



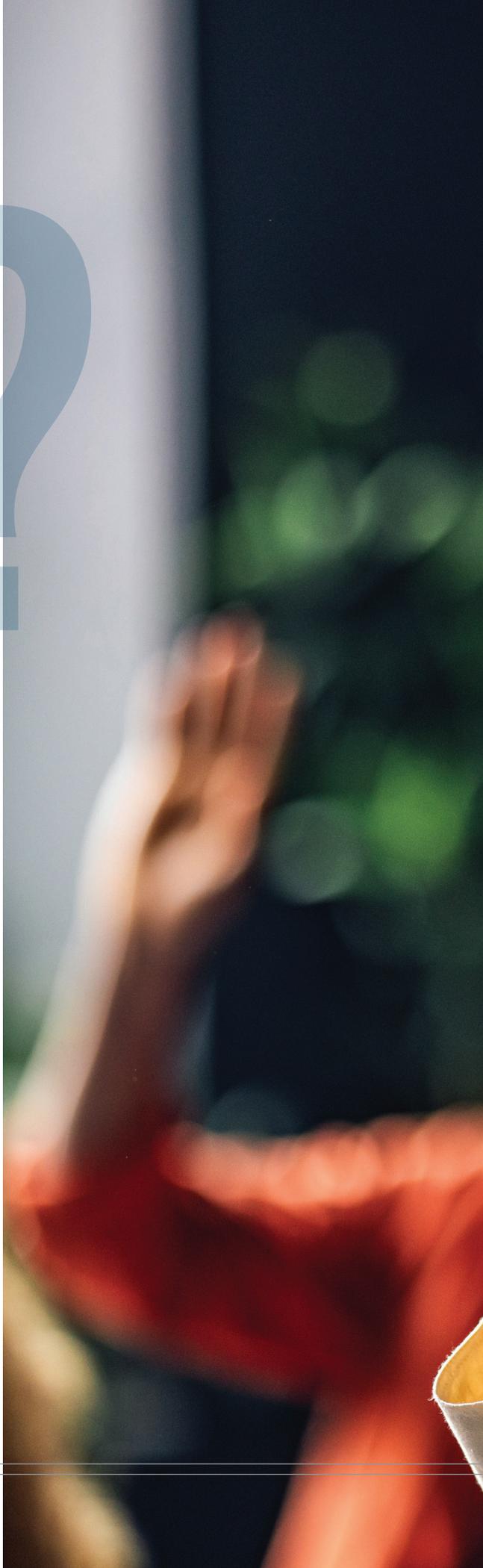
BY YASMIN L. STUMP, ESQ.

Several years ago, for my birthday, one of my clients gave me a tee shirt with the quippy slogan: “Talk is cheap until you hire a lawyer.” It was one of my favorite tee shirts, and I wore it for many years until after countless washings took its toll on this item of apparel. Ultimately, the collar separated from the rest of the shirt, and I could no longer wear it.

Clearly, strong communication skills are imperative for attorneys, particularly litigators. Solid communications skills are obviously equally significant for other members of the right of way industry, particularly buyers and appraisers. Outwardly, well-honed communication skills seem less essential for certain right of way professionals, such as engineers and surveyors, although it is certainly debatable. But, irrespective of the profession in the right of way industry, highly developed communication skills are crucial for successful leaders, and certainly, more than one article could be devoted to the value of effective communication in leadership. Since communication is a broad topic, the focus of this article is one aspect of communication, which is asking questions.

Asking Questions is Second Nature for Some Leaders

Unquestionably (no pun intended), like other skills, asking questions comes more naturally and easily to some people. The talent for asking questions may be evident early in life. Think about highly curious children who habitually exasperate adults with unrelentless questioning about basically everything. These inquisitive youngsters typically blossom into adults who are ferocious learners and ask questions to satiate their need to understand new things.





QUESTIONING —

A CRUCIAL LEADERSHIP SKILL

Building strength as a leader through asking questions





Others grow up in households where asking questions is part of their families' cultures, and they are so intent on their questioning that the larger culture may find their inquisitiveness intrusive. The other day I was at a salon, where I observed a customer question the salon owner about a recent event in her life. The individuals were from different cultures, and my sense was that the customer was well-intentioned with her questions, but the salon owner was clearly uncomfortable with the inquisition.

For others, the ability to formulate and ask profound questions is part of their educational curriculum or otherwise taught because it is essential to their professions, like journalism or law. In college, I majored in journalism during an epoch when laptop computers were a faraway vision in the future. My fellow journalism students and I used manual typewriters. But the lack of technological sophistication aside, our professors taught us to procure valuable information through the skill of asking thoughtful questions. If a journalist is unable to ask profound questions during an interview, he or she would be unable to effectively report to his or her readers.

Why is Asking Questions a Crucial Leadership Skill?

