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# Change Your Questions Change Your Life

**Executive Book  
Summary**

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## Overview

This book has been used by many organizations in Canada, Europe and Asia in leadership development programs, universities, coach training, hospitals, mediation and marriage enrichment workshops. The ideas presented promise to change leadership styles, improve business and personal relationships, and build effective teams through thinking mindfully, not reactively. The premise behind this book is Question Thinking which is the ability to be in control of our own thinking because the way we ask questions and react to questions affect what happens in our lives. When in control of this part of our conversations, we can build stronger relationships and build skills that are sustainable.

“With our questions we make the world” (Adams, 2015, p. 8). She hopes that those reading this book will shift our thinking from fixed opinions and easy answers to thoughtful questions that spur curiosity and open-minded questions leading to collaboration and innovation.

## Meet Ben

Ben is the main character in the book and has taken on a new leadership position in a company that is on it's way to collapse. He has accepted the position knowing the condition of the company and he is also recently married. Both his job and marriage are not going well and he decided to submit his resignation after a major event happens in the company. His boss, whose mantra is “Question Every-

thing” refuses to accept his resignation in hopes Ben will meet with an executive coach in order to build his capacity and change the way he thinks about situations. She wants him to learn from his experiences and make the changes to better them. Ben does not understand how asking more questions is going to help him get any answers but he is willing to find out.



# How can you get the best answers without asking the best questions first?

## What do Questions Really Do?

- Have a critical role in communication
- When one increases the quantity and quality of the questions, they ask themselves and others, lives can be changed
- Can create an internal dialogue of questions and answers



## Question Thinking—What is it?

- Question thinking is using questions to approach all situations.
- As questions are refined, the answers are better articulated.
- Puts focused action into critical thinking which is more creative and effective
- Builds a foundation for making wise decisions

Questions are often asked without thinking about how they are asked, but because they are a significant part of thought processes, the questions need to be more intentional. When new questions are asked, the participants can be led on a different path and it helps to look at problems in a new way.

## Observer Self—Where to start?

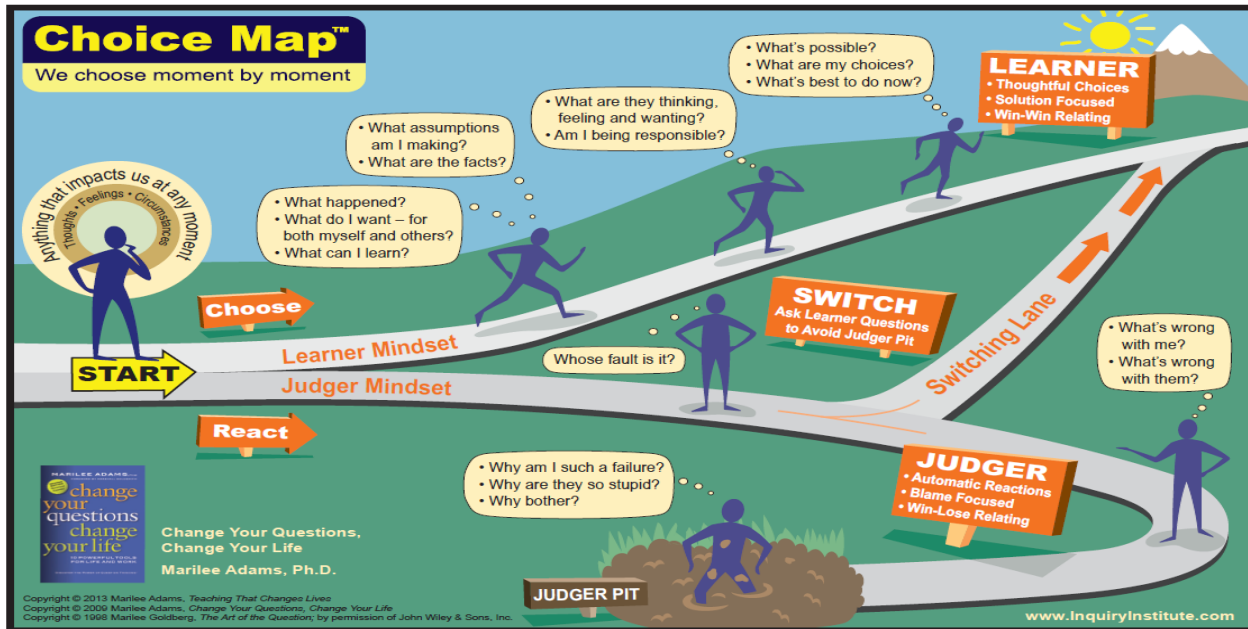
When one is looking to make a change, self-reflection is necessary to determine where the starting point is. When acknowledgement of the starting point occurs (observer self), then the work necessary to change can be targeted to get to the destination more quickly.

