



# Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H03LUV  
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG  
APRIL 14, 2017

## **ARTICLE** **MANAGING PEOPLE**

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*by James E. Ryan*

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Photo by Evan Dennis

The best teachers all have at least one thing in common: they ask great questions. They ask questions that force students to move beyond simple answers, that test their reasoning, that spark curiosity, and that generate new insights. They ask questions that inspire students to think, and to think deeply.

As a business leader, you might have years of experience and the confidence of your organization behind you, so it may be tempting to think that your job is to always have the right answers. But great leaders have to inspire the same curiosity, creativity, and deeper thinking in their employees that great teachers inspire in their students – and that starts with asking the right questions. Any answer is only as good as the question asked.

As a dean, I find it useful to remember the statement often (perhaps [spuriously](#)) attributed to Albert Einstein that if he had an hour to solve a problem, and his life depended on it, he would spend the first fifty-five minutes determining the proper question to ask.

Yet asking a good question is not an easy task. It requires us to look beyond simple solutions and to encourage colleagues to do the same. It requires courage and tact, to generate hard questions without sparking defensiveness, as well as being open to new ideas and to questioning untested assumptions. It requires being willing to listen and follow up.

I believe there are some essential questions that are useful across a variety of contexts, including, and perhaps especially, the workplace. In fact, I gave a commencement speech last year on this topic, suggesting to students from the Harvard Graduate School of Education that there are really only five essential questions in life. Although the audience was future educators, I believe these questions are equally valuable for anyone in a position to lead or influence others.

### **“Wait, What?”**

Too often, we jump to conclusions without having enough information. We listen just long enough to form a quick opinion, and then we either endorse or oppose what has been said. This puts us at risk of making faulty judgments, leaving key assumptions untested, and missing out on potential opportunities.

Leaders (as well as their employees) need to be able to ask colleagues and direct reports to slow down and explain in more detail what is being proposed, especially if something doesn’t quite sound right or seems too easy to be a lasting solution. Asking [“Wait, what?”](#) is an exercise in understanding, which is critical to making informed judgments and decisions—whether in the office or the boardroom.

### **“I wonder why ...?” or “I wonder if ...?”**

Children are far better than adults at questioning the world around them – nothing is beyond interrogation. When children wonder why the sky is blue, they prompt others to think, reason, and explain things anew. Similarly, leaders have to remain curious about their organizations in order to bring new ideas to bear on longstanding challenges.

Wondering why something is the way it is will sometimes lead to an unsatisfactory answer—as in, we do it this way because it’s easier and that’s the way we have always done it. But asking “I wonder why...” is the first step in overcoming the inertia that can stifle growth and opportunity for leaders and employees alike. That’s because it inevitably leads to the perfect follow up: “I wonder if things could be done differently?” This can begin the process of creating change by sparking the interest and curiosity of those with whom you work.

### **“Couldn’t we at least...?”**

Most of us have had the experience of sitting through a contentious meeting, where stakeholders are polarized, progress is stalled, and consensus feels like a pipe dream. Asking “couldn’t we at least?” is the question that can help you and your colleagues get unstuck on an issue. It can get you started on a first step, even if you are not entirely sure where you will end. Perhaps you might first find some common ground by asking: “Couldn’t we at least agree on some basic principles?” or “Couldn’t we at least begin, and re-evaluate at a later time?”

### **“How can I help?”**

The instinct to lend a hand to someone in need is one of our most admirable traits as human beings, but we often don’t stop to think about the best way to help. Instead, we swoop in and try to save the day. This frequently does more harm than good: it can unintentionally disempower, or even insult, those who need to take charge.

So when a colleague or direct report is complaining about an issue or expressing frustration, rather than jumping to offer solutions, try asking, “How can I help?” This forces your colleague to think clearly about the problem to be solved, and whether and how you can actually help. It helps your colleagues define the problem, which is the first step toward owning and solving it.

### **“What truly matters?”**

This question might seem obvious, but I don’t think any of us ask it often enough. “What truly matters?” is not a question that you should wait to ask when you are on vacation or are retired. It should be a regular conversation, externally and internally. For example, it’s a useful way to simplify complicated situations, like sensitive personnel issues. It can also help you stay grounded when you have grand ambitions, like an organizational restructuring. And it can make even your weekly meetings more efficient and productive, by keeping people focused on the right priorities. Asking this often will not only make your work life smoother, but also help you find balance in the broader context of your life.

Leaders should ask these questions both on a daily basis and during critical moments. Of course, these aren’t the only questions to ask; context certainly matters. But I have found these five to be a

very practical and useful way to ensure understanding, generate new ideas, inspire progress, encourage responsibility, and remain focused on what is genuinely important.

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**James E. Ryan** is the eleventh dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the author of *Wait, What? And Life's Other Essential Questions*. Before joining Harvard, Ryan was the Matheson & Morgenthau Distinguished Professor at the University of Virginia School of Law, where he founded the school's Program in Law and Public Service. Ryan is the author of the nonfiction work *Five Miles Away, A World Apart*. He graduated summa cum laude from Yale University and first in his class from the University of Virginia Law School. A former clerk for Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist, as well as a former rugby player, Ryan has argued before the United States Supreme Court. He and his wife Katie live in Lincoln, Massachusetts with four kids, two dogs, two cats, and nine chickens.

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