

A network diagram with nodes and connecting lines, featuring several large question marks. The background is dark grey, and the nodes are light grey circles of varying sizes. The question marks are also light grey circles, with the largest one in the upper right quadrant.

# Questions that create connections and impact for leaders

A framework for executives using Enterprise Social Networks (ESN)

Oscar Trimboli & SWOOP Analytics

## Summary

Leaders asking questions on Enterprise Social Networks increases engagement with employees by a factor of 10 times more than making announcements. This creates high performing organisations as employees speak up more often about the issues impacting their productivity and increasing customer and citizen satisfaction.

## Not all questions are equal

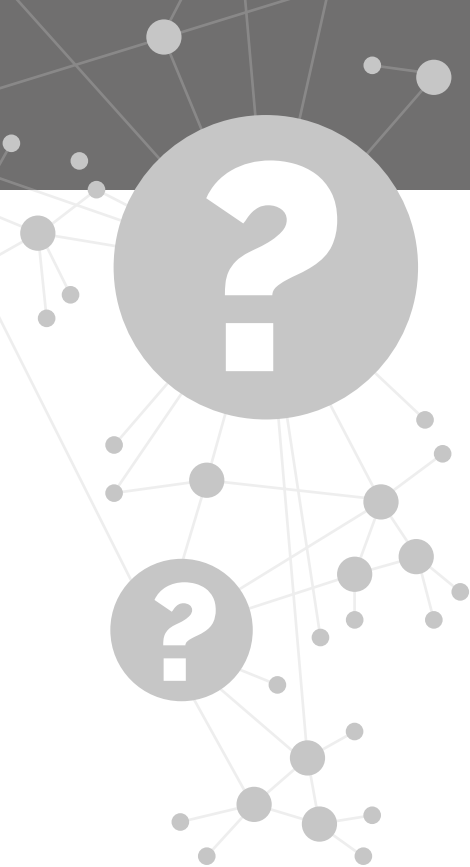
This Whitepaper explains the fears leaders face when asking questions, the cost of NOT asking questions, neutral questions and outlines a simple actionable question framework for leaders to lead with 'What' and 'How' questions rather than 'Why' questions.

## Actions for Leaders

1. **Acknowledge** that you have heard what's said with a comment.
2. Outline a **Timeframe** in which you will respond with action.
3. Confirm the **Action plan** and implementation timing.
4. **Communicate progress** on the action plan frequently.

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## The cost of NOT asking questions

Listening at scale happens through questions. The cost of not asking questions is apathetic and disengaged employees, teams and organisations.

During a time of crisis like we're experiencing with the COVID-19 pandemic, it's even more important for employees to feel connected – to their colleagues, managers and leaders.

Why do most leaders not use questions on Enterprise Social Networks to harness to power of everyone in their organisations to solve the most complex and long-term organisational problems?

## Why don't leaders ask questions?

### Fear of the answers

This most significant barrier to asking questions is the consequences of the answers for leaders. The consequences of not asking the questions can be even higher. Employees leaving, customers leaving, projects over budget, projects that deliver poor quality results, regulator, and media scrutiny.

**The Cost of NOT asking is always higher than asking.**

Practical barriers that leaders reference when discussing why they don't ask questions are more fundamental.

### What if we can't fix the issue?

All issues can be fixed, it's a question of priority and who by. Most organisational issues are noticed at the front line and can be fixed at the front line. Leaders need to ask more 'what' and 'how' questions to help the front-line people notice, define and solve their own issues.

Most leaders fix the issue – it's a collective response – unleash your team and organisation's potential by trusting that **together everyone can fix it.**

### What if the answers point to my leadership?

Sometimes they will, sometimes they won't. The more you ask, the less likely it will be about you. Rarely will the answers be surprising to you. You know your strengths and weaknesses. It's a great leadership moment to be vulnerable and acknowledge your flaws. Ironically, this will create a greater connection with your teams, especially if you ask them to help you.

## What if my leader sees the answers?

Let's hope they do. It creates an opportunity for different voices to make a similar point that you have probably already made to your leader. This will stimulate a different perspective for both of you. Welcome the opportunity to be transparent with your leader and your peers. It will harness different mindsets, discussions and resources.

In this real-life example from Australian Catholic University, an employee used the organisation's Enterprise Social Network to ask if it was possible to have a stingless beehive on a campus.

Within 24 hours, the university's Chief Operating Officer and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Dr Stephen Weller, had commented on the post expressing his interest in the idea. Just over a month later, the campus boasted a stingless beehive on its Brisbane campus. [Read more in this case study.](#)

This was an example of a leader listening to his employees and taking action, which resulted in the employee feeling heard.



