

Leadership: the art of asking good questions

Questions are important

'If I had an hour to solve a problem, and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes' (Albert Einstein).

It is easy to think that leadership is all about having all the right answers, but I am becoming increasingly convinced that one of the tools of great leadership is knowing how to ask the right questions.

We know instinctively that questions are important. It's how we learn anything. One of the first things a child does is learn to ask questions. It's reported that a four-year-old asks 437 questions a day. But it seems that, as we grow older, we tend to grow out of the habit.

Think how many inventions have come about from someone asking the right question in the right place at the right time. Einstein's theory of relativity resulted from a question that he'd pondered since teenager: 'What would the universe look like if I were riding on the end of a light beam at the speed of light?'. Consider also how many disasters might have been averted if someone had asked the right question. It is said that engineers who had concerns about the design of the Titanic didn't want to appear stupid by asking questions that didn't seem to bother the 'experts'¹.

The Bible is full of questions

Amongst God's first words to humans was a

question, a multi-layered one: 'Where are you?' (Genesis 3:9). The question leads Adam and Eve to confess, not just where they are but what they've done. God seems to pose a lot of questions. He asks Job a series of questions which ultimately lead Job to greater understanding; 'I will question you, and you declare to me. Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified? Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his?' (Job 40:7-9, RSV)².

One of the first things we hear about Jesus is that he was, 'in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions' (Luke 2:46). Why did he need to ask them questions? He was God wasn't he? Shouldn't he just have sat there and told them all the answers? They were indeed amazed at his answers, but he seemed to think asking them questions was important too.

Jesus asked lots of questions. Someone has counted up 307 questions asked by Jesus³. Many of his questions are rhetorical and lead the person he's talking to think further, to ask more questions and to enter into a dialogue with him. We tend to focus on Jesus' clear propositional statements, and pay less attention to the questions he asked. But this could be to miss something very important. Richard Rohr writes: '... we have paid so little attention to Jesus' questions and emphasized instead his seeming answers. They give us more a feeling of success and closure. We have made of Jesus a systematic theologian, who walked around teaching dogmas, instead of a peripatetic and engaging transformer of the soul'⁴.

¹Source: Vogt, E., Brown, J. and Isaacs, D. 2003. *The Art of Powerful Questions: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation and Action*. The World Café.

²See Philip Greenslade *God's Questions* (CWR 2003).

³See e.g. Elizabeth Rundle *Twenty Questions Jesus Asked* (BRF 2008) and Owen O'Sullivan *The Questions of Jesus* (Columba Press 2003).

⁴In the Foreword to John Dear, *The Questions of Jesus: Challenging ourselves to discover life's great answers* (Doubleday 2004).



An example comes in Matthew 19, when the rich young ruler came to Jesus and asked, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?'. Instead of answering immediately, Jesus asks him a question back: 'Why do you ask me about what is good?', challenging the man about who he thinks he is speaking to, 'If only God is good, why do you call me good? Are you saying I am God? If so, why are you questioning me?' They go on to engage in an exchange in which both of them give answers and ask questions. Watching this causes the disciples to ask even more questions: 'Then who can be saved?'

Constructing good questions

So if questions were an important tool used by Jesus to lead people to new places, how might we harness the power of questioning in our leadership? Can we discern what is the right question to ask at the right time?

Good questions can do really useful work in discerning vision, in strategic planning, in chairing good meetings, in leading small groups, in mentoring, in coaching and in pastoral relationships. But constructing the right question for the different contexts of leadership is an art, and a science – and takes deliberate thought and practice.

Firstly, it's worth thinking carefully about the **construction of a question**. The main thing to notice is that there are open and closed questions. Closed questions potentially stop the enquiry dead in its tracks, 'Are you satisfied with our working relationship?' (yes/no). Open questions, on the other hand, have the potential to do something much more powerful.

In 1956 Benjamin Bloom created a system for categorising levels of questions in educational settings. Bloom's taxonomy ranks questions according to their power. The most basic questions are simply to do with ascertaining facts (remembering), but they progress through a scale from the least to the most powerful: understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating, and finally, creating.

So, for example:

- 'When have you been most satisfied with our

working relationship?' (**remembering**).

- 'What is it about our working relationship that you find most satisfying?' (**analysing**).
- 'Why might it be that that our working relationship has had its ups and downs?' (**evaluating**).
- 'What would a better working relationship look like?' (**creating**).

A powerful 'creating' question is one that opens doors to new and fruitful possibilities and might include questions like, 'If you had access to all resources how would you deal with...?', 'How many ways can you...?', 'What would happen if...?', 'How else would you...?' The higher order questions are more powerful and open up more creative avenues. They do more.

Secondly, we need to consider the **scope of a question** – too wide and it will be useless, too narrow and it won't do the work we need it to do. Consider; 'How can we change our home group?', 'How can we change our local church?', 'How can we change our diocese? How can we change the Church of England?' Tailor and clarify the scope as precisely as possible to keep the question within realistic boundaries and pertinent to the needs of the situation you are working with. Avoid stretching the scope of your question too far. The scope must be appropriate.

Finally, it's worth checking the **assumptions contained in a question**. They might betray a hidden agenda that stops the question doing its truly open work. Consider; 'What went wrong and who is responsible?', compared with, 'What can we learn from what's happened and what potential options do we now see?'

Some large German companies place such a high value on powerful questions that they actually employ a 'Direktor Grundsatzfragen' (Director of Fundamental Questions). I wonder if, as leaders, we might become the Direktor Grundsatzfragen for our churches and communities, encouraging a 'culture of enquiry' and using good questions to lead us to new places and to open up new possibilities.

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For reflection:

- Consider reading through one of the gospels, looking out particularly for the questions Jesus asked. What do they tell you about him? What might they be asking of you today?
- Think of an aspect of your leadership that you are struggling with (perhaps a difficult relationship, a tricky meeting, a seemingly intractable situation). Can you think of a powerful 'creating' question that might need to be asked, in order to open up new prospects?

