GCG

Global Coach Group
Lead for Good

Ask More, Tell Less:
How Leading with Questions Drives Engagement, Empowerment, and Execution



www.globalcoachgroup.com

Introduction

Why This Guide Matters

It's a moment every leader faces — often daily: A critical challenge has emerged — one that affects priorities, outcomes, and people. The leader's team is looking for direction. Everyone is ready for a solution. But instead of stepping in to instruct, the leader asks a simple but powerful question: ***"What's your take on this?"***

It's a small shift in posture. But it changes everything. Better ideas begin to surface. Silence gives way to engagement. People contribute — not out of compliance, but from ownership. That one question didn't just unlock better thinking. It unlocked trust, engagement, and accountability.

This is the essence of ***leading with questions.*** And it's one of the most underused, high-impact behaviors in leadership today.

As coaches, we often hear from leaders:

> *"I need to speak less and ask more."*
> *"I want my team to think independently."*
> *"I need to stop jumping in with the fix."*

These aren't signs of weak leadership, they're signals of a deeper shift. The most effective leaders today aren't just directing, they're activating. They know that in a world where complexity is the norm, the best insights often come from inviting others in, not speaking over them.
And yet, GCG's analysis of more than 120,000 leaders shows that this behavior, leading with questions rather than telling, remains under-practiced. It's frequently selected as a priority growth area. But even when leaders agree with the idea, it rarely becomes a daily habit.

The reason?

It's not a skills issue. It's a usage gap. And it's costing leaders trust, engagement, and results.

Part of closing that gap is asking better questions — not just more of them. To lead effectively with questions, they must move beyond performance to the people. They must shift from extracting results to developing capability. From managing outcomes to unlocking ownership. That's when leaders stop just guiding decisions — and start growing their people.

That's what this guide is for.

Whether you're a leader seeking more influence or a coach helping others lead through inquiry, you'll learn:

- Why asking questions is a strategic leadership skill — not a soft skill
- Where leaders fall short (and why)
- What GCG's data reveals about the knowing – doing gap
- How to coach and build this behavior over time
- How to measure its impact on leaders, teams, and performance

Because leadership isn't about having all the answers. It's about creating the conditions for better answers to emerge — and better results to follow. ***Let's dive in.***

The Triple Win Power of Leading with Questions

Asking powerful questions isn't just a better communication strategy. It's a better leadership strategy. One that fuels progress across three levels at once: for the leader, for the team, and for the business.

That's the essence of GCG's **Triple Win Leadership Coaching** approach: helping leaders adopt habits, like leading with questions, that improve themselves, engage their teams, and drive performance results. This behavior isn't isolated. It drives visible, measurable change in the way people lead, collaborate, and execute. When used intentionally, it becomes one of the few leadership habits that scales impact without adding complexity.

Let's break it down.

Win for the Leader: Confidence through Credibility

Leaders often feel pressure to bring clarity, fast. But offering the answer too quickly can sometimes limit ownership and reduce engagement. In contrast, asking questions demonstrates presence, openness, and trust. It builds credibility without sacrificing decisiveness.

Leaders who lead with inquiry aren't seen as less capable. They're seen as more thoughtful, strategic, and trustworthy. In practice, this shows up as:

- Confidence that invites contribution, not control
- A leadership style that signals, "I'm listening"
- Stronger relationships built through inclusion

And as this credibility compounds, so does influence.

Win for the Team: Engagement through Ownership

People support what they help create. When leaders ask instead of tell, they activate the thinking, creativity, and accountability of their teams.

Questions aren't just about gathering input. They create space. They shift the team dynamic from passive reception to active participation. And when done consistently, they build psychological safety and a culture of shared success.

In our coaching experience, teams led by inquiry-driven leaders are more likely to:

- Step up with ideas, not wait for orders
- Take initiative on unresolved challenges
- Feel trusted *and accountable* to contribute meaningfully

It's not just about better meetings. It's about building a team that solves more, faster, together.

Win for the Business: Performance through Alignment

At the organizational level, leading with questions helps connect behavior with outcomes. It brings focus to what matters most and helps teams stay aligned through clarity and cocreation.

GCG's global coaching research data shows that when leaders develop this behavior consistently, there's a consistent measurable uptick in:

- Overall leadership effectiveness
- Team collaboration and performance
- Business results and outcomes as innovation, retention, and execution

This isn't a theory. It's data-backed coaching practice that has produced a 95% success rate in coworker satisfaction with leader improvement across more than 100,000 leaders.

> As we often say in Triple Win Leadership Coaching:
> *Great leaders don't just provide answers.*
> *They create the conditions for better questions.*
> *That's where real impact begins.*

What the Data Reveals: GLA360 and LGA Insights

The idea of leading with questions is easy to endorse. Leaders understand its value. Coaches encourage it. Teams want it. But GCG's global data tells a more comprehensive story: while many leaders believe in the importance of asking more and telling less, very few make it a consistent part of how they lead.

