describes a situation in which a group's collective decision is at odds with the thoughts, beliefs, and feelings of each individual member.

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It was introduced by management expert Jerry B. Harvey, who posed the idea after a trip to Abilene, Texas. On a sweltering afternoon, his family was relaxing on the porch of their home with a fan, some cold lemonade, and a game of dominoes. Despite the heat, they were relatively comfortable.

Seemingly out of the blue, his father-in-law suggested a drive to nearby Abilene for dinner. Harvey immediately disliked the idea - the town was 53 miles away and the car wasn't air-conditioned - but his wife spoke up to say it was actually a great idea. When pressed, Harvey agreed, on the condition that his mother-in-law also wanted to go. Of course, she said she did.

After the four-hour trip and an unsavory meal, the group arrived home overheated and exhausted. To spark conversation, Harvey mused that it had been a great trip. Nobody agreed. One by one, the family members each admitted that they hadn't wanted to go to Abilene. They had only agreed to the trip because they thought it was what the others wanted. In fact, Harvey's father-in-law confessed he'd only suggested it because he thought the others would enjoy it. He hadn't actually wanted to go, either.

How often do we make decisions that we think everyone agrees on, but that no one actually wants?

The attitude of courage is not limited to someone with a leadership title. Leadership is not a title; it is an attitude.

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This was brilliantly illustrated by a 13-year-old girl taking her hockey team “under her wings” after a tough loss. I was a referee during the game, and I witnessed firsthand how the young girl had been encouraging her teammates. How she listened to their feelings and concerns. And how she focused the group on what could be learned. I saw the team’s energy change. Not because an adult made a speech, but because someone practiced courage in a small moment.

So, if your self-reflection and curiosity have led you to an area of tension or to a question, you can make a real difference by having the courage to act on it: to review your initial thoughts or beliefs, to ask further questions so you truly understand what is at play, to surround yourself with people with different profiles in order to create a high-performing team, and then to decide what is best for your team and your organization.

It is not always about heroic gestures. Sometimes, it is the small, courageous questions that change the trajectory of a team.

This book is not here to give you “answers.” It is here to strengthen your courage to ask and your capacity to stay present when the answer is inconvenient.

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The hygiene reset

This is meant to be a practical book. So throughout these pages, you will find exercises and templates to help you apply what you have read, together with your team.
But it all starts with you, leading by example.

If you want one phrase to keep on your desk as a reminder, take this one:
Intention. Attention. Attitude.

Your intention shapes what you pay attention to.
Your attention shapes your attitude.
Your attitude shapes your impact.

So, before we dive into the seven questions, let's make sure we are setting ourselves up for success. Where are we when it comes to self-reflection, curiosity, and courage?

Start with a check-in

1. Pick one recent moment or incident you believe you can learn from. Write down the situation briefly. What happened? Who was involved? What was the context?
2. Write down what went well, and what did not.
3. Reflect on why things went well - or why they did not - and write these reasons down. Think about behavior, communication, timing, preparation, assumptions, context, relationships, emotions, and decision-making.
4. Reflect on what gave you energy, and what felt like an energy drain. Write this down.

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5. Reflect on what came from you – your preferences, thoughts, beliefs, and assumptions – and what was linked to the other person, the team, or the organization. Write this down.
6. Write down the tension or question this provoked. For example: What am I avoiding? What do I not yet understand? What needs to be said? What pattern do I notice?
7. Write down how you reacted: what you said or did, and how you did it. Then write down how you could have reacted differently: by saying or doing something else, by doing nothing, by asking a question, and so on.
8. Read what you have written, and write down the main thing you have learned (and possibly one small action you want to take from this reflection).

Ideally, you do this in writing. But it can also be valuable to do it in your head, such as while commuting. And please invite your team members to do the same.

If you repeat this on a regular basis, you will grow. You will develop your self-reflection, see more value in different ways of being and thinking, and become more courageous. All of this will lead to better leadership.

This is a small habit, but it can have a big impact.

And if you start doing this proactively – becoming more aware of your strengths and pitfalls, as well as the preferences and context of others – you will become a master of conscious communication and collaboration, fully ready to kick off the seven leadership questions for great results.

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Here is a template to help you structure your thoughts:

MOMENT Description (What happened? Who was involved? What was the context? Etc.)		LEARNINGS / INSIGHTS
EVALUATION		
What went well?	What could be improved?	
POSSIBLE REASONS / CAUSES (Behavior, communication, timing, preparation, assumptions, context, relationships, emotions, decision-making, etc.)		
Why did this go well?	Why not?	
ENERGY		
What gave you energy?	What felt like an energy drain?	

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