

# Stop Asking Questions

3 upvotes | 29 August, 2014 | by Cyralea

---

Scenario: *Your boss tells you that a client is having an issue, and that you need to fix it. He didn't say much, except it has something to do with the system not running. That's not really your expertise, but you have some experience with it. Upon arriving, you find that you really don't know what's wrong, it's not something you've encountered before. What do you do?*

If your first thought is to ask someone for help, you've already screwed up. This is one of the fundamental behavioural patterns that differentiates a leader from a follower.

Consider what you picture when you think of a leader. A commander. A CEO. A tribal leader. A dictator. What do these people all have in common? Quite simply, they're decision-makers.

If you've ever met a strong leader, the one thing most people instantly recognize is that they exude a sense of "knowing what to do". I'll let you in on a little secret -- they don't always know what to do. In fact, a lot of the time they're simply making educated guesses, but they're directing with the conviction of someone who is sure of their position. I work as a consultant; not only is this immensely important in my field, but the leaders I work with all have this quality, even when it's clear that they don't really know what the best course forward is. The morale of the company is largely decided by the apparent competence of the leader.

Why is this important? Because people gravitate towards security. No one has the answers all the time. A lot of people very rarely have answers. Someone who appears to be able to provide those answers is instantly seen as high-status. By asking questions, even the most innocuous ones, you serve to undermine people's belief in your assuredness. You see this with religious leaders. Conviction is a display of strength.

So what do you do? Well, it essentially boils down to this -- Observe. Educate yourself. Act. This is the crux of any decision-making. Look at all the variables, see if there aren't others who have been in a similar position, then make a decision based on their experience and outcome. Even if you make the wrong decision you'll be seen as assertive and having direction. What's important is that you made a definite choice.

When it comes to women this is doubly important. Stop asking "Where do you want to go for dinner?". Instead, "Let's go to that Italian place". If she balks, then change the venue. Alternatively, "Let's go out for dinner, I'm thinking either Italian or French, pick one". You've made the decision to go out, and narrowed it down to two options. Her picking between the two gives her the illusion of involvement.

Practice this in your day-to-day life. Next time someone asks you to do something you don't know how, **just act**. The more you do this, the more people will look up to you.

Stop fucking asking questions, start leading.

EDIT: [Good article that does a better job defining this concept](#). courtesy of [/u/farfigkreuger](#).

---

Archived from [theredarchive.com](http://theredarchive.com)

---

## Comments

---

[deleted] • 36 points • 29 August, 2014 02:34 PM

Your boss tells you that a client is having an issue, and that you need to fix it. He didn't say much, except it has something to do with the system not running. That's not really your expertise, but you have some experience with it. Upon arriving, you find that you really don't know what's wrong, it's not something you've encountered before. What do you do? If your first thought is to ask someone for help, you've already screwed up.

A machine doesn't react to confidence. You have absolutely have to come down to its level and operate on its logic to fix the problem.

I'm a programmer who works on an EHR, I know for a fucking fact if some guy came down from IT and tried to act like he knew shit but was simply fucking around stalling for time because he didn't want to lose face, anyone in our department would see through his stupid 'act' and it would completely blow up on him.

Commanders, CEOs, tribal leaders, and dictators ALL have advisers. Every single one of them, if they have any modicum of success. When you start making decisions blindly, ignorant of the situation, you end up looking ol' George W... look what legacy his 'decider' mentality left him.

In the proposed scenario, you need to ask goal-oriented questions if you want to fix the problem, period. The difference is delivery. "I need to know about X." vs "Can you explain X to me?".

jacob-ross • 7 points • 29 August, 2014 08:18 PM

This.

I can't tell you how much pussy has been pulled by guys not afraid to ask, ready to learn, from a position of respect. Literally nobody in bigger groups does that out of fear of looking stupid.

Just ask, listen, make a decision, test it out and repeat if necessary.

