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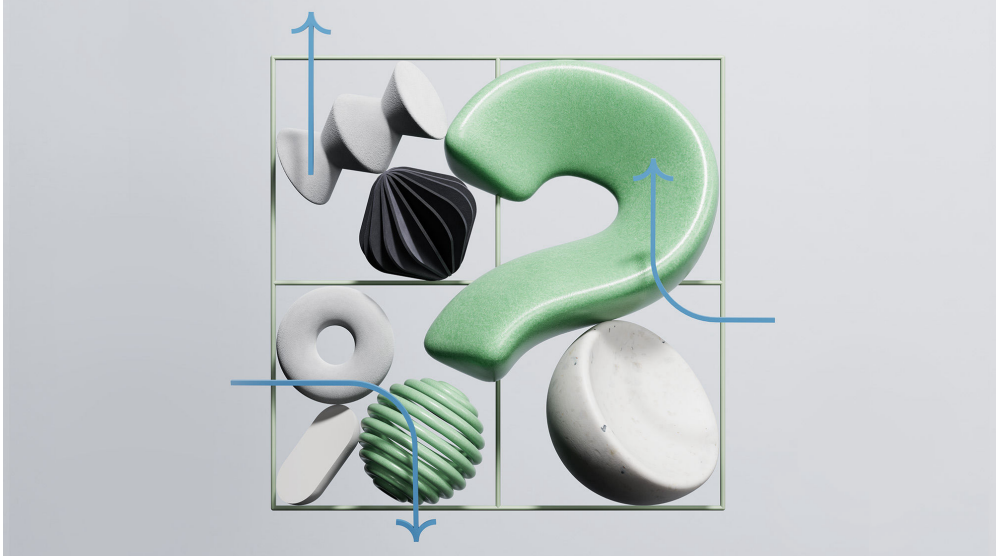
Interpersonal Skills



The Art of Asking Smarter Questions

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by Arnaud Chevallier, Frédéric Dalsace, and Jean-Louis Barsoux

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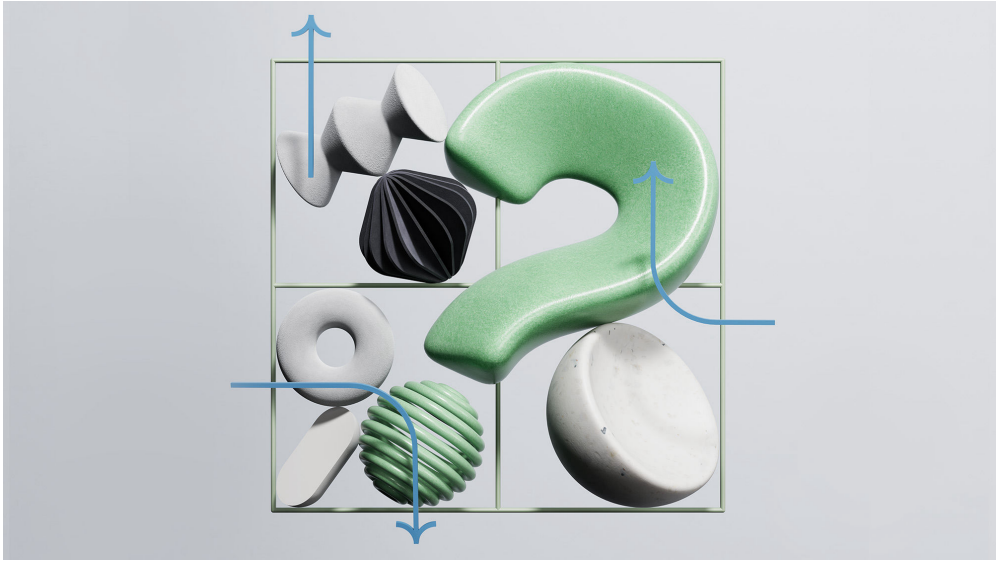

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As a cofounder and the CEO of the U.S. chipmaker Nvidia, Jensen Huang operates in a high-velocity industry requiring agile, innovative thinking. Reflecting on how his leadership style has evolved, he told the *New York Times,* "I probably give fewer answers and I ask a lot more questions....It's almost possible now for me to go through a day and do nothing but ask questions." He continued, "Through probing, I help [my management team]...explore ideas that they didn't realize needed to be explored."