**Daniella Doherty**  
14 November 2018

Hello All, Just wondering if ACU have considered having Bees or Native/Stingless bees on their Campuses? I have four Native/Stingless bee hives at my house, and my small children adore them. I understand that not all our campuses have large ovals of grassed leafy areas like that at Brisbane Campus, however I know of many Hotels, Shopping Centres and even the Childrens Hospital in the heart of Brisbane City that actually have Bee Hives on their rooftops! Maybe ACU could consider this in the face of the global decline of bee populations, and Staff and Students could also enjoy their presence on campus.



**Stephen Weller** OK I think I am interested Daniella Doherty - I appreciate that the health of our bees is an issue requiring attention and appreciate that this could be an area we could assist. [redacted] can you please consider and have a discussion with [redacted] and see whether you think this might be something we could consider?

Like · Reply · 15w

## Not all questions are equal

SWOOP research shows questions make up between only 10 to 12% of messages on ESNs. Despite questions being rare, engagement with questions is transformational. Data from [SWOOP Analytics shows asking a question leads to 150 per cent more replies](#). Have you stopped to ask yourself if all questions are equal?



Asking a **question** is a great way of starting a conversation and leads, on average, to...

**150% more replies**

How many questions have you asked recently?

**SWOOP** Check your **Curiosity Index** in **SWOOP** and see your own percentage compared with others in your organisation.

### Questions are either open or closed.

Closed questions provide the responder with a binary or multiple-choice alternative. Closed questions are not wrong. Closed questions should be used when the leader is conscious of the consequences of the closed questions. As a guide, closed question should be reserved for when progress and actions matter more.

Open ended questions are used to expand, explore and evaluate. Open ended questions aren't better than closed questions. Too many open-ended questions can result in frustration for the responders. Leaders need to consider when and how to use open-ended questions to be more productive.

## Neutral questions

Some people make statements and think they are questions. Some people ask loaded questions. Biased questions are about advocacy rather than inquiry. Biased questions are more than 7 words in length.

Questions are about exploring **connection, curiosity and clarity**.

Neutral questions create reflection and generate options.

Neutral questions engage and empower the responder with the opportunity to share their perspectives and possible solutions. They can see themselves in your questions and they can see and hear a future that they have created with you – their leader.

Neutral questions come from an **orientation of humility**.

They stimulate curiosity in the person asking and the person being asked.

Questions need a context. Asking questions without a context confuses the responder. Create context in time, problem, and place and you will gather higher quality and more thoughtful answers from the responders.

In this example, [ANZ Bank CEO Shayne Elliott](#). Shayne was at a leadership conference where they were talking about sustainability and the importance of it to ANZ. He picked up his phone and posted in ANZ's Environmental Sustainability group on Yammer, asking **"What else can we re use or recycle by making it easier for our staff?"**

Environmental Sustainability

**Shayne Elliott** – March 8 at 9:01 AM from iPhone

We made good progress recycling coffee cups. I moved the battery recycling bins to be more visible and seeming to get good usage. We have the re usable bag stations. Even our library trolleys are about reuse!

What else can we re use or recycle by making it easy for our staff? I was thinking home printer cartridges. Any ideas?

UNLIKE REPLY SHARE ...

You, Julie Dorrian (Property), Kate Davies (77035), and 50 others like this Seen by 542

1 share #EnvironmentalSus... #Onecampus #Beatplasticpollut... #Kickthecup

Show 55 previous replies

**Fiona Buchanan** – Wednesday at 9:50 AM

we need a branch buy (borrow?) swap and sell site!

LIKE REPLY SHARE ...

Dan Haynes and Pooja Jerajani like this

**Alysha Wolsey (78588)** in reply to **Fiona Buchanan** – Wednesday at 9:51 AM from iPhone

I thought that! Maybe even just a swap site :)

LIKE REPLY SHARE ...

Dan Haynes likes this

Write a reply

[This is a great example](#) of the power of **What** questions. As a result, the replies came flooding in, filled with suggestions.

Within a few weeks, ANZ's Environmental Sustainability team had re-designed signage for the company and began an education campaign, based off ideas from the Yammer post.

Another great example of a leader asking a question from his employees is from Service NSW CEO Damon Rees, who heads a state government agency in Australia's most populous state. Damon posted on the agency's Enterprise Social Network [asking if anyone had ideas how senior leaders could be more attentive](#).

**“How can senior managers listen more attentively to your ideas and concerns? What channels can we use and how often? Please share your thoughts below!”** Damon asked.

This is a powerful example of **How** questions combined with **What** questions.