## Ben—Chapter 1

Ben prided himself in his ability to provide the answers to his employees. He did not know how asking more questions would help him propel the company to the success his boss expected from him. Ben needed to make some improvements in building relationships with his colleagues. Because Ben is always trying to find the answers, he can be seen as over-confident by his colleagues and respect is lost. As a leader, he felt his job was to “get the job done” and in turn, everyone else will get their jobs done. He had significant doubts about his leadership potential.

## The Choice Map

People walk on both paths at some point, dependent on the situation they are dealing with. The map can help people look at themselves and others in a more conscious way by looking at which path they are on instead of being controlled by what's happening.



## Learner Mindset

This type of mindset is one made of choice where the person assesses what has happened and what can be learned. One is conscious of the assumptions and the facts and is deliberate in determining a pathway to decision making. They determine what personal responsibility they have and think of the choices available when deliberating about the decision.

## Judger Mindset

This type of mindset is one made from reacting with a closed thinking approach. The person will have a defeatist attitude placing blame on themselves or others. The reactions take place without deliberating about the consequences of their actions. “No one can help anyone else from a Judger place”, (Adams, 2015)

## The Switch

To make the switch from Judger mindset to Learner mindset, the person must acknowledge they are in Judger mindset first. The “switching question” helps to continue the transition which is: How can I think differently about this situation? When two people are in Judger mindset, the person who switches into Learner mindset first has the advantage and the situation can be turned around for both people. As people continue to ask switching questions, they build up immunity to the Judger mindset.

## We're All Recovering Judgers

When a person begins to move into Judger mindset, their bodies have a physical reaction: increased muscle tension, increased blood flow, increased feelings of anxiety, decreased ability to listen. Having a Judger mindset can create the same patterns from the past and continue into the same negative spiral. Leaders are called upon to exercise judgements regularly but it is important to note that making a judgement is not the same as having a Judger mindset. Exercising judgement is making an educated decision such as choosing a new parts supplier. The Judger mindset is when someone is being judgmental where they are finding faults and focusing on the negative aspects. All humans move into Judger mindset at times and it can be a place of comfort for some. It is unrealistic for a person to always have a Learner mindset but the speed a person recovers from the Judger mindset is the most important.

“Change begins with the person who wants the change.” (p. 62)

### Ben's Colleague

Ben was having difficulty with a colleague named Charles. Charles had applied for the same position that Ben has but was passed over for the position. Ben feels he is consistently challenged by Charles and is frustrated with Charles' arrogance. Ben also feels Charles is trying to sabotage him and is unsettled by his loss of control as the leader. As Ben discussed his problems with Joseph, his coach, Joseph explains how Ben needs to separate his reactions from Charles' behavior. If Ben continues to react to Charles, he continues to give away his power. Joseph says to Ben, “Either you have your Judger or your Judger has you.” It is difficult for Ben to understand why Charles is acting in this way until Joseph asks him if there is a different way Ben can think about this situation with Charles. As soon as Ben asks himself that question, he immediately feels his body lose tension which elicits the Learner mindset. This is when Ben started to remove his emotions from the situation and look at it from outside of his own body.



## Switching Questions or The Switching Lane

The moment a person begins thinking about which mindset they are in, is the moment the switch starts to occur. It is being conscious of the mindset and an automatic switch into choice occurs. Having choice is a quality all people have and one always has control over them. Exercising choice is difficult because a change in mindset is required. The concept is simple but the action is not. When making a choice either way, our bodies change physiologically. As an example, asking "What if I get fired?" creates feelings such as panic, anxiety and hopelessness. These feelings become barriers to productive thinking. Although labels cannot be placed on people as Judger or Learner, some people linger in one mindset more than the other. Those lingering in Judger mindset can be successful but it always

comes with a cost. If a leader is often in Judger mindset, staff disengage and they lose trust. As a result, productivity and creativity are lowered. The work environment has significant stress and human resource problems where the leader and employees lose flexibility and adaptability.

When a person judges themselves, damage to self-confidence and depression can occur. Judgers often become frustrated about others and feelings of anger, resentment and hostility surface.

### Blame vs. Responsibility

Blame happens when one seeks to find whose fault it is and comes from a Judger mindset (Who's to blame?) To switch this blame one needs to accept their own responsibility for what has happened (What am I responsible for?)

