

7 KEYS TO ASKING BETTER QUESTIONS (WHAT I'VE LEARNED FROM MY LEADERSHIP PODCAST).

Guest Post by Carey Nieuwhof

If you want to become a better leader (and who doesn't?), the key is simple: learn to ask better questions.

I wish I knew that 20 years ago when I started.

I thought leadership was about giving answers, not asking questions.

I still have to reign myself in from talking too much and listening too little, but I've worked hard on the art of asking questions over the last few years.

In mid-2014, I became immersed more deeply than ever before into the art of asking questions as I prepared to launch my [leadership podcast](#) (you can [subscribe for free here](#)). It's been an amazing journey, as 20 months in we just celebrated passing one million downloads. (Thank you to everyone for making the podcast so amazing!)

In addition, last year, I started interviewing for [100 Huntley Street, a national TV show](#) in Canada.

One of the surprisingly consistent questions I get is how I come up with the questions for my guests.

People seem to notice the approach I take and want to know how I prepare the questions.

The reality is I haven't known how to answer that question except to say "I don't know, I just do it." Not very helpful.

I also get interviewed frequently these days, and I've come to the conclusion that there are better lines of questioning, and not-so-great lines of questioning.

So I sat down to try to figure out the principles behind the art of asking better questions.

Here's what I've come up with. I think the principles work whenever you are interacting with someone...whether it's the foyer on a Sunday, in a meeting, or for a podcast or show.

Asking better questions is foundational to better leadership.

So how do you learn to ask better questions?

I want to keep growing in this field, but here are 7 things I'm discovering.

[Asking better questions is foundational to better leadership.](#)

1. Put yourself in their shoes

You may be getting together to discuss an issue, but behind every issue is a person.

When you speak to the person behind the issue, not just the issue, you always have a better conversation.

How do you do that?

Start here: imagine what it's like to be *them*.

This is true if you're talking to [Andy Stanley](#) or whether you're talking to a college student anxious about what's next after graduation.

People have emotions, fears, dreams, hopes and experience everything else you do.

A great way to access this stream of thinking is to imagine the questions *you* would have if you were them.

Imagine launching a church that grows exponentially. What would your hopes, dreams and fears be?

Sure, the person you're speaking with might respond differently than you would (and be open to that), but this at least gets you into the same emotional ball park.

If you can imagine what it's like to be them, your questions will not only become better, but they'll like you. Why? Because you just showed interest and empathy. And we all respond better to an interested, empathetic person.

[When you speak to the person behind the issue, not the issue, you always have a better conversation.](#)

2. Avoid putting people on the defensive Most people heading into an interview or conversation are a bit worried—whether that's a job interview, a podcast or TV interview, or a meeting where you're asking questions.

They're afraid they're going to say something they'll regret. Or afraid you're out to make them look bad.

People sense right away whether you're trying to make them look bad. And they respond to you accordingly.

Any cheap press or momentary victory you get from a controversial quote is in my view, so not worth it.

I never want to make anyone look bad. Even if I disagree with a person.

I just want them to tell their story...and if you put them at ease, they will.

“But what about the truth?” say the suspicious among you.

Well, that doesn't mean you don't ask real questions. But in fact, when someone is at ease, they'll often tell you far *more* than they would if you put them on the defensive.

If you want to listen to a couple of very authentic interviews on very controversial topics, you can listen to my conversation with [Justin Dean on the collapse of Mars Hill Church in Seattle](#), or [Aaron Harris on what it's been like for him to grow up in the church as gay man](#).

[People sense whether you're trying to make them look bad. And they respond to you accordingly.](#)

3. Ask what it felt like

I'm a logical guy. I think a lot. I'm a law school graduate. Most of what I do these days boils down to thinking, solving problems and then figuring out how to communicate what I've learned.

As a result, I constantly process principles behind why things are the way they are, and why people do what we do.

But deep down, we're all emotional creatures. I am. You are.

So is anyone you talk to.

If you really want to connect with the person you're speaking with (or interviewing), when they tell you about a critical moment in their life (good or bad) ask them what it felt like.

What was it like to learn you had cancer?

