

## **Asking Questions**

Asking questions has **enormous power**. Good collaborators do not make proclamations. A leader who makes proclamations without proper inquiry corrodes trust, undermines the desire to problem-solve, and infantilizes the team.

A high-performing leader creates an environment where **productive disagreement, embedded in curiosity and thoughtful back-and-forth**, drives the group toward high performance and rapid movement. They do that through asking questions.

High-performing teams excel when people ask questions—lots of them.

**Why?** Asking (questions rather than declaring positions):

- Encourages conversation.
- Avoids “equal and opposite position-taking,” which undermines thoughtful discussion
- Uncovers high-quality thinking by asking participants to elaborate on their positions rather than attach themselves to them.
- Forces attention toward the data and perspectives that support a particular direction.

**Asking good questions is an art. It is easily learned.**

First, learn to ask **Open Questions**. An open question invites further conversation and curiosity. It is an opening to further dialogue. Closed questions narrow the thinking and the opportunity for reflection.

If a question can be answered with a “yes” or a “no,” **it is closed**. The conversation usually ends. Often, questions with “would,” “should,” “is,” “are,” and “do you think” all tend to force a yes or no answer.

**Instead of:** Are you okay with the process so far? (yes, no)

**Ask:** How are you feeling about the process so far?

- I think it is going okay
  - What makes you say that?
- I am seeing progress

- What would make it better?
- We need to record the conversation better
  - Why is that?
- I like to have a record so we can be sure of what we agreed to.

**Closed:** Are we asking for too much from the team?

**Open:** What might it mean to add this task to the workplan?

**Closed:** Should we hire a Chief of Staff?

**Open:** What might we experience if we add a Chief of Staff?

### **More Powerful Questions**

- Help me understand what you mean.
- How did you come to that conclusion?"
- Let me see if I understand what you are saying. Did I get it right?
- What do you think I might be missing here?
- I think I see this differently. Not sure if I'm right but here's why...
- How do you think we came to these different conclusions?
- How might we (overcome this, think about this, address this)?
- It looks like we see this very differently. How important are the areas that we don't see eye-to-eye on? What are the areas that we do agree on?
- I could be reading this wrong, but it seems to me that you consider/feel/dislike/lack confidence in/hope to/prefer...is that right?
- What might we do to close the gap between us?
- How would you rank this on a scale of one-to-ten?
  - What would it take to make it an 11 for you?
- I'd like some time to think about what you said. When would you like to revisit this?

### Case Study

*Ellen is the Chief of Staff for a medium-sized company. She is in charge of optimizing the team's interactions for high performance. This means codifying the communication channels and tools used, where knowledge is stored, how fast team members are expected to respond to each other, and a dozen other communication and collaboration protocols.*

*After a mini-retreat, she asked a participant how the meeting went.*

- *How did the meeting go?*

- *It went well.*
- *How do you know?*
  - *We devised a great list of next steps, and the post-meeting survey was very positive.*
- *What did people say?*
  - *They said they enjoyed the facilitator and were glad their time was well-spent.*
- *What do you think made that possible?*
  - *We worked hard on the agenda, checked for agreement before we started, and used a facilitator instead of trying to do it ourselves.*
- *How do we make this happen every time?*
  - *I'll create a "good-meeting checklist" for the section leaders, and we will use that facilitator again.*
- *What else might we do?*
  - *Well, I'll bet that the big room made a difference because of the windows. It felt invigorating to be able to open them. Also, the breaks and the food. I'll ask the group if we can pull any other positives out of them.*
- *Great, so here is where I think we came to:*
  - *The meeting went well because the facilitator and the team collaborated on creating an effective agenda, including checking for agreement well in advance. There were breaks and food. And the room helped because it was big and you could open the windows. You will poll the group for more insights, make a "good meeting checklist" and put it on our Slack site. Did I get it right?*
- *Yes, that sounds right—oh, and one more thing. The calendar for using the meeting room is being ignored. I am going to remind everyone to use it.*
  - *Great! Thanks.*