Cyralea[S] comment score below threshold • -18 points • 29 August, 2014 02:43 PM\*

You obviously need to be competent to some degree. You can't consistently be making the wrong decisions. The problem with asking questions, even 'goal-oriented' questions is that *you've established that you don't have the answer.*

You're thinking like an engineer. I have a problem. The number one thing is to fix it. That's what people expect of me. If you're a follower, this attitude is fine.

But once you get to the upper echelons, leadership is everything. Same with group leadership. *Even if asking for information results in the best practical outcome, you're establishing that you're a fixer, not a leader.*

When it comes to leadership, people aren't so much invested in you making the right choice (all the time), but rather that you appear to know what you're doing.

George Bush, whatever you can say about him, *he was president of the United States.*

TeePee91 • 5 points • 29 August, 2014 04:02 PM

There's no shame in not having the answer. It's how you react when you don't have it that matters, and frankly ACKNOWLEDGING you don't know is very important to what kind of leader you are.

Cyralea[S] comment score below threshold • -12 points • 29 August, 2014 04:08 PM

No, that's what they tell you in school. It makes you look humble. Down-to-earth. It's a fine quality for the proletariat.

It does not inspire confidence in others.

TeePee91 • 1 point • 29 August, 2014 04:21 PM

I'm a professional fighter.. I've trained with guys at the highest level. I have literally watched world class fighters ask for help from much less experience fighters. I'm also an RN, and if the doctors or myself and other nurses used this logic, a lot of people would die. Doctors call specialists frequently. Nurses call doctors to discuss things. Quite an ignorant post.

Cyralea[S] comment score below threshold • -10 points • 29 August, 2014 04:26 PM

Doctors are not leaders. They are fixers. They are to a human body what an engineer is to a machine.

You need to discard your ego when exploring new ideas. Reject your desire to kneejerk.

TeePee91 • 3 points • 29 August, 2014 04:37 PM

So then what is your definition of a leader? I don't understand. A leader is a trait. You can be a leader and work at a fucking Starbucks. A doctor has to make decisions that effect the life of patients. Sometimes, there are many options and there's not always a right answer. That requires a leader. I hope you don't think someone comes in with a problem and we have strict step by step instructions on what to do. There's a lot of critical thinking involved and many times that includes asking for help. There is no ego involved except for yours.

Cyralea[S] • -1 points • 29 August, 2014 04:50 PM

It's not about ego. It's about social perception. It's about socially engineering the attitudes of those around you.

Consider this:

Agree & Amplify works because it demonstrates that you are not intimidated by her questioning, and that you don't take her seriously. It is an act of DHV. You don't tell her that you are not intimidated, you display it.

Similarly, by making decisions without asking questions, you DHV by demonstrating competence. People perceive you as capable. Now obviously this needs to be somewhat congruent with reality. You can't be a huge fuckup and get far with confidence alone. The problem is with the inverse -- someone highly competent that asks a lot of questions. Such an individual comes across as unsure, or best-case-scenario non-assertive.

The best leaders are those that provide direction as well as inspiring followers that they *have* direction. Politicians, CEOs and commanders are the iconic examples, but patriarchs and community leaders also come to mind.

You want people coming to you with questions, not the other way around.

TeePee91 • 1 point • 29 August, 2014 04:59 PM

This, I agree with. No arguments here.

aakksshhaayy • 21 points • 29 August, 2014 02:15 PM

I get what you're trying to say but your analogy is idiotic. If a true leader doesn't know how to do something, they don't pretend and try to bullshit. They go out, find the guy that does and learn from him.

Cyralea[S] • 1 point • 29 August, 2014 02:24 PM

I covered that. You educate yourself on past instances of that situation. You don't go asking those people. This makes you look unsure. It doesn't matter if that is the optimal strategy. A leader needs to be seen as having direction, always.