What did it feel like to have half your church walk out overnight?

What did it feel like for you as a leader to go from 100 people to 1000 people attending your church overnight?

What were you feeling when you failed out of college and had to go home to tell your parents?

In those moments, you move from head-to-head conversation to heart-to-heart conversation.

And those are my favourite conversations. That's the kind of stuff around which friendships and bonds form—both between you and your guests, and your guests and any listeners.

[Heart-to-heart conversation is always better than head-to-head conversation.](#)

4. Look for the counter-intuitive or exceptional

Lots of counter-intuitive things happen in life.

Follow that trail.

For example, when I interviewed Perry Noble about burning out in [Episode 2 of my leadership podcast](#), he mentioned it happened when his church had never been bigger and when things had never been 'better.'

That really surprised me, and we spent a good part of the interview exploring that.

Exploring the counter-intuitive usually leads to great places because it attacks widely held assumptions. For example, people assume you burn out with things are going poorly, not when things are going well.

In a similar way, people are surprised that successful people struggle.

In my view, that's what made [the interview I did with Passion Ministries founder Louie Giglio](#) so riveting. He talked openly and honestly about how success led him to break down and how he battled back.

Bottom line? If something surprises you, chase it.

5. Drill down

Our world is filled with 2-minute sound bites.

The best conversations in my view never happen in 10 minutes or between commercial breaks. They happen long after people have used all their sound bites and pushed past their ready-made answers.x

I took a risk in doing long-form podcasting when I launched (the average episode is around an hour). The reason I chose that path is because meaningful real life conversations tend to be longer, not shorter.

Taking your time also allows you to drill down on key issues.

Whether it's my podcast, a meeting, or even a job interview I'm conducting, most of my questions are unplanned. I always write questions out ahead of time, but you can't really anticipate the good stuff.

When you hear something someone says that piques your interest, drill down on it.

Go further. As in:

What do you mean by that?

Fascinating...tell me more.

What happened next?

What...say that again? *What* happened?

That kind of questioning opens up the floodgates for new insights and principles.

If you just move onto the next question, you usually lose a goldmine in the process.

6. Be curious

Curiosity is your best friend as a leader.

When you're interviewing, act more like a 6-year-old than a 36-year-old.

Ask why...a lot.

If you're genuinely curious, ask:

Why did you think that?

Why do you think that happened?

Why didn't you quit?

Why did you make that decision?

'How' is another amazing curiosity question:

How did you even think that was possible?

Wait, *how* did that happen?

How did you possibly think that might work?

Even in a meeting setting, you will learn so much more about the person you're talking with or the issue you're studying if you stay curious.

The best leaders I know are insatiably curious.

They want to know how and why things work, and they want to know more about the things they don't know about.

So...be curious.

The best leaders are insatiably curious.

7. Forget about yourself

Too many leaders are interested in making a point rather than asking a question.

And that's a critical mistake.

If you're always trying to show how smart you are, you accomplish the opposite.

If you're always trying to show how smart you are, you accomplish the opposite.

When I started my podcast in the fall of 2014, my wife listened to the first few episodes and said (in a very loving way), "You talk too much."

I felt like saying, "It's MY podcast!"

But she was right.

Since that time, I try to talk less than 10% of the time in a interview (unless the interview is designed to be a two-way conversations, as a few have been).

I've tried to talk a lot less in my daily leadership as well. It's way too easy for me to dominate meetings and I have to put a constant check on my tongue and brain.

After all, leaders, when you listen first and speak second, people are far more interested in what you have to say.

[When you listen first and speak second, people are far more interested in what you have to say.](#)

What Do You Think?

Hopefully asking better questions leaves you and whoever you're talking with feel amazing after a conversation. That's my goal whenever I talk to a leader, on air or off air.

If you want unlimited free access to my podcast, you can subscribe for free here on any of these channels:

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carey Nieuwhof is a former lawyer and founding pastor of Connexus Church. He's the author of several best-selling books, including his latest, [Didn't See It](#)

Coming, and speaks to leaders around the world about leadership, change and personal growth.

The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast and Carey's blog at www.CareyNieuwhof.com are accessed by millions of leaders each year.