The urgency and unpredictability long faced by tech companies have spread to more-mature sectors, elevating inquiry as an essential skill. Advances in AI have caused a seismic shift from a world in which answers were crucial to one in which questions are. The big differentiator is no longer access to information but the ability to craft smart prompts. "As a leader, you don't have the answers; your workforce [does], your people [do]," Jane Fraser, Citi's CEO, told *Fortune* magazine. "That's completely changed how you have to lead an organization. You have to unleash the creativity....The innovation isn't happening because there's a genius at the top of the company that's coming up with the answers for everything."

Indeed, leaders have embraced the importance of listening, curiosity, learning, and humility—qualities critical to skillful interrogation. "Question-storming"—brainstorming for questions rather than answers—is now a creativity technique. But unlike lawyers, doctors, and psychologists, business leaders aren't formally trained on what kinds of questions to ask. They must learn as they go. (See "The Surprising Power of Questions," HBR, May–June 2018, among others.)

It's not a matter of asking lots of questions in hopes of eventually hitting on the right ones. Corinne Dauger, a former VP of creative development at Hermès, told us, "In a one-hour meeting, there are only so many questions you can ask....So where do you want to spend the time? When you're asking one question, you're not asking another." If any one line of questioning dominates, it inevitably crowds out others. Leaders must also watch for complacency, diminishing returns, avoidance of sensitive topics, and stubbornness.

In our research and consulting over the past decade, we've seen that certain kinds of questions have gained resonance across the business world. And in a three-year project we asked executives to question-

storm about the decisions they've faced and the kinds of inquiry they've pursued. In this article we share what we've learned. We offer a practical framework for the types of questions to ask in strategic decision-making and a tool to help you assess your interrogatory style.

The Great Unasked Questions

Before we lay out our framework, we want to emphasize one point above all: The questions that get leaders and teams into trouble are often the ones they fail to ask. These are questions that don't come spontaneously; they require prompting and conscious effort. They may run counter to your and your team's individual or collective habits, preoccupations, and patterns of interaction.

The late scholar and business thinker Sumantra Ghoshal once said that leadership means making happen what otherwise would not. In the realm of inquiry a leader's job is to flush out information, insights, and alternatives, unearthing critical questions the team has overlooked. You don't need to come up with the missing questions yourself, but you do need to draw attention to neglected spheres of inquiry so that others can raise them.

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All this is harder than it may sound, for two reasons. First, you may be hampered by your expertise. Your professional successes and deep experience may have skewed your approach to problem-solving. (See

"Don't Be Blinded by Your Own Expertise," HBR, May–June 2019.) It can be hard to escape the gravitational pull of such conditioning unless you take a hard look at your question habits. Second, the flow and diversity of questions can be hard to process in real time, especially amid heated exchanges. Often it's only after the fact that you realize certain concerns or options were never raised.

Our research reveals that strategic questions can be grouped into five domains: *investigative, speculative, productive, interpretive,* and *subjective.* Each unlocks a different aspect of the decision-making process. Together they can help you tackle key issues that are all too easy to miss.

Investigative: What's Known?

When they are facing a problem or an opportunity, effective decision-makers start by clarifying their purpose—asking themselves what they want to achieve and what they need to learn to do so. The process can be fueled by using successive "Why?" questions, as in the "five whys" sequence devised by managers at Toyota. Successively asking "How?" can also help you transcend generic solutions and develop more-sophisticated alternatives. Investigative questions dig ever deeper to generate nonobvious information. The most common mistake is failing to go deep enough.

It sounds like a straightforward process, but lapses are surprisingly common. In 2014 a failure of investigation led a team at the French rail operator SNCF to neglect an essential piece of data during its €15 billion purchase of 1,860 regional trains. No one thought to ask whether the platform measurements were universal. They weren't. The trains proved too wide for 1,300 older stations—a mistake that cost €50 million to fix. The Spanish train operator Renfe discovered a similar oversight in 2021: The 31 state-of-the-art commuter trains it had ordered were too

big to pass through some tunnels in the mountainous areas they were meant to serve. The problem was detected before the trains were built, but delivery was significantly delayed.

Speculative: What If?

Whereas investigative questions help you identify and analyze a problem in depth, speculative questions help you consider it more broadly. To reframe the problem or explore more-creative solutions, leaders must ask things like "What if...?" and "What else...?" The global design company IDEO popularized this approach. It systematically uses the prompt "How might we...?"—coined by Min Basadur when he was a young manager at P&G—to overcome limiting assumptions and jump-start creative problem-solving.