That gap — between belief and behavior — is where the opportunity lies. And the numbers make it clear.

At GCG, we call these targeted leadership behaviors **Leadership Growth Areas (LGAs).**

LGAs are the specific leadership habits a leader chooses to improve over time, based on feedback from coworkers, supported by coaching, and tracked for measurable progress.

In many engagements, "Lead with questions rather than telling" is one of the most frequently chosen LGAs.

Leaders Know It Matters. They Just Don't Do It Consistently.

In GCG's research across more than 120,000 leaders, "Lead with questions rather than telling" is one of the most frequently selected Leadership Growth Areas (LGAs). Yet behaviors associated with inquiry and coaching remain underused.

Across the entire LGA dataset:

- A significant share, 1 in 10, growth areas selected by leaders are directly tied to leading with questions or coaching behaviors
- Leaders score significantly lower on internal inquiry (with their own team) than on external inquiry (with customers)

This shows that while leaders understand the principle, they often struggle to apply it where it matters most: with their coworkers, inside their teams.



Key GLA360 Items That Reflect This Gap

Let's look at how this plays out across actual behavior metrics from the GLA360 assessment, based on research with over 19,000 leaders.

Description	Percentile
Regularly solicit input from customers	52%
Encourage people to challenge the status quo	48%
Ask people what they need to do their work better	47%
Provide effective coaching	44%
Provide developmental feedback in a timely manner	44%
Ask people what can be done to personally improve	42%

What this shows is both promising, and revealing.

Leaders clearly understand the value of asking questions, especially in external settings like customer interactions (with a 52% score). But when it comes to their own teams, the same behaviors — asking what people need, seeking feedback for personal improvement, providing coaching, consistently score lower.

The scores themselves are not low. But in relative terms, they lag behind other leadership behaviors like respect, recognition, or execution. And that matters — because it shows that leaders *can ask* questions (as seen in customer interactions), but they *choose* not to do it consistently with their teams.

Not a Skills Gap. A Usage Gap.

This is the key insight: Most leaders don't lack the ability to ask questions. They lack the habit.

They know how to engage a client or external stakeholder with thoughtful questions. But when it comes to their own teams, they default to directing. They skip the pause. They choose speed over engagement and development. They sacrifice long-term ownership for short-term clarity.

This is not about competence. It's about where leaders choose to apply it.

In coaching, this creates a major development opportunity. Because when leaders start asking the right questions — internally, intentionally, and consistently — their impact multiplies across the very areas they care about: engagement, execution, and trust.

And that's why leading with questions isn't just a communication tip.

It's a core leadership behavior with cascading impact — when practiced with discipline.

Why This Behavior Is Hard (And Why It's Worth It)

If leading with questions is so valuable — and leaders know it — why isn't it happening more often?

The answer lies in what we've seen across tens of thousands of coaching conversations and GCG's global dataset. Leaders don't struggle with this behavior because it's complex. They struggle not because it's difficult, but because it competes with urgency, habit, the need for control, personal ego, and constant pressure to deliver.

They know they should pause and ask. But in the moment, they default to action. And that default comes at a cost: missed insight, limited ownership, and shallow engagement. Fortunately, this isn't a permanent gap. With the right coaching focus, this shift is not only possible, it's measurable. And it begins with three core development areas.

1. Lead with Questions - Just Do It

This is the most straightforward coaching focus: building the habit. It's not about giving leaders new tools — they already know how to ask good questions. The challenge is making it automatic, especially under pressure. That's where coaching makes the difference: moving from knowing to doing.

In our coaching, we see leaders focusing on behaviors such as:

- "Ask more, tell less"
- "Guide with curiosity, not control"
- "Create space for others to think and speak up"

But the execution gap remains because leaders often:

- Prioritize speed over development
- Confuse silence with incompetence or indecision
- Wait for the perfect moment to ask, instead of practicing consistently

What works:

- Set a clear goal to default to inquiry in high-stakes moments
- Practice one or two catalytic questions for use in real conversations
- Use pulse feedback to track whether others experience the shift

This is a behavior that improves fast — when it becomes visible and intentional.



2. Use Coaching as a Catalyst – It Pays Off

Many leaders still treat coaching as a bonus activity. Something they do if there's time. Something that feels supportive, but not strategic.

That mindset is a major barrier to results.

Coaching is not a side conversation — it's a performance lever in the flow of work. And the behaviors that define coaching — asking questions, listening actively, supporting development — are also the ones that accelerate execution and build capacity.

GCG's GLA360 data shows that coaching behaviors like:

- Providing developmental feedback
- Asking for improvement suggestions
- Encouraging reflection and challenge

...are among the lowest-rated globally (averaging in the *42nd to 48th* percentile).

