

The Power of Questions

As an emotionally intelligent project leader you must consistently ask questions – of yourself and others. When you ask questions, you open up and invite discovery. You become a leader who explores better ways of doing things and who encourages others to contribute and share their opinions.

As leaders we know that we don't hold all the answers to a problem, so instead of telling people what to do, we empower others and encourage them to find their own solutions.

We also know that the world is constantly on the move, and that in order to move with it, we must find new and better ways of working, collaborating, delivering projects and adding value.

We can achieve that by asking open questions, listening to the answers with a curious yet realistic mind, and by supporting and implementing innovative ideas.

Asking questions helps you to:

- Identify new and better ways of doing things
- Grow and develop other people's abilities
- Improve your leadership and delegation skills
- Keep yourself and others focused
- Add more value to your team and client
- Take a big picture view
- Become a thought leader

The Differences Between Managers and Leaders

Taking a step back and asking questions helps you transition from being a *manager* to a *leader*. You step off the auto pilot where you're in a telling and doing mode and instead adopt an asking and observing mode.

We often say that managers are good at getting things done, organising, and chopping down trees in the forest. Leaders however climb to the top of the trees and notice if the team is in the right forest to begin with.

Leaders question the status quo, set a new direction and inspire and empower others to implement the vision.

Which types of people do you come across most often in your organisation – managers or leaders? How do you want to come across yourself?

If you're not accustomed to asking open-ended questions, you will need to build a new habit. Challenging the status quo and empowering others by asking questions is a mindset shift.

One of the best ways to build this habit is to schedule time away from your desk on a regular basis, allowing yourself to take a balcony view of the project. Use the following guidelines to get started.

- Schedule a meeting in your diary with yourself. Choose a time when you are normally less busy and when you will be able to step away from your desk.
- Set aside half an hour or an hour and go somewhere where you will not be interrupted and where your thoughts can flow freely. This could be a nice meeting room, the favourite part of your house, a café, or a park.
- Don't do this at your regular work-desk as that's a place where you think in familiar patterns and have a managerial mind-set of executing activities and giving direction.
- When you step away from your desk, bring with you a set of insightful questions that you can ask of yourself. To start off you can use the questions from this worksheet.
- Don't be in a rush to find the answers to your questions. Allow yourself to take a step back and observe your work from afar. Distance yourself and look at what is working and what is not. Record your answers and ideas on a notepad.
- At the end of the session, choose three of your best insights and decide to implement them. Determine the date and time when you will take action and note down the name of someone who can help you.
- Repeat this exercise once or twice a month. You will quickly find that a new habit is being formed. Not only will you begin to ask more questions of yourself, you will also begin to ask more questions of others, thereby challenging the status quo and encourage them to think more expansively.

Part I - Questions about the situation

- How do I know that what we're developing is what's needed?
- What could get in our way of achieving the end goal?
- What keeps me awake at night? What is my gut telling me?
- What does my boss or customer complain about? What can I do about it?
- What would I do differently if I bet my own money on this?
- Which issues do I need to resolve once and for all?
- What have I not yet thought of that could make a big difference?
- What else?

Part II - Questions about the team

- Who do I need to spend more time with?
- Who needs more support and guidance from me?
- Who do I need to praise or reward for their good work and results?
- Who can I start to stretch and delegate more to?
- How can I better engage and utilise the strengths of each team member?
- How can I better inspire the team to achieve the project's vision?
- How can I encourage the team to take more ownership?
- How can I help the team communicate and collaborate better?

Part III - Questions about your own performance

- What is my unique contribution. How can I focus more on it?
- How can I add more value to my team and my client?
- Which important tasks and activities have I been procrastinating on?
- Which bad decisions have I made that need to be reverted?
- What are the 20% of activities that I do on a daily or weekly basis that contribute to 80% of my results? How can I amplify those 20%?
- How can I spend my time more proactively?
- How can I improve my relationship with my stakeholders?

Asking Questions of Others

In addition to taking time out on your own to ask questions, you need to get in the habit of asking open questions of your team members and direct reports.

Asking questions of others encourages them to find their own solutions to problems. It also shows that you value their input and trust their judgement.

Asking open questions empowers and motivates others and it helps them develop critical thinking. The best way to challenge the status quo and implement new and better ways of working is when the entire team contributes to the process – not just you!

One of the best approaches is to set up specific idea generating sessions and to ask open questions whenever you have a team meeting or a one-2-one.

You can experiment with the questions below, but don't ask all of them at one!

Ask a few key questions at each meeting and follow up later to show that you are serious about listening to the team and getting their input.

Remember that you are not there to overrule anyone. Your role is to listen, inspire, and encourage people speak up and think on their own.

Part IV- Questions that challenge & empower the team

- What is working well, and what is not working so well on our project?
- What is working well for other teams that we can replicate?
- What worries you and what keeps you awake at night?
- What needs to happen for us to collaborate better?
- What would make you really proud of working in this team?
- What type of support and guidance do you need more of?
- What would it take for us to work smarter?
- What would we do if we could start all over?
- What would we do if we had no constraints?
- How can we challenge the status quo more?
- What are we not seeing that is new or different?
- How can we improve our relationships with our stakeholders?
- How can we get better at identifying and mitigating risks?
- How can we become more creative?
- What else?



Susanne Madsen is an internationally recognised project leadership coach and the author of [*The Power of Project Leadership*](#). Now in its second edition, the book has been described as "a must-read for everyone in the project world".

A popular keynote speaker on the topic of leadership, emotional intelligence, stress, team motivation, and personal transformation, Susanne has worked with many high-profile organisations such as JP Morgan, Citigroup, LEGO, Philips, BAM, and NXP to name just a few.

Susanne's third book, [*How to Do the Inner Work*](#), will be released in spring 2024.

"I loved this book the first time, and the revised edition is even better. Fully updated, this edition goes deep into strategies to help you lead yourself and your team more effectively."

- Elizabeth Harrin, The award-winning blogger behind GirlsGuideToPM.com