**Service Time – The Beginning**

**Service NSW**

**Damon Rees** 4 September

\*\*\*\* Keen to get your ideas - PMES Survey results \*\*\*\*

Every day I come to work impressed by the calibre of people I get to work with. We asked you to speak up in this year's People Matter Employee Survey and again you went above and beyond. Not only did we hit an astounding 100% response rate, our engagement score of 72% remains one of the highest scores across the public sector.

I'm confident we are on track to building a world class organisation and team! You can view our PMES results in detail on the Intranet but in the meantime, I'm keen to get your ideas on one of the points you shared in the survey as an opportunity for us to grow.

**How can senior managers listen more attentively to your ideas and concerns? What channels can we use and how often? Please share your thoughts below!**

**Vanessa Perry** I'd like to see more 'hands on' experience for senior management. Send them out to various centres to watch & learn from our frontline staff. Get on the counter and process some transactions themselves! Spend a day (or a couple) getting to know staff, talking to them, engage with staff as well as our customers. Send them out to regional areas as things are done different in the city compared to the country.

**Jennifer Baglin** I worked for a leading hardware retailer and every year during our blackout period (Christmas - no leave, no training) all head office team were sent to stores for "hammer time". Stores got additional support with helping customers, serving on registers, doing car service, at no cost to their budgets. This gave our head office team true insight into frontline service and really helped when they were drawing up procedural change. Its a great concept!

**Melissa Stock** I really liked the idea of having a senior leader allocated to a Centre as an ambassador in head office. They could Video conference in at a team meeting or prearranged lunchtime once a quarter for open discussions around up coming projects and the Service NSW strategy.

**Damon Rees** Thanks Melissa Stock. I really like this idea and have been discussing this with Jody Grima. It also has the benefit of helping the leader who is partnered with the Centre to maintain a much better understanding of what is really happening on the front line and be a better ambassador for our customers and staff. I spent several years at Woolworths and saw this work really well there. Would you mind joining us for a discussion on this at an upcoming ELT meeting to help us shape how this could work?

**Workplace**

This post resulted in a whole new concept at Service NSW where every senior leader spends at least a day a year working in a frontline role, an idea from a frontline worker who suggested leaders “come and try my job” for a day.

The new initiative was an example of the power of a leader listening to his employees, learning from them and responding with action.

## Categories of questions

The simplest way to think and categorise questions is What, How, Where, Which, Who and Why based questions.

Many people have been taught to Start with Why - this is great for setting strategy for an organisation, when it comes to creating engagement Why questions are perceived as harsh and judgmental. Why questions trigger historic events and emotional reactions for responders.

### Start with What and How questions

What and How questions should form 80% of your approach. What and How based questions help to orientate the question from the responder's perspective rather than the leader's perspective.

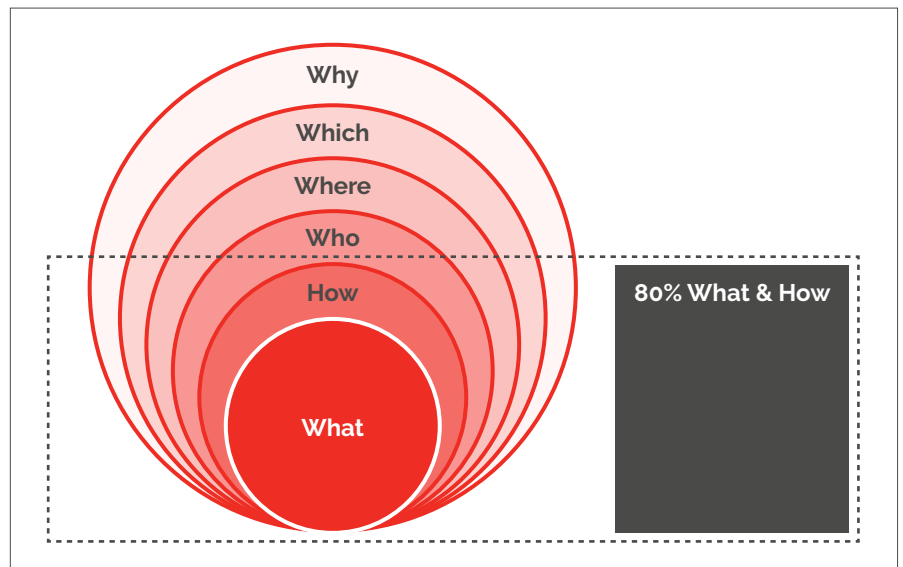


Figure 2 - Question hierarchy model for enterprise social networks (ESN)  
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### Example of Neutral Questions

Neutral Questions generate **expansive answers**.