You're entirely wrong about the first part. Bullshitting and saying things with conviction *is exactly what leaders do*. Religious leaders, politicians, CEOs. You're thinking of what would work best in terms of problem-resolution -- this is a follower mentality.

I know it's not intuitive.

[deleted] • 9 points • 29 August, 2014 02:37 PM

If it is your job to fix the problem, if you fuck up and don't fix the problem, you failed and lose standing. In almost any real business, no one cares if you failed with confidence. A door-to-door salesman can fail with confidence. If you want to move up the ladder, you have to confidently succeed.

Cyralea[S] • -3 points • 29 August, 2014 02:47 PM

Not if you can turn it around. I've made mistakes many times as a consultant. All consultants trip up occasionally. The idea is that we know more than average, we will do better than our clients could ever hope to on their own.

If you fuck up, that *might* cause them to lose faith in you. If you ask questions they **will** lose faith in you. That's the difference.

graduallywinning • 2 points • 29 August, 2014 03:34 PM **[recovered]**

If you ask questions that expose you don't have the skills you are supposed to have then you will lose their confidence, sure. But if you don't ask questions and it's obvious you don't have a clue and you're trying to hide that you come across as having extremely low confidence. Being a leader means you are confident enough in your skills that if you need an answer to something or need help that it is obviously a specialized problem and you need to bring others together to come up with a solution. Your strategy is what I'd expect from someone who is trying to act like a leader, not somebody who is naturally a leader because they are confident.

Cyralea[S] • -1 points • 29 August, 2014 03:41 PM

The ideal scenario is one in which you both act with confidence and know what to do. In reality, you often run into cases where you don't know what to do.

A leader fails if he consistently screws up or fails to instill confidence in others. By asking questions you expose your insecurity and fail the latter requirement. This is assured. If you screw up there is still a good chance that you still have the confidence of your followers. You see this with many politicians.

Human psychology is interesting this way. Even if you consistently came to the right answer every time, by asking questions you will not come across as a leader. More of a problem-solver.

aakksshhaayy • 2 points • 29 August, 2014 05:15 PM

You are not wrong, but you have to consider that people with power always have to project an IMAGE of full-confidence like you are saying. There are more complex things happening behind the scenes. Lets say you are discussing the quarterly sales with your investors. If the sales have gone down, you will project the image that you know exactly what you are doing and that it was all according to the larger "plan." Behind the scenes you are going to be talking to your advisors and trying to figure out what went wrong (and hiring the people to fix it). Don't confuse the image you should project to others with how you should actually act.

Cyralea[S] • 1 point • 29 August, 2014 05:28 PM

Of course, every leader has advisers and consultants. There's an expectation for them to provide you with information, there's no social ramification to listening to what they have to say.

That said, even advisers can lose faith if you demonstrate you are reliant on them. I've seen it where a managing board fired a CIO and replaced him with the VP because it was clear that the CIO was deferring to his VP a lot for information. The VP took over his job.

Your image is incredibly important, it's a delicate act when deferring to anyone's advice. It's safer to simply act instead of ask for most situations.

[deleted] • 4 points • 29 August, 2014 02:49 PM

[permanently deleted]

Cyralea[S] • 1 point • 29 August, 2014 02:55 PM

I wanted to go into the nuance of social engineering using directed questions, but my post was already getting too long. Thank you for picking up that nuance.

You're right, there are many instances where you can ask questions in a Machiavellian sense to manipulate your recipients attitudes. Not just for guiding them to an idea, but also to undermine their beliefs. Rewording their beliefs and presenting it as a question can cause them to see the obvious fault in their line of reasoning without actually attacking them.

That's a different discussion though. I'm more focusing on getting men to DHV by appearing capable.

Red\_August • 2 points • 29 August, 2014 03:05 PM

*'If you've ever met a strong leader, the one thing most people instantly recognize is that they exude a sense of "knowing what to do"...'*

This is very true. Its not that the effective leader makes decisions without considering any information - that would be mad. The effective leader knows when he has enough information to act. You're always managing risk and seeking a winning balance. Sometimes more research is needed, sometimes more research is a waste of resource. That's also a decision.

