

Five Questions All Leaders Should Always Be Asking

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David Burkus

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GUEST POST from David Burkus

Leaders don't need to have all the answers.

That sounds counterintuitive. There is a lot of pressure on leaders to have the right answers and to solve problems that team members can't solve on their own. In fact, most leaders were promoted into a leadership role because they had many more of the right answers than others in the organization. And the further up the hierarchy you go, the bigger the problems and bigger the expectations for answers.

But the more complex work gets, and the more complex problems get, the harder it is to know all the answers. So, it's okay if you don't know all the answers. But leaders should always be seeking out answers. To lead well, there's a few answers leaders should always be working to find.

Which means there's a few questions leaders should always be asking. In this article, we'll outline the top five of those questions.

1. What are our real priorities?

The first question leaders should always be asking is “what are our real priorities?” Teams are tasked with all sorts of projects and objectives. And the reward for getting those projects done well is often...more projects. Doing new tasks well results in people asking you to do more work. And when new tasks come up, many teams succumb to the tyranny of the urgent and focus their attention on the newest tasks assigned. But that can often mean diverting focus from what are actually the most important tasks. In addition, when circumstances change or when new problems arise, it can change what tasks matter most. So, leaders need to be asking—and re-asking—what the real priorities are often and then making that answer clear to their team. That way the team stays committed to what matters—and not just what's new.

2. Where are our potential roadblocks?

The second question leaders should always be asking is “where are our potential roadblocks?” Once you know what the real priorities are, ask what could derail your team from achieving those roadblocks. The concept of leader as roadblock remover is a simple one rooted in trust. Great leaders trust that, once their people know what they need to do, those same people will also know best how to do it. That means a leader's job isn't telling them how

to work better, it's finding the barriers that are keeping people from doing their best work and removing them. If you've built trust and rapport with your team, they'll likely just tell you. But the nature of your role as a leader also means you can anticipate some barriers based on what else you see happening in the organization or your environment. But roadblocks can pop up unexpectedly, so don't just ask once. Keep asking.

3. What am I not hearing?

The third question leaders should always be asking is "what am I not hearing." There's a reason the warning "don't shoot the messenger" became a cliché. It's because many leaders shoot the messenger. And even if they don't, many team members fear of being shot keeps them from sharing openly. (I hope it's clear we're using "shoot" as a metaphor here...we do not endorse firearms as a management tactic.) That means there's likely certain bits of information that team members know that you're completely unaware of. That can undermine your decision-making and your leadership. And reversing that trends starts by asking regularly what you may not be hearing or by extension who you're not hearing from. Then take the time to amplify those unheard voices and signal your consideration for what they shared. That not only keeps you more informed in the short term but also makes it less likely you're not hearing important information in the long term.

4. Who isn't being challenged?

The fourth question leaders should always be asking is "who isn't being challenged?" People tend to be most motivated and engaged in a task when the demands of the job match their skills and capacity. Too much of a challenge can lead to stress and burnout. But too little of a challenge can lead to boredom and...burnout. And while members of your team may have entered their role in the sweet spot between demands and ability, many of them have likely grown and improved their skills...which means they might be falling out of the sweet spot and being less challenged. Great leaders are proactive not only in creating new growth opportunities for their people, but also new challenges or new projects to keep them in the sweet spot of engagement.

5. How is our motivation?

The fifth question leaders should always be asking is "how is our motivation?" The attitudes and emotions of a team and its members can change quickly, and so can their collective level of motivation. So, leaders need to be monitoring motivation levels constantly and finding ways to keep motivation inside the ideal range. Especially for teams on the front-lines and in the middle of the organization, the flowery speeches and mission statements that come from senior leadership are not enough to keep motivation high all the time. When the day-to-day

tasks get demanding, it's hard to even remember how one person's work makes a difference. But this is where team leaders are most important. It's up to the team leader to make that connection and be constantly reminding the team why their work matters.

In the end, people want to do work that matters and that challenges them to grow. And that's what makes these five questions so important. Because the answers to these questions, even though they change over time, provide leaders with the knowledge they need to help their team know their work matters and help their team find new challenges. And that helps their team do their best work ever.

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