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Discovering How Your Future Leaders Think

The key questions your organization's coaches
should ask every developing leader

by Barry Conchie with Jerry Hadd

Do you want to get the best performance from your organization's future leaders? Then start asking them direct questions that, when answered, will help shape and define the type of leaders they will become.

Great teachers and coaches have always known that the deepest learning results from asking thought-provoking, probing questions. These questions cause people to think, and the sharpest questions can have tremendous influence on how executives formulate strategy.

Furthermore, probing questions demand a response. They focus the mind on the most important aspects of a problem. They spark thinking and learning that affect outcomes.

Many forms of leadership coaching attempt to teach future leaders "about" leadership. But relatively little coaching encourages leaders to concentrate on activities that will reliably improve their capacity to lead. So what are the questions your organization's coaches or mentors should ask every developing leader? What are the questions that most promote leadership growth?

Gallup has been researching top-performing leaders for more than 40 years. One crucial discovery has been that top performance is strongly correlated to seven main leadership activities or "demands." (See "The Seven Demands of Leadership" in the "See Also" area on this page.) Those demands are: visioning, maximizing values, challenging experience, mentoring, building a constituency, making sense of experience, and knowing self.

Focusing each leader's growth on the seven demands can accelerate leadership development. Below, we outline the seven demands and suggest probing questions for developing leaders in these key areas.

Visioning

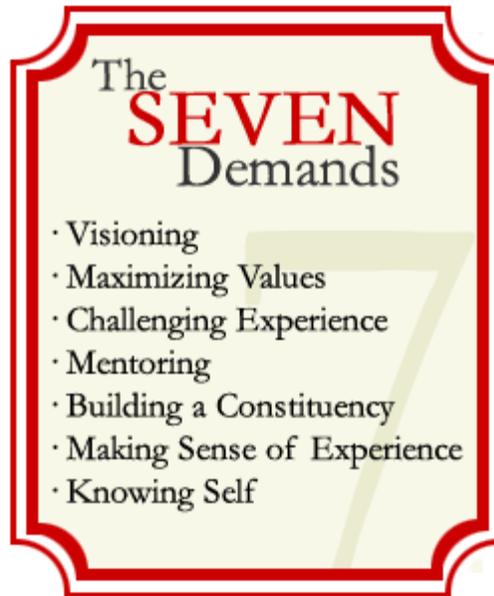
The best leaders talk often about the future and how it will be better than the present. Their forward-looking approach engages and excites their audience and elicits commitment.

Questions about visioning:

- Can you articulate the long-term direction of your organization?
- With whom have you recently discussed your views about the long-term future direction of your organization?
- How did this discussion positively affect and motivate your audience?
- Who will be in your next audience, and what will you say to them?

Maximizing Values

Great leaders live their values, and this fact is usually revealed in the predictability of their behavior. Those leaders also clearly and passionately articulate how their



organization compares to its competitors.

Questions about maximizing values:

- For any situation or issue you face, how accurately could each of your team members predict your behavior or response?
- Why is your organization so much more important to current and potential customers than any other organization?

Challenging Experience

Leaders constantly raise the bar for themselves and others. Top-performing leaders seek out and welcome new challenges -- they don't avoid them.

Sometimes setting high standards requires having difficult conversations with others. The best leaders have those conversations early. While challenging employees, leaders never lose sight of performance, whether the time frame is short, medium, or long term.

Questions about challenging experience:

- How have you stretched performance goals for your organization, division, or team recently? Why did you do this? What results do you expect?
- What are the three main performance goals on your agenda?
- Have you made someone uncomfortable and someone else excited about his or her performance over the past week? What did you say, and why did you say it? What result did this have? When and how will you follow up?
- What challenge have you accepted while others struggled or failed? Why will you be successful?

Mentoring

Great leaders selectively mentor talented associates toward top performance. These leaders understand how to focus their mentees' attention on the right areas for optimal performance gains. Leaders understand what these people can achieve and position them in areas where their talents can become true strengths.

Questions about mentoring:

- Who are the top and bottom performers on your team? What will you cover as you spend with them this month? How will you know if your mentoring has been effective?
- What is the current performance ranking of your direct reports? How has this changed over the last quarter? Why has it changed?

- What will be your key coaching points for your meetings with your top three performers?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of each of your direct reports? How has this influenced how you position these team members?

Building a Constituency

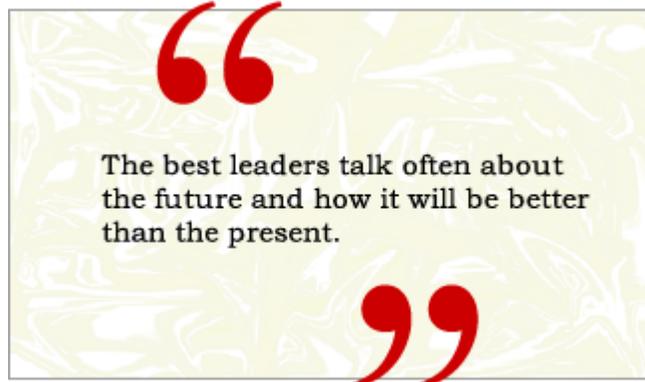
The most effective leaders are constantly building their network and growing their constituency. This is not superficial; instead, it comes from a genuine desire to know and be known. These leaders not only help others, but they also build relationships that enable them to call on help when needed.

Questions about building a constituency:

- Over the last month, how have you intentionally grown your constituency? Who have you targeted?
- How much bigger and stronger is your constituency now compared to last year? How do you know that? What actions did you take to strengthen your constituency? What further actions do you propose to take?
- What have you done to grow the visibility of your high-potential team members?
- How has your constituency helped you over the past month? What recognition did you give them for their help?

Making Sense of Experience

At a time of increasing business complexity, great leaders understand the need for simplicity. It is easy to look smart by communicating complex pieces of information. Leaders strive to make information understandable and accessible to as many people as possible.



Questions about making sense of experience:

- Recently, how did you take a complex issue and simplify it so that others understood it?
- What three points provide the clearest explanation of the current financial performance of your organization, division, or team?

- Do all of your direct reports clearly understand the difference between excellent, good, and unacceptable performance? How do you describe these differences? How do you know they understand?

Knowing Self

Effective leaders are transparent in how they present themselves to others. They don't come to work pretending to be someone else. They are aware of their strengths and weaknesses and don't assume that they know everything. They don't try to do everything, either; they build partnerships that complement their capabilities.

Questions about knowing self:

- What do you do better than just about anyone else you know?
- What tasks or activities drain your energy and cause you to disengage?
- What new discoveries have you made about yourself?
- How have you intentionally applied your talents to increase your performance?
- Who are your complementary partners, and how do they help boost your performance?
- How does your performance rank alongside your peers? How do you feel about this?

Asking developing leaders these questions provides a starting point for discussions about their leadership growth. Although there will be many things that leaders need to do, these questions help leaders understand their role -- and the actions they can take that will matter most to the future of the organization. The questions are role defining, and all leaders should be able to answer them.

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