An effective leader will have developed from experience a set of *simple principles* to guide his every decision. All decisions will be filtered through these principles. This makes a leader effective, consistent and stops them from wavering. Effective leaders know their mission.

Great leaders also surround themselves with skilled people that know exactly what's expected of them. When the Secretary of State or any high ranking official approaches POTUS with a problem, they don't come empty handed. They have options and supporting information. A recommendation even. POTUS filters the options (and his own) through his principles and the decision becomes obvious, and quick.

Politics aside, Reagan was a master at running decisions as he had a very clear set of principles. He was an

effective leader (whether or not you agree with his decisions, that's a different matter and not my point).

Carter, a very intelligent man, hesitated. I'd argue that he never developed or honed his grid of principles. This sent a very wrong signal as he appeared to vacillate and hesitate.

Lastly, one should never postpone indefinitely for fear of failure. You won't always be right and that's par with the course. I read an analogy somewhere that if you're sitting in a boat on a river with a current - every decision is akin to doing one paddle stroke. You're better off to paddle away even if you need to do the occasional course change than to just let the current take you. You're in control.

Cyralea[S] • 1 point • 29 August, 2014 03:29 PM

Its not that the effective leader makes decisions without considering any information - that would be mad.

Of course. We advanced as a species by piggy-backing off the collective experience of our ancestors. Every leader has consultants and advisers. The dynamic in those scenarios is a little different. They are tasked with providing you information. There is no loss of social status from hearing their opinion, as it's expected.

Your post is spot-on. Making effective, timely decisions is the crux of it. Spending too much time asking around furthers that appearance of uncertainty. The key is that you sum up the situation and *act*.

This is spot on:

You won't always be right and that's par with the course. I read an analogy somewhere that if you're sitting in a boat on a river with a current - every decision is akin to doing one paddle stroke. You're better off to paddle away even if you need to do the occasional course change than to just let the current take you. You're in control.

teeelo • 2 points • 29 August, 2014 03:32 PM

Huh I figured this post would have something to do with people posting questions here and not in /r/asktrp as well as a reminder to read the side bar again haha

laere • 2 points • 29 August, 2014 03:45 PM

I've incorporated this a lot, and completely have avoided asking questions almost completely in any situation, unless I need an important piece of information (work environment).

farfigkreuger • 2 points • 29 August, 2014 03:52 PM

Reminds me of the Letter to Garcia

Cyralea[S] • 1 point • 29 August, 2014 03:54 PM

I should have just linked this instead of writing my post. It exemplifies everything I've attempted to say.

dicklord\_airplane • 2 points • 29 August, 2014 05:01 PM

If your first thought is to ask someone for help, you've already screwed up. This is one of the fundamental behavioural patterns that differentiates a leader from a follower.

not asking for advice on something you're unfamiliar with will make you look like a fool in science and engineering. i work in the oil exploration industry, and we can easily identify dumbasses who try to bumble through processes without a clue because they think asking for help makes them look weak. those guys don't get promoted. the most important thing is to get the job done right and in a timely manner, and trying to figure out

everything on your own is not the best way to do that.

asking for help the first time is only rational. asking for help is a sign that someone isn't completely wrapped up in their ego and are capable of putting the job first and their ego second.

Cyralea[S] • -1 points • 29 August, 2014 05:12 PM

A good leader is both competent and assertive. You can't have one without the other.

A capable person who asks lots of questions is still seen as insecure or non-assertive. An incapable person who is assertive is seen as incapable (assuming people discover his incompetence).

CDBaller • 2 points • 29 August, 2014 10:44 PM

As far as "not asking questions", you're a retard and don't know what you're talking about. A wise leader asks questions of his advisors, gathers the information available to him and makes the decision based off of that and sticks to it. He makes the decision confidently and believes that's the best decision and does not second-guess himself, but he ALWAYS asks questions.