Consider how Emirates Team New Zealand's innovative catamaran won international sport's oldest extant trophy, the America's Cup, in 2017. Crew members pedaled stationary bikes to generate power for the vessel's hydraulic systems rather than turning handles, as was customary. Many observers assumed that the breakthrough question had been "What if we used leg power instead of arm power?" That wasn't a new suggestion, however. Other competitors had considered and rejected the idea, unwilling to hamper crew members' ability to move around the boat. One team had even tried it.

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The team from New Zealand went a step further, asking, "What else could a pedal system allow?" It could free up crew members' hands, the team realized, and the boat's hydraulic systems could then be operated with handlebar controls. That distributed the crew's roles more evenly

and allowed multiple maneuvers to be executed quickly. The boat could be sailed more precisely and aggressively, leading to an upset win over Oracle Team USA.

Productive: Now What?

Productive questions help you assess the availability of talent, capabilities, time, and other resources. They influence the speed of decision-making, the introduction of initiatives, and the pace of growth.

In the 1990s the CEO of AlliedSignal, Larry Bossidy, famously integrated a focus on execution into his company's culture. He insisted on rigorously questioning and rethinking the various hows of executing on strategy: "How can we get it done?" "How will we synchronize our actions?" "How will we measure progress?" and so on. Such questions can help you identify key metrics and milestones—along with possible bottlenecks—to align your people and projects and keep your plans on track. They will expose risks, including strains on the organization's capacity.

The top team at Lego neglected productive questions when responding to the rise of digital toys in the early 2000s. The toymaker tried to diversify its way out of trouble, introducing several products in rapid succession. The initiatives themselves weren't necessarily misguided, but each meant a stretch into an adjacent area, such as software (Lego Movie Maker), learning concepts (Lego Education), or clothing (Lego Wear). Collectively they far exceeded the company's bandwidth, and Lego suffered record losses in 2003. The following year the incoming CEO, Jørgen Vig Knudstorp, shared his diagnosis of the problem with the board: "Rather than doing one adjacency every three to five years, we did three to five adjacencies every year." He later told the MIT professor David Robertson, "Suddenly we had to manage a

lot of businesses that we just didn't understand. We didn't have the capabilities, and we couldn't keep up the pace."

Interpretive: So, What...?

Interpretive questions—sensemaking questions—enable synthesis. They push you to continually redefine the core issue—to go beneath the surface and ask, "What is this problem really about?" Natural follow-ups to investigative, speculative, and productive questions, interpretive questions draw out the implications of an observation or an idea. After an investigative question, you might ask, "So, what happens if this trend continues?" After a speculative question, "So, what opportunities does that idea open up?" After a productive question, "So, what does that imply for scaling up or sequencing?"

Interpretive questions come in other forms, too: "What did we learn from this?" "How is that useful?" "Are these the right questions to ask?" In an interview on *The Tim Ferriss Show,* Daniel Ek reflected on what he considered his chief role as the CEO of Spotify: "It's almost always back to purpose—like, Why are we doing things? Why does it matter? How does this ladder up to the mission?"

> **Investigative questions dig ever deeper to generate nonobvious information. The most common mistake is failing to go deep enough.**

A decision-making process should always circle back to interpretive questions. They provide the momentum to move from one mode of inquiry to another, and they convert information into actionable insight. Even solid analyses are ineffectual if you fail to make sense of them. Ten years ago we worked with the top team at a high-end

European car manufacturer. When we brought up Tesla's recently released all-electric sedan, some of the engineers laughed. "There's a seven-millimeter gap between the door and the chassis," one said. "These people don't know how to make a car."

That was a serious error of sensemaking. By focusing on a technical imperfection, the automaker failed to spot the car's revolutionary appeal and missed the urgent competitive questions it should have raised.

Subjective: What's Unsaid?

The final category of questions differs from all the others. Whereas they deal with the substance of a challenge, it deals with the personal reservations, frustrations, tensions, and hidden agendas that can push decision-making off course. Volocopter's CEO, Dirk Hoke, once told us, "When we fail, it's often because we haven't considered the emotional part."

The notion of people issues as a competitive advantage gained prominence in the aviation industry in the early 1980s. Herb Kelleher, then the CEO of Southwest Airlines, recognized that the customer experience could be dramatically improved by putting employees first and empowering them to treat people right. SAS's CEO, Jan Carlzon, transformed the Scandinavian airline by "inverting the pyramid" to support customer-facing staffers in "moments of truth." (See "The Work of Leadership," HBR, December 2001.) In both cases the role of managers became to coach and support—not monitor and control—frontline staff. They learned to ask their *internal* customers, "How can I help?"