"Blame keeps us stuck in the past. Responsibility paves the path for a better future. (p. 89)

### Characteristics of Learners

#### Judger Mindset

- Judgmental of self/others/facts
- Critical and negative
- Blame Oriented
- Defends assumptions
- Mistakes are bad
- Possibilities seen as limited
- Inflexible and rigid

#### Learner Mindset

- Accepting of self/others/facts
- Appreciative and has humility
- Responsibility oriented
- Questions assumptions
- Mistakes are to learn from
- Possibilities seen as unlimited
- Flexible/adaptive/creative

## See with New Eyes, Hear with New Ears

Leaders need to make difficult decisions at times and these decisions can significantly affect staff. Using the word “Learner” can imply a leader is soft and not able to make difficult decisions. Being “Learner touch” means having a toughness that fosters respect and loyalty encouraging staff to take risks and cooperate. Taking time to ask learning questions creates an efficient method for problem solving. It may slow down the decision –making process but the end result is well thought out and intentional.

### ABCD Choice Process

- |               |   |
|---------------|---|
| A - Aware     | Am I in Judger? Is this working?  |
| B - Breathe!  | Do I need to step back, pause and gain perspective?                         |
| C - Curiosity | What’s really going on (with me, others, the situation)? What am I missing? |
| D - Decide    | What is my decision? What do I choose?                                      |

### Ben Update

After discussing the Judger and Learner mindset with Joseph some more, asking his own questions for clarity and getting redirected by Joseph, Ben started to see the important role he has played in his dysfunctional team. Followers follow their leaders and when the leader is in Judger mindset, the team will reflect the same mindset. Ben acknowledged the Judger questions he con-

## Learner Teams

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Learner teams are successful when the leader asks learner questions. The questions need to inspire curiosity, motive and inspire creating a learning culture. The leader needs to listen with Learner ears asking:

“What do I appreciate about them?

What are the best strengths of each one?

How can I help them collaborate more productively?

How can we stay on the Learner path together?

What’s valuable here?

How can this contribute to what we are working on?” (p. 110 & 112)

When listening with Learner questions, blame is removed and understanding is gained. The Learner leader provides full attention and genuine care for the team. High-performing teams have a balance between advocacy and inquiry where they are free to ask challenging questions and engage in debates but the atmosphere still remains a Learner atmosphere.

# When the Magic Works

In Learner mindset, learners need to ask themselves the following questions:

- What assumptions am I making?
- How else can I think about this?
- What is the other person thinking, feeling and wanting?
- Am I defending my assumptions instead of questioning them?

If the learner enters into the conversation without assumption or having the mindset of not-knowing, the conversation will be productive and forward-thinking. Because conversations are often entered into with pre-conceived assumptions, already barriers have been put in place. “Most leaders do more telling than asking which is the reason they do not know what the actual problems are. Using the question, “How can we build on our strengths and successes?” turns the focus in a positive way. Curiosity is a crucial part of Learner mindset. Curiosity allows the leader to get a complete picture where the group can discover new information about each other or the situation.

“I know that if I ask good questions, people are smart enough to come up with their own best answers.” (p. 115)

## Q-Storming

Q-storming is just like brainstorming, except using questions, asking as many questions about the situation as possible. It is important the discussions and answers are withheld during this process because the discussion may cease the questioning. As more questions are asked, the range of possibilities increases. To start the Q-storming, the group needs to state the problem, the goals for change and the assumptions the group has about the situation. The questions need to be forward thinking questions and be conscious of the wording of the

questions using the words “I” and “we” to show self-ownership and collaboration. After many questions are asked, reviewing those questions is important to make sure there are no missed questions and to include any missed questions.

*“Where you stumble, there your treasure is.”*

*Joseph Campbell*



## Ben's Progress

### Ben's Wife

Ben's wife, Grace, was also experiencing difficulty at her work place. As one of the leaders, Grace found one of her employees to be unsure and in need of consistent affirmation. Once having the conversation with Ben about the Choice Map, Grace decided to use the techniques on her colleague and asked her "If you were the boss, how would you handle this?" This question got to the root of the issue and Grace determined her employee was seeking Grace's guidance because she was scared of losing her job. This conversation also empowered her employee to make creative decisions.

Ben and Grace also discussed the way the Learner mindset could help their marriage. Instead of judging each other's reactions and thoughts, they made a commitment to move into Learner mindset to divert arguments.



### Ben and Charles' Meeting

Ben took advice and cues from his meeting with Joseph. He noticed Joseph removed barriers between the two of them when they talked so that Joseph's desk did not create an authoritative barrier between the two of them. Ben did the same in his meeting with Charles. Ben started by stating his concerns for the team but not in an accusatory way, but collaboratively. Ben also acknowledged his own role in the team's lack of productivity and stated he had created unfair assumptions about Charles when Ben started with the company. Ben told Charles he was frustrated with the questions Charles continually asked. Charles told Ben that he asked the questions because he wanted to know what Ben wanted from him and he received Learner-Judger training and wanted to be more innovative. Once Ben understood more of Charles' perspective, Ben asked for his help to engage the team to be more successful. The two started a Q-storming session with Charles guiding the process. They reviewed the questions they asked and included all of the questions they

missed. Ben asked a very important question of himself: Am I willing to allow others to help me or contribute to solving our problems?

