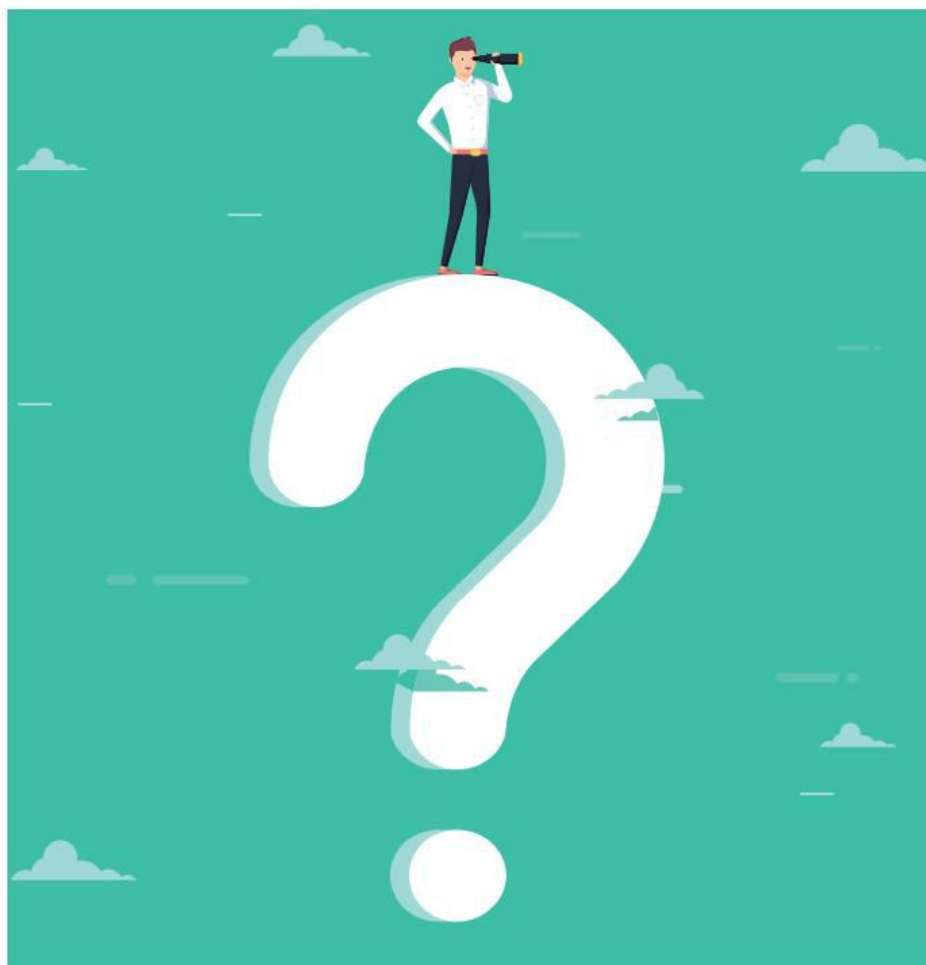


Curious leadership

Rather than having all the answers, good leadership is the art of asking the right questions, writes **Michelle Gibbings**



IN TODAY'S fast-paced world, there's often an expectation that leaders need to have the answers at their fingertips, that it's not OK to say "I don't know" or "I'm not sure".

However, it's not possible for leaders to have all the answers all the time. Additionally, we are surrounded by more information than ever, and it's becoming harder to know which sources to trust.

Discernment and good judgment are critical – particularly because in a complex, ambiguous and interconnected world, everything may not be what it seems. When we take something on face value, we may be missing key pieces of information or overlooking unseen options. And when leaders hold dogmatic views and are certain about their opinion, they open themselves to decision failures.

Your mindset is critical

History is littered with stories of leaders who thought they had the answers, ignored advice and consequently made poor decisions – from the failure of Kodak to AOL's disastrous purchase of Time Warner to the collapse of Lehman Brothers.

When leaders are certain they are right, they close themselves off to other ideas and different opinions. This can lead to

poor decision-making due to the bias we all have in how we process information and make decisions.

Stanford academic Carol Dweck confirmed this in her research on fixed and growth mindsets. She found that people who have a fixed mindset see intelligence as static – a fixed trait. As a result, they always want to look smart and appear as though they have all the answers. They believe that success is based on talent alone, not work.

This means they will avoid challenges and give up more easily. They also ignore feedback, which they see as criticism, and they often feel threatened by the success of others.

In contrast, people with a growth mindset believe intelligence can be developed through hard work and effort. Consequently, they are more eager to embrace learning, take on challenges and persist in spite of setbacks. They love learning and usually display higher resilience. They are also more willing to learn from others and receive feedback.

Embrace scepticism

In contrast, leaders who are comfortable with uncertainty have a growth mindset and are more willing to embrace the art of curiosity. They recognise that good decision-making comes from asking lots of questions, not finding the one right answer.

And that's where scepticism plays its part. According to the dictionary, to be sceptical is to be not easily convinced or to have doubts or reservations. It's easy to paint the sceptic in a negative light – as the person who's cynical and therefore to be dismissed.

In fact, being sceptical means you are curious. It means you recognise you don't have all the answers and are open to challenge and debate, rather than having a fixed idea or opinion. Sceptics question. They critically think and ponder ideas. They reflect on what is really happening. In doing this, they

take the time to ensure they are:

- ✓ Considering what's happening around them and reflect on what they are seeing and hearing, and therefore what action should be taken
- ✓ Challenging assumptions they and others may have to ensure they are making a good decision and are being open to dissenting views and outlier opinions
- ✓ Checking their facts and interpretations of those facts as they are on the lookout for bias, which may adversely impact their thought processes and decisions

- uncover elements that may be missing from the conversation
- ensure the discussion has examined the issue from multiple perspectives
- challenge their own thinking process and the processes of those around them

By asking questions, leaders show they are interested in the ideas being shared and open to new information and thoughts. They are also welcoming divergent views and encouraging debate and discussion – all characteristics that are critical for successful leadership. So instead of encour-

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The art of the good question

Leaders who are comfortable with uncertainty have a growth mindset and are more willing to embrace their curiosity. They recognise that good decision-making comes from asking lots of questions, not finding the one right answer.

This isn't about asking a question to get the answer they want. Instead, leaders need to ask questions that:

- clarify their understanding
- help to seek out different ideas
- ensure that outlier opinions and diverse views are heard
- make sure the trade-offs from decisions are clearly articulated

aging leaders to find the answers, encourage them to ask the right questions.

It was the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss who said, "The wise man doesn't give the right answers; he poses the right questions." Being open to asking the right question is a hallmark of influential leadership. So, what question will you ask next? 

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