

Lead by Asking

“What makes a great leader?”

In response to this question, Eric McNulty, Director of Research at the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative authored a blog post in strategy + business based on his interviews with various leaders in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. McNulty suggests specific characteristics may vary by industry, but the one that consistently stands out is the ability to pose meaningful and sometimes very simple questions. He offers a list of six that apply to anyone looking to hone their leadership acumen.

- 1. What do you think?** Good leaders know how to engage people to help them become invested in the task at hand and ultimately drive better performance. This simple query can be the first step on that journey.
- 2. Do we think or do we know?** This question challenges peoples’ assumptions and suggests that theories should be tested and decisions based on evidence, not hunches. Some decisions have to be made on intuition, but it’s critical that a leader knows when a course is being set based on validated information versus a hypothesis.
- 3. How are you doing?** This straightforward question is intended to get to the heart of the emotional and operational challenges at hand. It conveys genuine interest in the person and is meant to stimulate some introspection. Active listening is critical to using this question: If you accept “fine” as an answer, you’ve missed the point.
- 4. How am I doing?** One of the great secrets of introverted leaders is their ability to get others to talk; it takes the pressure off of them and often generates valuable information. You can demonstrate genuine caring and concern, reassuring those who follow you that they are valued.
- 5. What does this mean over the long term?** Organizations can become obsessed with short-term results. By asking about a longer time horizon, you can encourage someone to contemplate potential future issues and unintended consequences.
- 6. How can I be helpful?** Some leaders are comfortable not to assert control of operational decisions because they trust those given the responsibility to make things happen. The effective leader understands how they can best support their efforts. They possess the self-confidence to focus on the desired outcome, not all the details about which others have greater expertise.

McNulty emphasizes that asking questions like these six are only half the formula. Soliciting feedback and then ignoring it is worse than not asking at all. Each of the questions-and-answers should create a meaningful information exchange that can benefit all parties. McNulty concludes that top leaders know they don’t need all the answers, rather, they need to ask a few good questions.