

## The Power of Questions

In order for you to become an effective and successful project management 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 share their opinions.

As leaders we know that we don't hold all the answers ourselves, so instead of just 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 – and not stand still – 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
- Add more value and get recognized for your results
- Grow and develop other peoples abilities
- Keep focused on the most important tasks and activities
- Become a better people manager
- Step outside of your comfort zone
- Take a big picture view
- Become a thought leader
- Lead and motivate others

### The Difference Between Managers and Leaders

How come that asking questions helps you become a leader? Well, think about it for a moment.

When you take a step back from your project and ask questions, you go 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 following and doing and getting things organised. Leaders, on the other hand, are good at questioning the status quo, setting a new direction and implementing the vision by inspiring and empowering others.

- 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 of yourself and others, you will need to build a new habit. Challenging the status quo by asking questions is a mindset shift.

One of the best ways of building 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 by asking questions. Use the following guidelines:

1. Schedule an appointment with yourself in your diary once a week. Choose a time when you are normally less busy and when you will be able to step away from your desk, for instance on a Monday or Friday.
2. Set aside half an hour or an hour and go somewhere where you will not be disturbed 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 desk at work, 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 such as "What could get in our way of reaching the end goal of the project? What have we not yet thought of? What worries me? Which reoccurring issues do I need to get to the root of?" etc.
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. Take a balcony view of it. 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 I

- 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 wants and 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 / head of department / lead architect / 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?
- Who can help me implement these smarter ways of working?
- How can I get my team to focus more on product quality?
- How can I get my team to understand the clients 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

- 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?
- How can I better motivate and utilise the strengths of my team members?
- Who needs more support and guidance from me in order to excel?
- What is my succession planning and what am I doing to implement it?
- How can I better lead with Vision?
- How can I better inspire my team to follow and help contribute to the vision?
- How can I better inspire my 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?
- Which bad decisions have I made that need to be reverted?
- Which important tasks and activities have I been putting off or procrastinating on?
- 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?

### 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 them. 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 too 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 asking Team Members

- What is working well and not so well on our project? How can we improve?
- What worries you and what keeps you awake at night?
- How can we improve our relationships with our customers?
- How can we get better at asking for feedback from our customers?
- What would it take for us to operate smarter?
- How can we improve our project processes?
- How can we minimise the amount of defects we have?
- How can we focus more on product quality?
- How can we get better at identifying and mitigating the project's 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 clients 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?
- How can we become the best team in this organisation?
- 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?

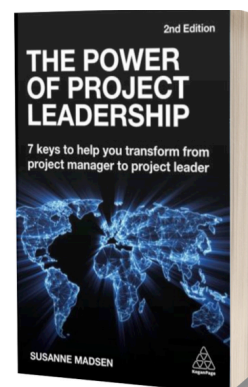


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Prior to setting up her own business, she worked for 17 years in the corporate sector leading large change programmes of up to \$30 million for organisations such as Standard Bank, Citigroup and JPMorgan Chase. She is a fully qualified Corporate and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

Susanne specialises in helping managers improve their leadership skills so that they can gain control of their projects and fast-track their career. combination of training, coaching, mentoring and consulting.

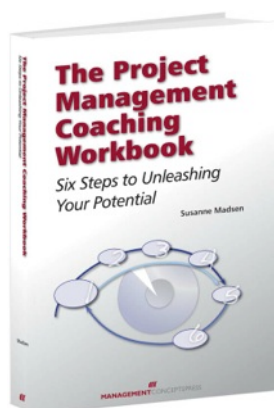
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