(4 words) *What needs to change?*

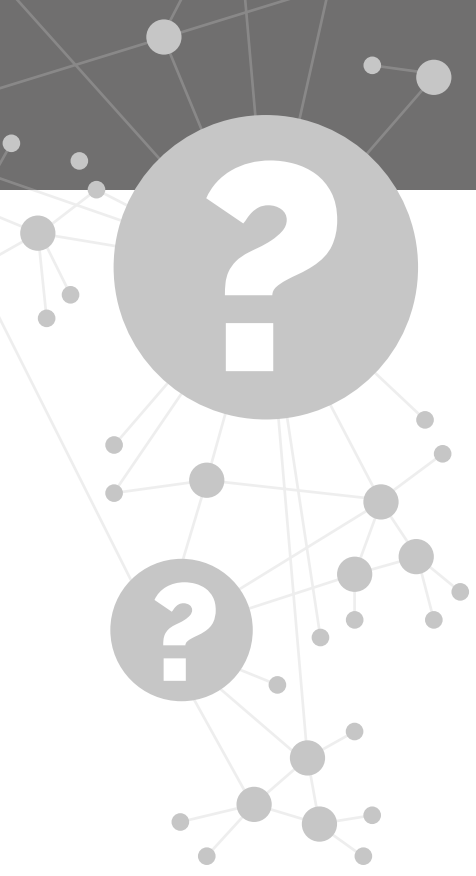
(6 words) *What can we do about that?* and its follow up question  
*What else can we do?*

(5 words) *How can senior managers help?*

(5 words) *How many customers need this?*

(6 words) *How often do you hear this?*





## Similar Questions – Different Intent

When asking questions are you asking for fact or feelings. Neither is right or wrong, either or both might be useful. Let's explore the following questions;

### 1. Facts - 3 things to explore

- 1.1 (7) What are the 3 things you need?
- 1.2 (8) What are the 3 things you need now?
- 1.3 (10) What are the 3 things you need in your role?

### 2. Facts - 3 things to explore facts within a general context

- 2.1 (10) What are the 3 things you need from our organisation?
- 2.2 (11) What are the 3 things you need now from our organisation?
- 2.3 (13) What are the 3 things you need in your role our organisation?

### 3. Facts - 3 things to explore facts within a specific context

- 3.1 (13) What are the 3 things you need from our organisation for our customers?
- 3.2 (14) What are the 3 things you need now from our organisation for our customers?
- 3.3 (16) What are the 3 things you need in your role our organisation for our customers?

### 4. Feeling - 3 things to explore facts within a specific context

- 4.1 (4) What's frustrating for you?
- 4.2 (6) What's frustrating for you the most?
- 4.3 (6) What are your Top 3 frustrations?
- 4.4 (6) What's frustrating for you at work?
- 4.5 (7) What's frustrating for you in your role?
- 4.6 (5) What's frustrating for our customers?
- 4.7 (6) What's our customer's Top 3 frustrations?
- 4.8 (9) What's frustrating for our customers the most?

As you can see from reading each of these questions, very similar sounding questions with radically different contexts and intention with the addition of only two words.

These questions are examples to highlight the importance of neutrality in our questions.

How conscious are you of the length of your questions and their intentions?

## How to ask questions

	Before	During	After
Question	» Others <b>Connection</b> » Self	» Open <b>Curiosity</b> » Closed	» Action <b>Clarity</b> » Vague
Answers	» Inquisitive <b>Anticipate</b> » Scripted	» Exploratory <b>Involve</b> » Judgemental	» Common <b>Cluster</b> » Random
Replies	» Others <b>Mention</b> » Myself	» Themes <b>Reflection</b> » Detail	» Clear <b>Impact</b> » Uncertain

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Questions are a process rather than a point in time. Questions exist in a context and the more of the context before the question, the narrower the response generated.

Consideration needs to be made about the context before the question is asked, when the question is answered, and the actions taken because of the response.

### Asking a question is easy, taking the action is critical.

Too many leaders fail in the eyes of their employees, customers, suppliers, regulators, and the media not because they ask questions. **They fail because they don't act on the answers.**

When you think about the process of questioning rather than questions, you come to understand there are 9 steps and opportunities to creating a framework for sustainable and lasting impact when all steps are considered **before, during and after** along with **Your Question, Their Answers and All Replies.**

## Actions for Leaders

1. **Acknowledge** that you have heard what's said with a comment.
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## About the authors



**Oscar Trimboli** is a marketing and technology industry veteran across software and telecommunications for organisations including Microsoft, PeopleSoft, Professional Advantage and Vodafone.

He believes leadership teams need to focus their attention and their listening on building organisations that have impact and create powerful legacies for the people they serve.

If you would like an assessment of your leaders' questions, [email Oscar](#).

Oscar is the author of and [Deep Listening – Impact beyond words](#) and publishes an [Apple award winning podcast series Deep Listening – Impact beyond words](#).



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