My experience has been that leaders often hesitate to ask questions for a couple of reasons. First, it is often easier and more efficient for leaders to tell team members what they think and what to do. But leaders who avoid asking their team members questions in the interests of expediency miss important chances to assist their team members with professional development and potentially discover another view or manner to accomplish assignments. An October 2022 article on [skillabilly.com](https://www.skillabilly.com) states, "Effective questioning can identify and exploit new opportunities and challenges that would otherwise go unnoticed." Second, leaders avoid asking questions because they fear it may make them appear as if they are unknowledgeable. However, this fear should be dismissed because, as an October 29, 2020, COO Alliance article noted, "If you're the smartest person in the room, you're in the wrong room." The article further observed, "Growth is an on-going process." Ultimately, leaders who ask important questions contribute to the growth of both their teams, as well as themselves.





So, why should a leader ask probing questions? Joan Cheverie addresses this question in her 2017 article for the *Educause Review*. “[A]sking questions effectively is a major component of any manager or leader’s job, and asking good questions often distinguishes outstanding leaders and managers from average ones (or worse, poor ones).” Reasons other than growth exist for asking pertinent questions as a leader. A *skillabilly.com* article said, “[I]t can improve communication, build consensus and increase collaboration.” This article further added, “One of the most important reasons to use questioning is to improve your decision-making skills. It can help you understand others’ motives. It’s important to know what motivates others.”

Additionally, aside from building comradery among team members on work assignments and projects, asking questions also helps to strengthen your relationships with your individual team members. A leader can ask questions about a team member’s life, interests and future aspirations. When the leader does so, he or she is taking a personal interest in the team member and makes the team member feel that he or she and his or her life is important. All employees appreciate garnering their bosses’ attention and having their bosses take an interest in them.

The Next Step: Formulating Meaningful Questions

Questioning is an indispensable leadership skill, but how do leaders formulate effective questions, particularly if it is not an innate talent or ability that has been taught to them through education or other training? My own experience has been that formulating critical questions involves thoughtful planning. Before the conversation, leaders need to first contemplate what is needed to be more productive or to address an issue. In doing so, they need consider the specific information to elicit from their team members to reach the goal of being more productive or addressing an issue. The questions crafted should be open-ended rather than close-ended. Close-ended questions are those that suggest a certain answer, usually “yes” or “no.” Trial lawyers use close-ended questions on cross examination. For instance, “Isn’t true Mrs. Smith that you own the property located at 1234 Easy Street?” Conversely, open-ended questions do not imply a certain response and allow the individual answering the question to explain the answer or provide a narrative response.

When using questions, leaders should be mindful to create a nonjudgmental atmosphere. Team members should be placed at ease during the question-and-answer dialogue to ensure that they are comfortable to provide complete and thorough answers. The questioning process should not be one where they feel they are being blamed or criticized. Certainly, the experience should not be one that seems like an inquisition. Rather, the objective through questioning is for a leader to elicit information through important discussion as part of teamwork for an organization’s benefit.

The close companion to effective questioning is actively listening. It is not enough to ask intelligent questions; effective leaders must also carefully listen to the answers to their questions. After the answers to questions have been provided, follow-up questions should be asked to further understand and expand the topic of discussion. As a trial lawyer, one too many times I have listened to another lawyer with a script of questions at a deposition, hearing or trial and fail to listen to the witness’ answer to a question. Instead of asking a follow-up question based on the witness’ answer, the lawyer just moves on to the next question in the script. At times, it is painful to hear. Not only does the lawyer appear to be inexperienced and inattentive, but he or she misses an opportunity to meaningfully develop the line of questioning. Closely listening to the answers to questions is vital. As Cheverie admitted in her *Educause Review* article, “[I]t slowly dawned on me that I was learning by asking questions and listening. The more I listened, the better my questions became and the more I learned.”

One additional note on asking follow-up questions: ensure that specificity is provided in an answer rather than a subjective answer or one that requires interpretation. For instance, if a leader asks a team member when he or she will have an assignment completed, and the team member responds, “sometime soon,” follow-up is imperative because “sometime soon” can be interpreted differently by different people. A follow-up question to drill down on a specific answer could be, “By sometime soon, what do mean specifically, one week, 15 days or some other time?”

Asking thoughtful questions is not just beneficial with leaders’ teams but also with your clients and in professional development. With clients, questioning can be used to ascertain their expectations of your firm or company, projects and their deadlines. Using questions to understand expectations and deadlines avoids misunderstandings in the future and negative perceptions. In professional development, questions are an excellent tool to learn more about one’s colleagues, their businesses, skills and interests and build relationships. This article will be published immediately prior to the 69th Annual IRWA International Education Conference in Denver, which will create an excellent opportunity to get to know other right of way professionals through asking questions. ✪



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