
When in Doubt, Leaders Should Ask Questions



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Inquisitive leaders receive something even better than a good answer: a bump in credibility.

The mainstream language of leadership is geared toward deciding and affirming rather than questioning. Yet my recent research finds that – contrary to popular belief – leaders who routinely ask questions become more credible in their roles.

Most leaders believe the opposite. They think their questions betray a lack of knowledge that could raise doubts about their competence. While not always untrue, that is only part of a more complex picture, as my co-author Irina Cojuhrenco of the University of Surrey and I explain in a forthcoming paper in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.

Why leaders don't ask questions

Our first study, a survey completed by 281 managers, found that only 29 percent of participants asked questions as often as they could. Curiously, the managers also reported that asking questions was a great way to elicit trust,

input and help – as well as to display humility. However, they were much less optimistic about how being inquisitive may affect how *competent* a leader is perceived to be.

There's the rub. The appearance of competence may appear so important that it overshadows other critical factors of a leader's success such as trust, cooperation from employees, etc. It is not surprising, then, that leaders are wary of asking questions.

We proceeded to investigate whether this negative correlation between question-asking and perceived competence actually existed. In four subsequent studies, participants recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform read different versions of scenarios depicting bosses either asking questions, delivering conclusions or admitting that they didn't know something. They then rated the boss's perceived competence, humility and trustworthiness as well as their own inclination to help the boss, based on the information in the scenario.

We found that for the hypothetical bosses who were described as new in their role and with relatively low qualifications (i.e. whose competence was initially in doubt), asking questions indeed incurred a modest competence penalty. Interestingly, the penalty for asking questions was much lower than that for openly admitting ignorance ("I don't know..."). Most importantly, however, any penalty for asking questions was largely counterbalanced by a boost in perceived humility. As a result, leaders who asked questions were rated as more trustworthy and participants were more willing to help – compared to those who sought the same information without using questions (like an invitation for input with tentative conclusions).

Bosses whose excellent credentials largely eliminated ex-ante doubts about their competence received the same rewards for asking questions – but with no competence penalty attached.

Relational humility

Question-asking could be construed as just another way of admitting ignorance. So why do people respond far more positively to "Do you know...?" than "I don't know"? We think that reframing knowledge gaps as curiosity signals what theorists call *relational humility*, i.e. a humble style that elevates others as opposed to lowering oneself. Relational humility means willingness to view oneself accurately – including observing gaps in

personal knowledge, displaying appreciation of others' strengths and contributions and being eager to learn from others. For leaders, greater relational humility is associated with increased leader effectiveness and translates into increased employee engagement and performance.

Inquisitive leaders, then, reap interpersonal benefits over and above the information or solutions their questions are designed to elicit.

Caveats to keep in mind

These findings contradict the common assumption that the relationship-building benefits of asking questions will always be nullified by a decline in perceived competence. Rather, leaders who frequently ask questions before making decisions can strengthen their interpersonal relationships, while simultaneously improving problem-solving as well as leadership performance.

However, they should also be aware of possible competence penalties arising from asking questions. In particular, women – and others whose atypical leadership profile may throw their competence into doubt – should ensure to establish their readiness for the role and ability to deliver before adopting a question-heavy leadership style. They should also communicate very clearly that they are the final decision-maker so that asking questions is not mistaken for a deflection of responsibility.

Remember, however, that not all questions are worth asking. The “humble” questions included in our studies sincerely invoke the addressee's unique expertise and insights. More self-serving types of questions – e.g. manipulative ones designed to extract a predetermined answer or lazy ones posed in lieu of doing one's own homework – are unlikely to register as humble, and therefore may damage rather than boost your reputation as a leader.

Making better decisions and building better relationships

With these caveats in mind, leaders should not let concerns about seeming less competent prevent them from asking questions. Those who are well-established in their roles or who come with stellar credentials have the least to lose, according to our studies – putting questions to employees won't damage their standing in the slightest. But the “When in doubt, ask questions” rule of thumb holds true for less secure leaders too. Any moderate competence penalties they may suffer are likely to be balanced

out by an increase in the quality of their working relationships. Consider question-asking a solid interpersonal investment that also allows you to make better decisions.

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