But when leaders start using these behaviors consistently, the return is measurable:

- Stronger coworker relationships
- Greater follow-through on goals
- Higher team accountability and execution speed

The takeaway is clear. Coaching works. And *questions* are the starting point.

3. Empower Through Trust - Let Questions Set You Free

This may be one of the most misunderstood dynamic in leadership development: Leaders want to empower others. But they hesitate to let go.

Why? Not because they want to control, but because they fear misalignment. They worry about poor execution, missed expectations, or unclear priorities. The result is reactive oversight — and the exact opposite of trust.

The solution isn't more process. It's better questions.

When leaders ask the right questions early — about goals, ownership, and decision-making — they create clarity that frees them to delegate. And when team members feel equipped to act, they take more initiative, not less.

GLA data backs this up. Leaders score in the 41st to 51st percentile on items like:

- "Take risks in letting others decide"
- "Trust others enough to let go"
- "Build people's confidence"

But when leaders reframe empowerment as alignment through inquiry, their teams thrive. Execution improves. Follow-up decreases. Ownership increases.

> *Trust doesn't mean absence. It means shared clarity — and shared success.*



Practical Strategies to Build the Habit

Understanding the value of leading with questions is one thing. Turning it into a daily leadership habit is another. That's where most leaders get stuck — not in believing the idea, but in applying it when it matters most.

In our coaching practice, we've found that the most effective way to bridge this gap is by focusing on five specific shifts. These are not abstract principles. They are small, deliberate changes in behavior that make leading with questions a visible and consistent part of how leaders show up.

Each one is coachable. Each one is measurable. And together, they form a foundation for lasting change.

1. Default to Inquiry in High-Stakes Moments

When pressure is high, the instinct is to provide answers. That is exactly when questions are most powerful.

Instead of rushing to fix or decide, leaders can train the instinct to pause and ask:

- What options have you considered?
- Where do you see the constraint?
- What would success look like from your view?

Leaders who make this shift report more engagement, better solutions, and fewer bottlenecks. The key is consistency. Do not wait for the perfect moment. Build the habit in everyday leadership conversations.

2. Ask One Layer Deeper

Surface questions are easy to check off. But catalytic questions — the ones that build ownership and insight — go a layer deeper.

For example:

- From "Did you complete it?"
  To "What did you learn from the process?"

- From "Are we on track?"
  To "What's helping or hindering progress the most right now?"

These deeper questions signal to coworkers that the leader values thinking, not just outcomes. That shift changes the tone of business conversations entirely.



3. Make Space, Not Just Questions

A good question is only as effective as the silence that follows and the subsequent response.

Many leaders ask and then quickly move on. But the pause is where insight lives. Giving the team a chance to think, wrestle, and respond creates stronger engagement and better ideas.

This is especially coachable:

- Use silence intentionally, even if it feels uncomfortable
- Avoid "rescuing" the pause by filling it with your own ideas
- Let reflection stretch a little longer than feels natural. It builds capability

Silence is not absence. It is space to lead.

4. Use Questions to Build Capacity, Not Just Clarity

Not all questions are created equal. Some clarify tasks. Others build thinking.

Leaders who consistently lead with questions use them to develop capability, not just get updates. **They ask:**

- What approach would you take if I weren't here?
- What's your recommendation, and what gives you confidence in it?

These kinds of questions help team members prepare to lead, solve, and deliver without over-reliance on the leader. They build judgment, not just compliance.

5. Track It Like Any Leadership Habit

What gets measured gets practiced. That applies to leading with questions too. GCG's coaching platform allows leaders to collect suggestions regularly directly from coworkers, and get pulse feedback on how this behavior is impacting them.

For example:

- Does your leader regularly ask for your input on key issues?
- Have they invited your ideas before offering their own?

Tracking does not just prove progress. It fuels it.

This visibility does two things:

1. It keeps the leader accountable to real-world behavior change
2. It reinforces to the team that their input matters, because they are being asked about it



Real Feedback from Coworkers

It is one thing for a leader to decide to lead with questions. It is another for the people around them to experience that shift. That is why the most meaningful insights often come not from what leaders say about themselves, but from what their coworkers observe, experience, and share.

In GCG's feedforward process, coworkers regularly provide open-ended suggestions to leaders. These comments give us a window into how behaviors like inquiry, coaching, and empowerment actually land. They reveal what is working and what is missing.

When it comes to leading with questions, the patterns are clear. Coworkers do not ask for more answers. They ask for more space to think, more opportunities to contribute, and more trust in their voice.

