# Leading with Questions

BY MICHAEL MARQUARDT

Overview

Michael Marquardt, in his book Leading with Questions, suggested that questions can help leaders develop greater self-understanding and grow their organizations in a way that fosters leadership, creative thinking and a common vision and empowers people through shared responsibility. He pointed out several reasons why a questioning culture struggles and gave solutions to these issues, suggesting that we need to foster an environment where we give others the time and skills to ask great, open-ended questions, and the security of knowing that questions are to be valued rather than feared. He emphasized asking questions that give hope and optimism and that are posed with the intention to learn rather than judge where empathy for others are key to success. Marquardt suggested that

leader's need to model a questioning culture by finding places to ask questions rather than telling others answers and they need to step outside the norm and admit they don't know thereby showing a willingness to listen and learn. According to Marquardt, leading others into a questioning culture will also require positive people skills and the ability to change and overcome the crutches of the preceding culture. He asserted questions can help build teams by opening up discussion, injecting energy and improving problem solving methods.
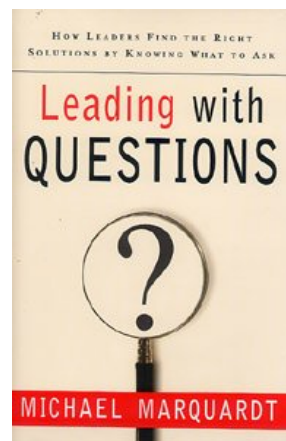
Why Ask Questions?

Marquardt opens the book by suggesting that questions are central to effective leadership practices. He shows that disaster can and has resulted when people don't ask questions, citing some of the most well know catastrophes in modern history including the Titanic, the Challenger and the Bay of Pigs. He also points out the need to nurture a question-friendly environment. Marquardt suggests that by asking questions leaders do not have to be the source of all knowledge which in turn encourages new ideas and forces others to think and solve problems. He states that questions help a person model a humble, learning, serving leader. Marquardt illuminates the benefits of a question laiden culture for both individuals and the organisation. He explains the motivational, relationship and cognitive benefits that organisations can receive if they foster a questioning culture. In the numerous benefits he cites, he highlights several that individuals seem to develop in this environment. He emphasizes self-esteem and self-awareness, conflict management, communication, comprehension and commitment, which all translate into the cultivation of leaders.

"6 Hallmarks of a Questioning Culture" (p.29)

1. Be willing to admit when you don't know.
2. Encourage questions rather than just allowing them.
3. Develop questioning skills in a positive way.
4. Embrace empowering questions and avoid disempowering ones.
5. Focus on the process of asking good questions and look for answers rather than beginning a quest for the illusive 'right' answer.
6. Value risk taking in a visible way.

Questions can be "an invitation, a request or a missile" (p.57)

How to Ask Effective Questions

Leaders need to move from "telling to asking" (p.60)

"The failure to ask questions ...allows us to operate with a distorted sense of reality" (p.18)

Marquard begins the second section with the common barriers that stop people from asking questions. He clearly and succinctly points out four reasons as well as question based solutions to theses issues. He suggests that people struggle with questions because of an instinct for self preservation, to which he responds that leaders need to relinquish control and welcome input from others, despite the inherent insecurity. He adds that leaders can use questions to get a clear self image if they get input from all directions. Additionally, a knowledge and experience gap in questioning skills, he asserts, can be overcome with mod-

eling, education and practice. Another key problem he discusses is discouraging environments where challenging the norm is not valued. Marquardt proposes that leaders need to encourage new ideas and empower others by accepting any risks involved and asking questions whether things are good or bad. He also maintains the need for leaders to become better teachers and models to overcome environmental deficiencies. The constant hurried state of being is the other main barrier he describes. To this Marquardt responds that leaders need to listen first and take time to survey the big picture, assessing all the factors in the situation before moving forward.

Marquardt goes on to describe what types of questions leaders should be asking and how

they should be asking them. To begin, he distinguishes between "good" and "poor" (p.64) questions. He asks leaders to be empathetic and design questions for individuals that are "supportive, insightful […] challenging […] and offered in an unpresumptuous sharing spirit" (p.66). He also advises that questions should generally be open rather than closed but gives examples where both can be useful. He warns that questioning should not seem like an interrogation and that leading questions and most importantly disempowering questions should be avoided.

According to Marquardt, leaders need to seek opportunities to further their knowledge by examining not only the questions they are asking but the way in which they ask them.

