

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 to 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 encourage others to find their own solutions. We also know that the world around us is constantly on the move, and that in order to move with it, we must find new and better ways of operating, delivering projects and adding value to our clients. 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:

- Find new and better ways of doing things
- Grow and develop other people's abilities
- Keep focused on the most important activities
- Lead and motivate others
- Add more value and get recognized for your results
- Become a better people manager
- Step outside of your comfort zone
- Take a big picture view
- Become a thought leader

The Difference Between Managers and Leaders

Taking a step back from your project and asking questions helps you transition from being a project *manager* to a project *leader*. You step off 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 chopping down trees in the forest; whilst leader climb to the top of the trees and proclaim that the managers are not even in the right forest!

Managers are good at getting things organised. Leaders are good at questioning the status quo, setting a new direction and inspiring and empowering others to implement the vision.

- Which types of people do you come across most often in your organisation? Managers or leaders?
- Which type do you want to be?

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

One of the best ways to build this habit is to schedule some time away from your desk on a regular basis where you allow yourself to take a balcony view of the project. Use the following guidelines:

1. Schedule an appointment with yourself once a week. Choose a time when you are normally less busy and when you will be able to step away from your desk.
2. Set aside half an hour or an hour and go somewhere where you will not be disrupted and where your thoughts can flow freely. This could be a café, a park, the favourite part of your house or a nice meeting room.
3. 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, following procedures and giving direction.
4. When you step away from your desk, bring with you a set of insightful questions which you can ask of yourself. To start off you can use the questions from this worksheet.
5. Don't be in a rush to find the answers to your questions. Allow yourself to take a step back and observe your project from afar. Distance yourself and look at what is working and what is not. Record all your answers and ideas on a notepad.
6. At the end of the session, choose three of your best insights and ideas for improvements 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.
7. Make sure you carry through with your actions and that you repeat the exercise once or twice a month. You will quickly find that a new habit of asking questions, adding value and creating a better project environment is being formed and that your mindset has taken a subtle, yet dramatic shift.

Questions to Ask of Yourself - Part 1

- What could get in our way of achieving the end project goal?
- What have we not yet thought of?
- How do I know that what we're developing is what my customer needs?
- What worries me and what keeps me awake at night? What can I do about it?
- What would I worry about if I were the customer / end user etc.?
- What is not working optimally on the project?
- What does my customer or boss keep complaining about? What can I do about it?
- Which reoccurring issues do we have which I need to resolve once and for all?

- How can we work smarter rather than harder?
- How can I get my team to understand the client's business better?
- How can I improve my relationship with my customers and more frequently ask into their feedback about the project?
- What are the most important business benefits for my client, that I can help them track and deliver?

Questions to Ask of Yourself - Part II

- How can I better motivate and utilise the strengths of the team members?
- Who do I need to praise or reward for their good work and results?
- Who do I need spend more time with setting and agreeing objectives?
- Who needs more support and guidance from me in order to excel?
- What is working well in the team and what is not?
- How can we deepen our communication and create a better working environment?
- Who do I need to spend more time with?
- How can I better lead with Vision?
- How can I better inspire the team to contribute to the project's end goal?

Questions to Ask of Yourself - Part III

- What is my unique contribution to the project and how can I focus more on it?
- How can I instantly start to add more value to my project and my client?
- What are the 20% of actions 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?
- Who can I start to delegate to, so that I free myself up to focus on the activities that really matter to the success of the project?
- Which bad decisions have I made that need to be reverted?
- Which important tasks and activities have I been putting off or procrastinating on?

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, which means that you have to spend less time micromanaging the team. It also shows that you value their input and trust their judgement. Asking open questions empowers and motivates others and it helps them to develop critical thinking. The best way of challenging the status quo and implementing new and better ways of working is to have the entire team contribute to the process – not just you!

One of the best approaches for encouraging your team to step up and take on more responsibility is to set up specific idea generating sessions and to ask open questions every time you have a team meeting or a one-2-one.

Below is a list of suggested questions to ask in a group forum to get you going. Remember that you are not there to overrule anyone. Your role is to listen, inspire and encourage people to share, think on their own and to take action.

You may not want to ask all questions at once as that could be overwhelming. Ask a couple of key questions at each meeting and follow up later to show that you are serious about wanting to raise the bar and getting their input on how to do it.

Questions for Team Members

- What is working well and not so well on our project?
- How can we improve?
- What is working well for other teams that we can replicate?
- What worries you and what keeps you awake at night?
- How can we improve our relationships with our customers?
- What would it take for us to operate smarter?
- What would we do if we had no constraints?
- What would we do if we could start all over?
- How can we focus more on product quality?
- How can we get better at identifying and mitigating risks?
- How can we become more certain that the products and features we are developing are what the users really want and need?
- How can we get to understand our client's business so well that we are able to actively challenge the requirements and the project's vision?

- How can we challenge the status quo more?
- What are we not seeing that is new or different?
- What would make you really proud of working in this team?
- What do you like the most and the least about your role?
- What type of support and guidance do you need more of?
- How do we better access the team's knowledge and creativity?
- How can we improve our communication and team dynamic?



Susanne Madsen is an internationally recognized project leadership coach, trainer and consultant. She is the author of [The Power of Project Leadership](#) (now in 2nd edition) and [The Project Management Coaching Workbook](#).

Prior to setting up her own business, she worked for 17 years in the corporate sector leading large change programmes of up to \$30 million for organisations such as Standard Bank, Citigroup and JPMorgan Chase. She is a fully qualified Corporate and Executive coach, an NLP Practitioner, DISC accredited and a regular contributor to the Association for Project Management (APM).

Since starting her business, Susanne has worked with clients across industries from Europe, North America, Asia, South America and the Middle East.

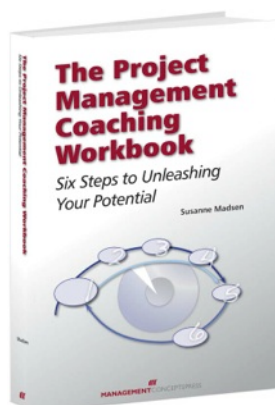
"I loved this book the first time, and the revised edition is even better. Fully updated, this edition goes deep into strategies to help you lead yourself and your team more effectively. The book goes beyond theory - although you can tell the text is well-grounded in research - to give you practical tactics that you can use daily at work. When you combine powerful techniques and a willingness to do the work, you have a blend that will help you excel at delivering organisational strategy through projects. Susanne makes it easy by stepping you through the 'keys' to leadership, and you can pick and choose the approaches you think will make the most difference with your team." Elizabeth Harrin, The award-winning blogger behind GirlsGuideToPM.com



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