

Good Leaders Ask Dumb Questions: Leadership Traits in Defense of Asking the Obvious

Asking dumb questions can showcase valuable leadership skills.

By Walt Grassl

People who ask “dumb” questions are generally the smartest ones in the room. They’re the ones who point out inconsistencies, errors, and misconceptions that others accept or let pass by. They ask the logical questions that others are often wishing someone would ask. Often it’s that one little question that shines a whole new light on the situation.

No one ever loses when someone asks a question. But everyone loses when the right question isn’t asked. Here are six benefits of questioning the obvious:

Openness

When you ask dumb questions, you acknowledge that you don’t have all the answers. That highlights you as approachable, relatable, and authentic. People see you’re open to being questioned and are likely to use you as a sounding board.

Vision

When you have vision, you imagine what might be. Asking dumb questions can lead to creative, out-of-the-box solutions. Your query may inspire someone else to come up with a breakthrough idea.

Another part of vision is contingency planning. That often means asking things others disregard, such as, “What’s our Plan B in case this plan fails? What will we do if things don’t work out the way we expect?”

Alignment

At the end of a meeting it may seem silly to ask, “What have we agreed to?” But that query may uncover a lack of consensus that no one realized was there. Clarifying misconceptions take minutes, and can save weeks of lost time and money.

Understanding

Blindly following a new direction can lead to problems. Your organization may not get the intended results – not because the idea was bad but because people didn’t understand why

the change was being made. The question, “Why are we doing this?” can seem simplistic, but it’s not. It can mean the difference between confusion and clarity, between a disgruntled workforce and a motivated team, between a failed initiative and a well-executed plan.

Teaching Moments

Good leaders learn to delegate. Delegation requires follow-up. It also requires confidence that the right things are being done in the right way. When you ask, you may discover that what you meant isn’t what was understood. Questioning gives you a chance to explain things in another way.

Courage

Asking dumb questions allows you to develop and display courage. It shows you’re not intimidated by the situation and that you add value as a participant in the meeting. It indicates that you represent the silent majority in the audience – those who had the same question but lacked the courage to bring it up.

Having the courage to ask also demonstrates decisiveness – an important trait for leaders. By daring to ask the dumb questions, you will instill confidence and be seen as a strong-minded, incisive, and trustworthy leader. 

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Other Things Good Leaders Do

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Rate Yourself as a Servant Leader (Vol. 31, No. 1)

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“You may uncover dangerous misunderstandings.”