Be a learner not a judge

He highlights the need for leaders to learn how to inspire hopeful optimism. He suggests that this positive belief in that which could be, is better than being a reactionary, blame-filled, fear-breeding judge. He also reasserts the need for empathy in framing questions, suggesting leaders should ask "what has gone well and how can it be improved" rather than asking "what went wrong" (p.84). He sets out 5 steps that leaders can use to learn in a supportive manner.

1. Break the ice

2. Set the stage

3. Ask what you want to ask

4. Listen to the response(s)

5. Follow-up

Marquardt explains the fundamentals in developing a questioning culture. The key point he makes is that leaders need to move from "telling" to "asking" (p.98). To change to a questioning culture he says leaders must be prepared to create an environment that challenges the norm by integrating

questions into daily practice. Marquardt includes that people must know that questions are valued by accepting mistakes and rewarding questions. He reiterates that leaders need to model this through their desire to learn and teach and through cultivation of a trusting, safe environment where people know their opinions and ideas are valued and they, in turn, value and appreciate others. Marquardt points out two main types of opposition to question based leadership, answer dependency where people are accustomed to having someone tell them the answers and telling dependency where leaders feel compelled to give answers as they see it as their responsibility and base of power. He advises leaders to deal with answer dependency with honesty and reassurance to appreciate and empowering others. His solution to telling dependency is to encourage debate and ask about a change to a questioning culture, rather than trying to force one.

"Hear what isn't being said" (p.91)

A Questioning Culture in Action

In the third section of this book Marquardt restates many of the principles and ideas from the first two sections under four key leadership areas; people, teams, strategy and change. In discussing people management, Marquardt repeats the importance of empowerment. He again mentions that leaders should individualize their questions and maintain a "positive regard" in an empathic manner. He points out how questions can be used to help people learn and understand themselves and others on a deeper level. He suggests that questions enable innovative action as people see a potential future unconstrained by current realities and conventions. In this section Marquardt proposes that asking questions such as "what have you done to develop your leadership skills" (p.123) will help develop leadership capacity. He restates that questions move responsibility to others and allow them to develop into strong leaders as well. He adds that questions can and should guide how people interact.

Non-threatening questions, according to Marquardt, should be central to goal setting as they give ownership and can uncover potential problems. He also advises using questions to assess performance, giving people the opportunity to critique themselves first so all involved can learn from the experience.

In Marquardt's estimation, questions provide the footing for strong teams. He reiterates the impor-

Empower others to lead and succeed

tance of positive questions which clarify values, goals and group norms as well as engendering trust, commitment, respect and understanding. He adds that debate lets teams discuss issues openly and decide on the appropriate course of action, which they consequently support because of their involvement in the decision making process. Additionally, he supports that discussion helps groups come up with better ideas that are both more valuable and valid. He recommends that leaders ask reflective questions at the end of meetings to enhance learning. Marquardt says that it is necessary to clarify understanding to build trust and move toward solutions even when agreement is absent so that groups can continue to grow. He also distinguishes between two types of problems that leaders face, technical and adaptive. The difference, he suggests, is the existence of a response. There-

fore leaders need not just to search for answers but also for comprehension and in doing so they must embrace the "fresh" or "dumb" (p.145) questions. Marquardt suggests that strong leaders will not accept responsibility for team problems but will instead be prepared to use questions to change the way the group looks at the problem and allow them to move ahead. Questions allow for shared responsibility as teams seek answers. Questions can be useful in helping leaders strategise for and execute changes. The new approach or view that questions bring can uncover possibilities for the organisation. Marquardt repeats that in order to move toward this future, leaders must ask good, empowering questions and teach others to do the same. He reiterates that they need to challenge norms and admit when they don't know. He points out that it is necessary to ask questions of people who have a

vested interest both inside and outside the organisation. He suggests that customers have knowledge to improve the way organisations operate, including customer satisfaction and loyalty while vendors and allies provide valuable experience and insight into best practice. Marquardt adds that the community at large can be a valuable source of information and provides leaders with the opportunity to open themselves up to ask and respond to questions others may have. He suggests that "how" is one of the most useful questions for leaders to ask as it suggests a way to possible solutions in an empowering way.

What do you see?
By shifting perspective you might see an old woman or a young woman.

Questions and Educational Leaders

Effective educators are most likely already doing many of the things that Marquardt suggests. Much of what he proposes comes down to the human side of education. Knowing yourself, valuing others, serving humbly, and in essence, managing people are key aspects that good educational leaders already know they need to both embody and foster in others. As they read

Leading with Questions most leaders will likely be nodding their heads.

