

5 Essential Questions to Guide Your Leadership Quest

by Mette Norgaard

Think of three words that characterize the way you lead. If I were to ask ten people who have reported to you directly or indirectly, would they come up with similar words? The greater the match between your answers and theirs, the greater the clarity of your leadership voice. When your voice is clear, you can attract the right people more easily, and they can better assess if they want to work with you.

Whether your voice is brazen or discreet, eloquent or hesitant is irrelevant. What matters is that it is *yours*. Does your way of leading bear your imprint, your unique signature, or are you copying someone else's? Are you giving shape to your organization, or is your organization molding you?

Obviously, it is not enough to just be authentic; you also need to get the job done while creating a better future. Are you trusted to deliver results on time, within budget, and to expectations? That is, do people count on you to manage things well? Beyond that, do you accomplish things in a way that helps shape the future, that taps into ever more of the organization's potential?

Years ago I read an article by Peter F. Drucker in which he shared seven personal experiences that taught him how to grow and change. The first occurred when he was barely 18 years old. Once a week he would attend the opera, and one day he saw Verdi's *Falstaff*, an opera rarely performed at the time. Drucker was overwhelmed. Later, he found out that Verdi had been 80 years old when he wrote this opera "with its gaiety, its zest for life, and its incredible vitality." Why would a man, already famous and one of the leading opera composers of his century, decide to write this exceedingly demanding opera? Drucker found the answer in Verdi's own words, "All my life as a musician, I have striven for perfection. It has always eluded me. I surely had an obligation to make one more try."¹ This is the sentiment I hope will govern your quest to be an outstanding leader.

This article is for anyone who cares about leadership, regardless of the setting. It is for the rookie who wants a head start, and also for the pro who wants to bring her game to a higher level. It is for anyone humble enough to apprentice themselves to the craft of leadership, yet audacious enough to seek the elusive goal of mastery.

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Most managers believe that nothing is as practical as activity. As a consequence, we tend to value stamina. We want to be in good health so we can handle the incessant interruptions and our 24/7 to-do list. We are so enamored with the self-starting, action-oriented go-getter that we confuse activity for impact. In reality, there is nothing as practical as a good theory, as the great social psychologist Kurt Lewin noted.

All of us are guided by assumptions or beliefs about the way things work, whether we recognize it or not. In its simplest form, you have a theory that if you do *a*, then *b* will happen. When that works, your prediction is confirmed, that is, your theory was accurate in that particular set of circumstances. If it did not work, you hopefully adjust your thinking instead of repeating the same mistake. The more conscious your theories-in-action, the faster you can learn; and in today's world, the race is won by the fastest learners.

In *The Human Side of Enterprise*, Douglas McGregor observed that a leader must understand the nature of human beings in order to get results, just as a civil engineer must understand the nature of water to build a dam. If an engineer tried to make water flow upstream, to go against its nature, people would not blame the water for poor performance. Instead, they would consider the engineer to be incompetent. Curiously, when a leader tries to direct people against

their natural inclinations, we often blame people for resisting change. We need to put an end to such nonsense.

The disregard for good theory has three serious consequences. First, there is *no disciplined inquiry*. Instead of searching for answers to a specific question, most let the latest management fashion set the agenda and provide prefabricated answers. Thus, having heard Jack Welch speak, managers decide to force-rank employees hoping to achieve his GE-like returns. Or, reading Gallup's research on strength-based management, they tend people's talents to boost productivity.

Disciplined inquiry, on the other hand, requires *you* to set the agenda by asking the right questions. A fuzzy question, like "How do we become more profitable?", is useless and will only generate fuzzy results. By contrast, a clear question can get to the heart of the matter. For example, a question Andy Grove, former CEO of Intel, deliberated early in his career was, how does a company's growth rate relate to its employees' ability to grow?²

The second troubling consequence of not having a guiding theory is *no disciplined implementation*. Seeking a quick fix, many managers cherry-pick the easy parts of a solution set and ignore the rest. For example, forced ranking was a small part of GE's highly ambitious, high-performance culture. Similarly, working with Gallup's Strengthfinder is easy when compared to adopting their full solution set. Most managers neither design the best solution to fit their own culture nor have the discipline to see it through. As a result, the intervention does not take

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hold and the leaders start looking for the next ready-made solution. Employees soon come to recognize this pattern and give only their half-hearted support to such half-hearted interventions. The cynics, who have been through this cycle many times, check out and play BS bingo with the latest set of buzzwords.

By contrast, when there is disciplined implementation, leaders test and tweak a solution set before deciding to launch. They work out the bugs before large-scale implementations.