If you neglect this mode of questioning or fail to push hard enough in it, your proposed solution might be undone by subjective reactions even

though your analysis, insights, and plans are sound. British Airways is a cautionary example. In 1997 it was the world's leading carrier of international passengers, but surveys showed that it was viewed as staid and stuffy. So CEO Robert Ayling and his team decided to boost the airline's global image by replacing the British colors on the planes' tail fins with ethnic designs by artists from around the world.

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The designs were visually striking, but the top team badly misgauged employees' and customers' emotional reactions. The staff was distressed that a £60 million rebrand had been undertaken amid ongoing cost-saving measures. British business travelers —the airline's core customers—were strongly attached to the national branding and antagonized by its removal. And as if to underline the error, Virgin CEO Richard Branson announced that his planes would proudly "fly the flag." BA's new designs were withdrawn two years later, and the misjudgment contributed to Ayling's ouster.

Team members may be reluctant to explore emotional issues unless the leader provides encouragement and a safe space for discussion. They may fail to share misgivings simply because no one else is doing so—a social dynamic known as *pluralistic ignorance.* Leaders must invite dissenting views and encourage doubters to share their concerns.

Balancing Your Question Mix

We created a tool to help people assess their questioning styles and gave it to 1,200 global executives. Although the combined results showed an even distribution among the five styles we've described, individual answers revealed major imbalances. One category or another was barely

on the radar of more than a third of the executives. And follow-up interviews showed that many leaders were overly attached to the types of questions that had brought them success. They relied on those at the expense of other kinds of inquiries.

Assess your current question style. Self-awareness is an essential first step, of course, toward correcting or compensating for weaknesses. For insight into your questioning preferences and habits, you can take an abridged version of our self-assessment. After you've identified your strong points and weaknesses, three tactics can improve your mix. You can adjust your repertoire of questions; change your emphasis to reflect evolving needs; and surround yourself with people who compensate for your blind spots.

What's Your Question Mix?

The questions below are taken from the self-assessment we use with executives and their teams. Our wording here is very direct to avoid ambiguity, but you'll want to be more diplomatic in practice. Reflect on the five sets of questions and think about which ones come most naturally to you and which feel less comfortable, rating them on a scale of 1 (not part of my repertoire) to 5 (one of my go-tos). Compare the totals for each section and focus your attention on the lowest-scoring sets.

Investigative

- What happened?
- What is and isn't working?
- What are the causes of the problem?
- How feasible and desirable is each option?
- What evidence supports our proposed plan?

Speculative
- What other scenarios might exist?
- Could we do this differently?
- What else might we propose?
- What can we simplify, combine, modify, reverse, or eliminate?
- What potential solutions have we not considered?

Productive
- What is the next step?
- What do we need to achieve before taking it?
- Do we have the resources to move ahead?
- Do we know enough to proceed?
- Are we ready to decide?

Interpretive
- What did we learn from this new information?
- What does it mean for our present and future actions?
- What should be our overarching goal?
- How does this fit with that goal?
- What are we trying to achieve?

Subjective
- How do you really feel about this decision?
- Are there differences between what was said, what was heard, and what was meant?
- Have we consulted the right people?
- Are all stakeholders genuinely aligned?

Adjust your repertoire. Having established which types of questions you are most and least comfortable asking, you need to create a better balance. One way to begin is to remind yourself of the five categories before your next decision-making meeting and ensure that you're considering all of them. The CHRO at a large tech company we worked

with had us display the framework throughout an important company program.

You can also try out questions from your weak or missing categories in a few low-stakes situations. That will help you understand how things you're not accustomed to asking can open up a discussion. Steven Baert, a former chief people and organization officer at Novartis, described his process on *The Curious Advantage* podcast. "Previously [I focused on] listening to fix," he told the host. "'You have a problem. I need a few points of data from you so I can solve the problem.' [But now] I'm practicing listening to learn."

> **Team members may fail to share misgivings simply because no one else is doing so—a social dynamic known as *pluralistic ignorance.***

There's another step involved in adjusting your repertoire: You may need to discard some types of questions that served you well in the past. This point was captured in a *Financial Times* profile of Erick Brimen, CEO of the investment group NeWay Capital, who describes himself as a stubborn, goal-oriented micromanager. "The lesson I've been learning," he said, "is to let go of the 'how to get there' and to focus on 'where we are going.'"