In theory, educators could use questions not just in the classroom but also around the school and beyond. They could help build quality relationships with staff, students, parents and guardians and the community. These relation-

ships can be nurtured by seeing people as valuable and their questions as opportunities for growth and improvement. If educational leaders start by asking questions of and about themselves they can get a clear understanding of where they are at personally and professionally and help them to decide where they need to go.

Painting:
Optimism
By: John
Slaby

A questioning culture, in theory, should also lead to truly shared mission, vision, goals. With an environment that promotes open questioning and empowers people to share their ideas and opinions without fear of negative consequences, this practice will provide the opportunity for leaders to gather a true picture of where they are at and make good decisions

about where their school or school division is going.

Educational leaders are in the business of valuing people. If they can truly listen to people around them and ensure that concerns are heard and addressed, that all voices matter and will be heard and that there is no such thing as a stupid question, the resulting culture shift, that they both promote and model, has the potential to foster powerful relationships in schools. The need for "right" answers along with the assumption that educational leaders are and should always be source for these

could slowly change. Marquardt repeats the importance of empowering people in each section of this book. For educators and especially educational leaders this can be more than a noble goal.

The theory behind Marquardt's Leading with Questions is very sound. In practice, as it is in so many situations, there is a greater complexity for educational leaders to make the shift to a questioning culture where collaboration with all is encouraged and valued. Marquardt points out "answer" and "telling" dependencies which will undoubtedly be concerns for educational leaders who are new to asking questions. Leaders will need

"Questions are the mode of healthy group conflict"… "Statements are the mode of unhealthy group conflict" (p.150)

to overcome these with honesty, patience and especially communication. Communication will also be necessary to deal with the negative consequences of asking everyone's opinion. When opinions differ, and one answer is chosen over another, even via questions, there will be politics and relationship issues. Leaders will need to address concerns that come with asking for an opinion and then not choosing it even if good logical reasons are used to back up the decision. Educational leaders will need strong

communication and team building skills and practices with all parties involved to ensure that all opinions even those that are cast aside are still valid and valued. A procedure to show appreciation for ideas, even unused ones could be helpful.

As Marquardt suggests, it is important to ask questions of people to be sure you are meeting their needs and that they feel valued. In practice however, educational leaders also need to be wary that they don't take their collaborative efforts too far. The major costs of

collaboration are time, energy and emotion (Nabarra and Shaw, 1995) all of which educators value highly. People don't want a say in decisions that don't affect them (Tschannen-Moran et al., 2000). Educational leaders need to be sure to involve people in decision in which they have a vested interest so they don't see it as a waste of their time rather than a thoughtful attempt to include them.

Perhaps the greatest task for educational leaders in implementing any change is to get people to buy into

the idea. It is great on paper and educators use it already at least to some degree but to convince them to embrace it wholeheartedly without reservation will be a challenge. The tendency for people to go with what they know, along with a fear of change make for difficult obstacles for some educators to overcome and it will be important for leaders to follow Marquardt's implementation advice by modeling questions, connecting the values and vision to a questioning culture,

pointing out and providing opportunities for questions and providing ongoing professional development for continual learning.

If educational leaders can overcome these obstacles, they can look forward to empowerment, optimism, innovation, and growth for themselves and for the people for and with whom they are working.

Nabarra, C. and Shaw, P.. (1995). What is a Collaborative School? FWTAO/FEAO Newsletter, Nov./Dec., 46-49.
Tschannen-Moran, M., Uline, C., Hoy, A., and Mackley, T. (2000). Creating Smarter Schools Through Collaboration. Journal of Educational Administration, 38(3), 247-260 Retrieved February 27, 2004 from Proquest database. Armidale:2000. 38, 3 p.247- Proquest, 2/27/2004

Critical Summary
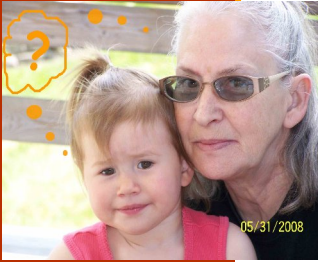
Starting Out

- Increase your awareness of questions
- Try not to ask questions for an hour
- Ask yourself questions silently
- Decide what you want from a question before you ask it (p.173)

OF WHAT SHOULD QUESTIONERS BE WARY?