Finally, without a theory there can be *no disciplined learning*. Today, the most important competency is arguably learning how to learn, and for leaders this is critical, as they influence the learning of everyone around them. The problem is that we still believe people learn from experience. But the reality is, as the quality expert Edward Deming would say, we only learn from experience when that experience is connected to a theory.

The good news is that when you are clear about your theory and regularly reflect on your practice, resistance can be thought of as free admission to your own leadership gym. Because, just like working with weights help you build strength, so does every problem help you develop “leadership muscle.” Over time, you deepen your understanding of human nature and the nature of change, and as you see things more clearly you can use your energy more wisely.

The process of developing and articulating your leadership theory is straightforward and completely within your control. All you need is the desire to be a great leader, the courage to look honestly at yourself and your results, and the discipline to make time for reflection. The payoff is greater clarity, coherence, and credibility. More importantly, instead of regurgitating the words of various CEO’s, generals, coaches, or professors, you will be the author of your own words – *you* will become a leadership authority.

Questions shape the Quest-in-Action

We grow toward that which we persistently ask questions about.³ Consider the employee who is preoccupied with questions such as, “what will the boss think”? or “how can I make more money”? versus the one who gets out of bed and wonders, “what will make my team engage whole-heartedly”? or “how can I wow my customer”? Naturally, their lives and careers unfold very differently.

Below such surface questions lie more important ones about belonging, purpose, power, good and evil, and so forth. As human beings, we need to answering such questions for ourselves, instead of defaulting to the prescribed answers of our “tribe.” Only when we look honestly at such questions and ourselves can we develop a certain level of wisdom. Likewise, a leader must answer a few primary questions about identity, change, people, power, and accountability. By revisiting such questions at ever-deeper levels, you can develop a thoughtful and wise approach to leadership. You can stop running round like a gerbil in a wheel and use your energy effectively.

Following are five essential questions to guide you in such a leadership quest. The right answers are the honest answers.

(1) *Why do you want to lead?* To understand what has shaped you as a leader, consider where you came from. Reflect on the people and experiences that have influenced your beliefs about leadership. Also, consider why you choose to lead. If it is just the money and prestige, there may be easier ways to get that. Regardless of what drives you, make sure it is worth your time, your energy, and ultimately your life.

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(2) *How do you lead change?* For decades, managing change was likened to going to war. This metaphor was widely used by Michael Porter at Harvard Business School, and at one time HBS even prided itself as being the West Point of business. By contrast, Wharton’s Russell Ackoff likened change to artistic creation. The metaphors you use reveal your unique beliefs about setting direction and execution.

(3) *Why should anyone be led by you?* What type of people do you want to attract. You might prefer highly competitive or collaborative individuals. Or, maybe you like salt-of-the-earth, loyal employees instead of the restless, ambitious type. Most importantly, what do the people you want to work with expect from a leader?

(4) *What’s the source of your power?* Power is the capability to get things done. Most employees prefer to work for powerful leaders, because such leaders are more likely to get resources and provide the access to get the job done. Interestingly, it is often powerless bosses who can be the most pushy and petty.

(5) *To whom are you accountable?* The specter of corporate malfeasance or government corruption makes this a critical question. You may see your first duty as being to the shareholders or the customers, while others would say it is to yourself, so you can pass the mirror test each morning. Yet others put the employees or the communities on top of the list. Such choices govern many day-to-day decisions as a leader.

As you reflect on each question, pay special attention to the thoughts that make you uneasy, be they embarrassingly naïve, quixotic, Machiavellian, or prejudicial. That is, pay attention to both your “idealistic twin” and your “evil twin”. If you reject or deny parts of who you are, you cannot be an authentic leader. Self-deception and spin kills credibility.

This is not about giving the *right* answer; it is about articulating *your* answer. When in doubt, look to your own behaviors. For example, if you champion empowerment but take over every time things are not up to your standards, you clearly value high standards over development. There is nothing wrong with that, just don’t say one thing and do another. It irritates people and undermines your credibility.

After you have answered each of the primary questions, you can draw on all the answers to craft your own leadership theory. Then, continually connect your experience to your theory. At least once a quarter, reflect on how you are doing and make adjustments.

Like Verdi’s quest for perfection, mastering leadership is a life-long journey. I invite you to deepen your practice and become a learning leader.

¹ *My Life as a Knowledge Worker*, by Peter F. Drucker, Inc. Feb. 1997, pp. 76-78

² *The Education of Andy Grove*, by Richard S. Tedlow, Fortune, December 12, 2005, p. 122

³ *Human systems grow toward what they persistently ask questions about.* Juanita Brown