Change your emphasis. Your question mix is a moving target, especially if you're now in a new role, company, or industry. As you take on bigger responsibilities, for instance, you'll face increasingly complex challenges, not just because they have more components but also because you're allowed to take larger leaps. Reflecting on her own trajectory, Patricia Corsi, the chief marketing, digital, and information

officer at Bayer Consumer Health, told us, "As your career progresses, you're offered riskier moves, into jobs you've never done, domains you don't know, and challenges you've never experienced.…[People] gamble on your ability to ask the questions that will help you learn."

With every job change, you face a challenge to adapt. The question mix that previously worked for you and helped you land your new role might now lead you astray. We spoke with Larry Dominique when he was adjusting to his new position as the SVP and head of Alfa Romeo and Fiat North America. "Drawing on my experience as an engineer, I'll go deeper into costs, resources-management efficiency, and customer satisfaction," he told us. But he recognized the danger of playing only to his established strengths: "I have to remind myself that my real value as a leader is to provide the big picture and to move beyond the questions that are comfortable for me."

Find others who can compensate. As previously noted, you don't need to come up with all the questions yourself; it should be a team effort. José Muñoz, the global president and COO of Hyundai Motor Company, sometimes delegates the questioner role. "The person who asks the question should be the one who's best equipped," he told us. "As the boss, I might invite someone on my team to continue a line of questioning." After completing his self-assessment, Robert Jasiński, then the managing director of Danone in Romania, said, "I'll pay more attention to what I value the least [the speculative category]. And if someone on my team is a good creative thinker, I'll do a better job of listening to what they have to say."

As a leader, you're responsible for noticing missing perspectives and giving people a chance to contribute. Gilles Morel, the president of Whirlpool Europe, Middle East, and Africa, told us, "I need to make space for the people who aren't like me to ask these questions that

I'm not good at asking." But getting everyone to contribute may not be easy. A change of leadership style to a more inquisitive approach can feel threatening. And the same query may elicit either vital input or defensiveness, depending on how it's phrased. One HR specialist finds that "Why?" questions sometimes trigger resistance and that a simple change to "How come…?" gets better results. David Loew, CEO of the biopharmaceutical company Ipsen, told us, "If you start asking closed or loaded questions, such as 'Why have you done it like this?,' it can feel like a police interrogation. That creates an unsafe space, and unease spreads to the rest of the team."

At least as important as the words used are the perceived attitude and intention of the questioner. The question "Is everyone OK with that?," for example, can be heard as either a genuine invitation to share reservations or an attempt to shut down the discussion. "When I ask searching questions, I make it clear that it's OK if you don't have an answer, or if you don't have one right away," Charles Bouaziz, CEO of the medical technology group MTD, told us. "Your tone often matters more than the question. People sometimes assume you're testing them." Problems of interpretation are exacerbated in virtual meetings, where intention is harder to assess; you can't be sure how your question has landed. "Without the full body cues of in-person meetings, leaders have to lean even more strongly into asking the right questions, and listening for misunderstandings or trigger points," Lisa Curtis, the founder and CEO of Kuli Kuli Foods, wrote in *Inc.* magazine.

You'll need to educate your team about the various kinds of questions and the importance of attending to all of them. Some of the most successful executives we know always start conversations with new people by creating a safe space and demonstrating openness and vulnerability. They operate in what Marilee Adams, the author of *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life* and the founder of the Inquiry

Institute, calls "learner mode," as opposed to "judger mode." The former is expansive and focuses on assumptions, possibilities, solutions, and meaningful action. The latter is reactive and shortsighted and focuses on discovering who's to blame.

But even when the entire team contributes, there's no guarantee that all five kinds of questions will be covered, especially in high-stress situations. Team members may have a shared blind spot. If that's the case, try assigning one question type to each member—at least until the group's collective repertoire is reasonably well balanced.

To Gilles Morel, the end goal is clear. "I want to create a questioning muscle within the team," he has said. "I need to set the stage so that my curiosity is amplified by the curiosity of others. Their questions should stimulate my questions." His remarks echo Jensen Huang's belief that leadership involves "getting everybody to ask and answer questions."

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By pinpointing the strengths and weaknesses in your interrogatory styles and considering the five types of questions we've outlined, you and your team can make smarter strategic decisions. You'll be more likely to cover all the critical areas that need to be explored—and you'll surface information, insights, and options you might otherwise have missed.

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