**"Every question missed is a potential crisis waiting to happen."  
(p. 140)**





## The Bottom Line

Leaders need to have awareness and the ability to self-manage. They must also be able to lead themselves before they can effectively lead others. The amygdala in the brain is responsible for a fight or flight reactions. Hormones are secreted to change our brain chemistry and this reaction is spread through the body. This same hormone is released when difficult situations arise and although flight is not the desired response, the body is left with the hormone's effects such as increased emotional response. When leaders allow these emotions take over, they lose the ability to be strategic and proactive.

“Failure is often crucial or learning how to do something well.” (p. 170)

## Discussion Questions

1. Is it possible to be completely objective towards a situation? If so, what kind of self-talk needs to take place to get to the objective place?
2. Being conscious of the questions you ask others, evaluate how often you are telling instead of asking. What are ways you can self-monitor to ensure you are asking more questions instead of advising or telling?
3. Think of a time when a question made a difference in your life. What was the question and why did it make a difference?
4. How are we able to assess the accuracy of our own assumptions when they may be so deeply engrained within our psyche?
5. We have all been on Judger teams and Learner teams. What were the qualities of those teams?
6. What are the problems with Q-storming? What are the advantages?
7. Describe a previous conversation that did not go well. Using the Learner mindset, how could you have changed the outcome of the conversation?
8. What changes do you foresee in your work and home life by using questions?

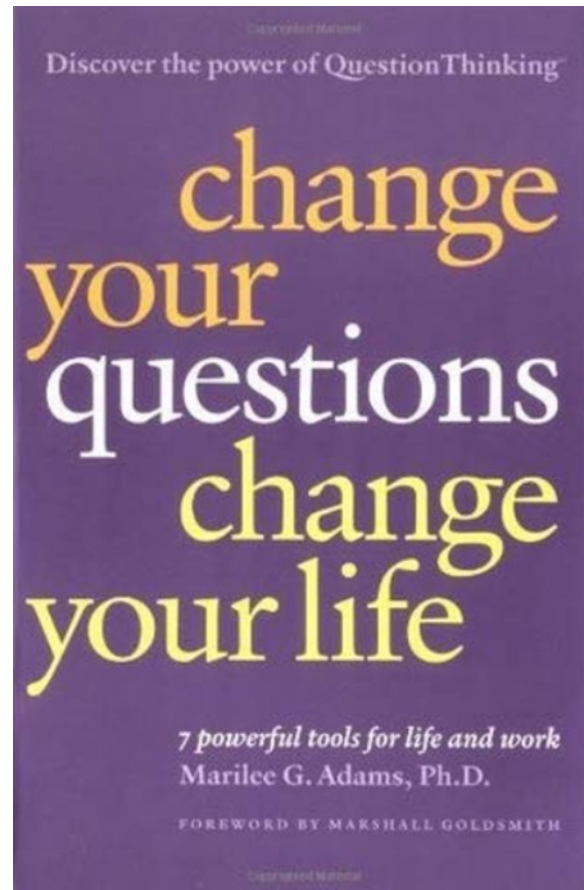


## Review

### Change Your Questions Change Your Life

This book is written in story format and is an easy read. It is filled with practical examples and realistic situations that leaders may encounter. The author also provides strategies for the reader to build their capacity in Learner mindset. The examples presented can be translated into all relationships whether that is at home, with friends or in the work place. Because the book is written from Ben's perspective, the reader has a clear perception of Ben's internal feelings and thoughts as he transforms his leadership style to become aware of Judger and Learner mindsets. This book is relatable to all people as we all navigate through relationships of all capacities.

The book has a significant amount of repetition throughout but because it is a self-help book on leadership, the repetition is welcomed as there are consistent reminders of the work the reader needs to do to be more effective.



Marilee Adams lives in New Jersey with her husband. Most of her work revolves around the Learner Mindset and incorporating questions. She is an executive coach, a professional speaker and a facilitator. She operates a best-selling business called the Inquiry Institute who provide professional development for leadership coaching. Marilee is also a professor at American University's School of Public Affairs and has affiliation to the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. She maintains an affiliation with Columbia University's Learning and Leadership Group at Teacher's College.

Adams, M. (2015). *Change Your Questions Change Your Life*. Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.