

Seven Questions To Ask Yourself If You Want to Thrive

Many leaders focus on having the right answers, but success is more about asking the right questions.

By Jeremy Hunter April 16, 2019

The way we frame a situation can either open or shut down our ability to meet it effectively, creatively, and successfully.

Let's try an experiment. Ask yourself the following questions:

"How can I prove I'm right?"

"How did I get stuck with these idiots?"

"Who's to blame here?"

"How can I lose?" (...and what can I do to protect myself?)

What do you experience when you read these questions? What does your body feel like? Light? Heavy? Open? Constricted?

What if you were on the receiving end of them? How might they affect your motivation level? Your emotional state? What actions are likely to result from these questions and what outcomes do you think they'd produce?

Now try asking yourself these questions:

"What's working?"

"How do we move this forward?"

"What can we learn from this?"

"How might we support one another for success?"

How do you experience these questions? Is there a difference when compared with the first set? Most people experience the first set as tight, defensive and demotivating. Furthermore, the first questions seem to be focused on one's own needs and provoking an attack or at least actively disengaging. The likely outcome may be a stagnant or regressive one. In any case, they lead down a path of lost opportunity.

By contrast, the second set seems more open, relaxed and engaging. Instead of ego-defense, they're more focused on the situation at hand. Instead of provoking, they read as more likely to be productive and growth-oriented. Leaning in, they ask us to consider other possibilities. Instead of "I," they are focused on "We."

Is Your Mindset Fixed?

The questions express underlying mindsets, our implicit, and often non-conscious views we hold about the world. The first set of questions express a view of fixed mindset and easily downshifts to a judgmental, critical, self-oriented view of the world. According to the fixed mindset, talent, intelligence, wealth, power or love are in-born and predetermined. You have it or you don't. If you win, I lose.

So if you have it, then you must constantly defend it because it is under threat from others who might take it or be better than you. Failure is to be avoided, so risk-taking becomes verboten, which leads to a dearth of learning. In time, comes stagnation.

A fixed-mindset boss has conditioned his people to not challenge his delicate ego. They expend enormous energy avoiding the minefield of his reactive emotions. In this tense environment, there's little resource left for flourishing. People who succumb to fixed mindset spend considerable energy defending their position, image or identity. They create narcissistic environments where attention is focused on preserving their self-image rather than producing the best possible outcome. Life becomes a tense game of survival.

Effort and feedback are in a continual dialogue. From this, possibilities emerge that were unseen at the outset. A new future can be created.

The second set of questions express a view that resources can be grown. This approach is oriented toward curiosity, engagement and connection. Here, talents can be fostered, compatibility can be enhanced. Learning and effort trump innate talent and ego. Effort and feedback are in a continual dialogue. From this, possibilities emerge that were unseen at the outset. A new future can be created.

Overcoming the Feeling of Scarcity

A former student of mine was the third generation scion of a wealthy Taiwanese family. He had a sudden insight that the dominant view of his family was one of fixed mindset. His relatives were constantly protecting their position, fearful of losing face, and oriented their defenses toward real and imagined threats.

"The result," he said, "is that we treat each other like animals and we are all miserable. Even though we have more resources than most people could ever imagine, we act like we are on the brink of disaster. We are merely trying survive. We never ask ourselves, 'with all we have, what would it mean to thrive?'"

He learned that by changing the questions he asked himself, he could create a different set of possibilities. His pinched nervous face began to relax. He started to pay attention to what was working well, to his strengths and what brought him enjoyment. He redirected his energy away from defending and towards developing. His family was puzzled by this turn, but his sweetheart relished the change. Orienting toward growth created new possibilities for both of them. A few years later on social media he posted a glowing photo of his former-girlfriend-now-wife and their little baby. He had continued to thrive and made a good life for himself.

Shift Your Mindset By Asking Yourself These 7 Questions:

Take some time to sit with these questions. Write down your answers and see if you're clinging to a fixed mindset.

- What questions are you asking yourself?
- What questions motivate your organization?
- What are you trying to defend?
- What would it be like if you let that go?
- What question could your life be expressing an answer to?
- What would it mean to give up surviving to thrive?

Who would you be that you are not now?

Transforming Leaders into Mindful Leaders

About the author

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Jeremy Hunter, PhD is Founding Director of the Executive Mind Leadership Institute and Associate Professor of Practice at the Peter F. Drucker Graduate School of Management in Claremont, CA. His goal is to help leaders develop the best of their humanity. Since 2003, his pioneering courses on Self-Management build on Peter Drucker's assertion "before you can manage anyone else, you have to manage yourself first." He is an executive coach, entertaining keynote speaker, and would drive long distances for a great Chinese dumpling.

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