Here are just a few real examples of what coworkers have said:

> *"Try asking me what I think before offering your solution. I would love the chance to think it through first."*

> *"Sometimes it feels like we go straight to the answer. I think we would benefit from slowing down to explore options together."*

> *"I appreciate it when you ask for my input. It makes me feel like part of the process, not just an executor."*

> *"Let the team wrestle with the challenge a bit more before stepping in. That is how we grow."*

> *"When you ask thoughtful questions, it changes how the team engages. We bring better ideas."*

None of these comments reflect a lack of leadership. In fact, they reflect the opposite. They show a team that is ready to be trusted, and a desire for leadership that creates space rather than closes it.

From a coaching perspective, these insights are gold. They give us language, focus areas, and emotional context for helping leaders develop the habit of inquiry. They also reinforce that change is visible — not just in what the leader does, but in how the team responds.

When a leader begins asking better questions, the team often rises to meet them with better thinking. That feedback loop is what transforms leadership from transactional to transformational.

Leadership in Practice: Ed Catmull at Pixar (A Disney Company)

When Ed Catmull co-founded Pixar, he was surrounded by some of the most brilliant creative minds in the industry. But brilliance alone wasn't enough. The real challenge wasn't generating ideas. It was creating an environment where those ideas could surface, evolve, and be acted on.

In Pixar's early days, teams were hesitant to speak up. Feedback was softened or withheld. Even in a company built on creativity, people hesitated to challenge each other's thinking. Meetings were polite and quiet, even when problems were clear.

Catmull recognized that innovation doesn't come from certainty. It comes from curiosity. So he began to lead differently. He replaced direction with inquiry. He asked more questions and gave fewer answers. He invited pushback and made space for voices that had gone unheard.

One of his most transformative ideas was the "Braintrust." It was a recurring meeting where directors and producers shared unfinished projects and received candid input from peers. No one had authority over the final decision. The point was not to dictate, but to explore. The only rule was honesty, grounded in care.

It worked. That culture of inquiry led to some of Pixar's most iconic films — Toy Story, Finding Nemo, The Incredibles, Up. Each one benefited from a process shaped not by individual genius, but by collective insight. Because when feedback is safe and expected, the work gets better. So does the team.

Catmull later wrote:

> *"You are not your idea, and if you identify too closely with your ideas, you will take offense when they are challenged. To create a culture that protects new ideas, you need to create a culture where people feel safe questioning and being questioned."*

This is the essence of leading with questions. It's not about stepping back. It's about stepping aside, to let others step forward. Inquiry builds trust. It strengthens thinking. It leads to better work, not just from the leader, but from everyone involved.

Great leadership isn't about having all the answers. It's about creating a space where better answers can emerge.



Conclusion: Better Questions, Better Leadership

In leadership, it is easy to believe that answers are what earn trust. That clarity is what drives performance. That confidence comes from control.

But the leaders who create the most meaningful impact are the ones who choose a different path. They build trust by asking. They create clarity by listening. They lead not with all the answers, but with the courage to ask better questions.

This is not about being passive or indirect. It is about being intentional. Purposeful. Strategic. When leaders lead with questions, they do not lose authority—they gain influence. They signal that the team's perspective matters. That solution can come from anywhere. That leadership is shared, not hoarded.

The data proves it. The coaching stories confirm it. The results speak for themselves.

Leading with questions is not just a communication technique. It is a leadership behavior that improves coworker engagement, deepens team collaboration, and delivers measurable results. It creates space for insight, trust, and accountability to grow.

This is what the Triple Win looks like in practice:

- Leaders who engage with confidence and vulnerability
- Teams who think, act, and contribute at a higher level
- Businesses that execute better because they include more voices in the process

You do not have to change everything at once. But you can start with one choice:

Ask the question.
Then pause. Let the answers come.
And lead from there.



For Clients



We Deliver a Triple Win

Better Leaders, Better Teams, and Better Results — boasting a 95% success rate confirmed by coworkers, based on more than 100,000+ leaders coached.

Global Coach Group delivers the best results-based coaching worldwide through our network of over 4,000 world-class certified coaches, powered by our proven Triple Win Leadership Coaching approach and proprietary digital tools.

Triple Win Leadership Coaching, captured in Everybody Wins by Will Linssen — Amazon #1 International Bestselling Author.

Author



Will Linssen

Will Linssen has been ranked World's #1 Leadership Coach by Global Gurus (USA) and World's #1 Coach Trainer by Thinkers50 (UK), serves as advisor to the Harvard Business Review, and is recognized as a LinkedIn Top Executive Coaching Voice. He is an Amazon #1 International Bestselling Author. With more than 30 years of experience in executive leadership across Europe, North America, and Asia, Will holds the International Coaching Federation's highest accreditation: Master Certified Coach.

He is the founder and CEO of Global Coach Group, the world's #1 international leadership coaching network, with over 4,000 coaches worldwide serving Fortune 500 companies and leading multinational corporations.