Marquardt has done leaders a service with Leading with Questions. It is a well written, easy read filled with world events, and personal and professional stories tied together with research. It brings to life a key tool that, if properly used, can make a real difference in people's lives. He has a clear teachable point of view (TPOV) (Tichy and Bennis, 2007) which he consistently articulates throughout. He suggests optimism and empowerment and his style and content reflect that in a genuine way. This book will leave you feeling good about the questions you currently ask and looking for opportunities to ask more.

Perhaps as a result of his outlook or as a conscious choice due to his focus, Marquardt does not tackle some of the more negative aspects involved with the collaboration he proposes. For me he doesn't make

a strong attempt to answer why his idea "won't work" (p.141). He adequately addresses the dependencies on giving and receiving answers but neglects what to do when concerns arise. I would like to have heard his insights on how types of questions change as people and businesses grow to allow new questioning leaders to see and evaluate their progress toward the goals Marquardt sets out for a questioning culture. I would find some sort of a progression useful so as to have some idea where I currently find myself. Clearly this is beyond the scope of what Marquardt has chosen to include but at the same time it is a useful piece of the puzzle for someone growing into the leadership position without reams of experience to fall back on.

The practicality of Marquardt's book is an asset. He clearly

and consistently provides example questions which can be adopted or adapted by leaders for their own use.

I appreciated the format in so far as the well documented examples he used, the questions he provided and especially the detail he employs to clarify his concepts. However I do believe he could have made the book more useful had he devoted more to the practical side of changing to a questioning culture. More specifically, I believe that there may have been some value in scaffolding current practices to questioning ones. Again this is a personal choice on Marquardt's behalf.

The fact that Marquardt has such a clear TPOV is encouraging and his consistency with his core message is initially refreshing but it also becomes repetitive in places and I believe I would have appreciated

more parsimony. The third section left me wanting slightly, in part because it repeated many of the concepts from the first two but also because it focussed on four specific areas of people, teams, and strategy and change. All were worth reading but I believe it would have made sense for Marquardt to delve deeper into equally relevant areas such as the use of questions in self-refection and even organisational learning. In addition I feel it would

have been valuable to at least mention the threats to the collaboration Marquardt proposed, including those of energy, time and emotion as previously cited.

Marquardt put forth an easy and interesting read that I devoured. His real world examples and clarity of ideas made for easy digestion. The relevance, simplicity and obvious benefits in the application of the principles and practices that he suggests, permit for ease of transition from general leadership practices to skills for educational leaders. There are a few personal preferences

I would have liked to see included but overall this book is definitely worth the time and effort. I would recommend reading at least the first two sections of Leading with Questions to learn what good questions are as well as why and how to ask them.

Tichey, Noel M. and Bennis, Warren G., (2007). Judgement: How Winning Leaders Make Great Calls. Penguin Group, New York.

Discussion Questions

1. What questions do you have about <u>Leading with Questions</u>?

2. Is there ever a time to stop asking questions? When would that be and why?

3. Are there times when you are forced to be the judger? How can you prepare yourself so as to minimize, avoid, or embrace these times?

4. Marquardt lists two types of resistance to a questioning culture, "answer dependency" and "telling dependency". Can you think of any other forms of resistance that a leader may encounter in trying to help this idea take hold? How would you meet these opportunities?

5. Are there times when shared responsibility can be a liability as much as an asset? Does the buck need to stop with someone sometimes? If so, how can these two mindsets co-exist?

6. Marquardt presupposes that people will thrive in a positive environment. Can you think of anyone who is more of a realist than an optimist? How could you help them begin to see the silver lining?

Sample Questions

Marquardt uses questions prolifically throughout the book. Here are a few that reflect his core ideas.

Concept	Question	Page
Open Ended Questions	What needs to be done?	19
Challenge Status Quo	Why must it be that way?	72
Learner Mindset	What is good or useful about this?	79
Forward Looking	What possibilities does this open up?	79
Optimistic	What can we learn from this?	79
Empower Others	What are you trying to accomplish?	88
Build Relationships	How solid are our relationships among ourselves?	105
Understand Self	What has happened to my reflection time?	107
Deal with Dependency	Would you like people to solve their own problems rather than coming to you?	111
Serve Humbly	How can I help you?	119
Foster Reflection	How do you learn best?	120
Encourage Action	What will you commit to do by when?	122
Evaluate	What does our leadership team do that gets in the way of your job?	127
Listen	Are we listening to each other carefully?	138
Involve All Stakeholders	What are the common areas of interest?	151
Enable Change	What will you need from us in the future?	158
Develop Vision and Values	Are we being honest with ourselves?	165