I'm a Lieutenant in the Army. If I didn't ask my Sergeants (who have about 5-10 years more experience being in the Army than I do) about whatever I'm dealing with, I'd be hopelessly lost just trying to "figure it out" and "just acting". Hasty decisions make for poor results and those get people killed.

NoLongerSisyphus • 2 points • 29 August, 2014 04:22 PM

You are a fool.

Actions have consequences, and acting without an understanding of the consequences is foolish. In your examples, you are advocating action without that understanding... This might succeed if you consult on low risk business processes, or some other white collar bullshit, but it won't fly in a high consequence environment like an oil rig. Actions like yours taken there can kill people.

Practice this in your day-to-day life. Next time someone asks you to do something you don't know how, just act. The more you do this, the more people will look up to you.

No, this isn't what will happen. Maybe people think you are awesome because they can unload their bullshit on you cause you're a fucking doormat who doesn't ask WHY. This was always the case when some trumped up Lieutenant Commander fresh out of the academy would come down from on high to tell the enlisted men what to do. They would happily listen, and would take action, and then report him up the chain when it inevitably went south.

Ask more question, make them good questions, and only when you have the facts you require to move forward, take action.

Cyralea[S] • 0 points • 29 August, 2014 04:31 PM

Ask more question, make them good questions, and only when you have the facts you require to move forward, take action.

You're too hung up with the title of my post, rather than its content. A good decision-maker evaluates his scenario to the best of his ability. He takes in all the data he can, then executes a decision immediately.

If it is your job to lead, then you need to inspire confidence (this is in addition to being competent). If your Lieutenant Commander came in and started asking the men what he should do, he would be seen as a weak leader *even if his actions resulted in success*.

That's the point I'm trying to convey. Be competent, but do not undermine your appearance of certainty.

[deleted] • 1 point • 29 August, 2014 03:10 PM\*

A good leader is someone who can manage people and utilize the resources available to him. The client doesn't care about you and your decision making abilities. He wants the problem corrected in a timely manner. It's best to delegate the responsibility to someone who can fix the problem. If you want to learn how something is fixed you can meet the tech or (sub.)vendor on the jobsite and ask questions while the work's being done.

Cyralea[S] • -2 points • 29 August, 2014 03:22 PM

There's a difference between sizing up the situation by getting the necessary info, and asking questions about how to do the things they want done.

At the upper levels it doesn't operate the same way. If you're talking about a support desk person, or a contracted technician, then yes, their job is just to fix things. They are not leaders. Their position does not require leadership.

If you're a CEO, or an IT Director, or a Senior Consultant, your position is contingent on knowing what to do. In most cases there isn't any way to know what the "right" answer is. You need to size up the information, get as knowledgeable as you can, and then make a decision.

You can ask questions to people who aren't affected by your decision-making, eg. the CEO asking the consultants. The CEO can never seem unsure to his subordinates.

[deleted] • 1 points • 1 September, 2014 10:33 PM

[permanently deleted]

Cyralea[S] • 1 point • 2 September, 2014 04:06 AM

Such is the problem with reddit voting. The best knowledge isn't upvoted, only the most popular.

I've had the privilege to work with highly established leaders. This is precisely how they behave. Hopefully someone walks away with that information at heart.

HiddenDeathArt • 1 point • 29 August, 2014 06:45 PM

If you're not a professional or highly skilled enough to handle advanced problems you're not fit to be a leader, no matter what you tell yourself, for one a leader would be highly skilled or a professional in some shape of form.. and if you want to get there, you have to ask questions..

HDA

InvisibleVisitor • 1 point • 29 August, 2014 07:10 PM

Good leaders make good decisions by having good information. If your subordinates are not giving you the information you need, you GET the information you need. If to get that information you need to ask questions, then you do that, while explaining next time, they better give you the information up front.