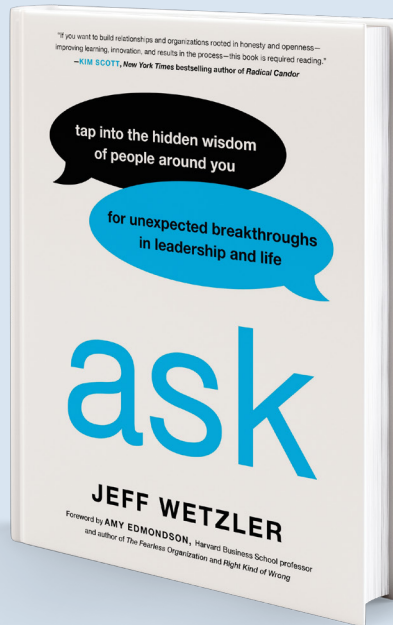


Book Snaps™

In-depth reviews of best-selling business books.



Ask

Tap Into the Hidden Wisdom of People All Around You for Unexpected Breakthroughs in Leadership and Life

By Jeff Wetzler

Jeff Wetzler has been on a quarter-century quest to transform learning opportunities and unlock human potential. Blending a unique set of leadership experiences in the fields of business and education, he's pursued this quest as an international management consultant to executives in Fortune 500 corporations, as Chief Learning Officer at Teach For America, and currently, as co-CEO of Transcend, a nationally recognized education innovation organization. Jeff earned a Doctorate in Adult Learning and Leadership from Columbia University and a Bachelor's in Psychology from Brown University. He is an Aspen Global Leadership Fellow and an Edmund Hillary Fellow.

A Book Review by Soundview

Find Out What Others Really Think, Know, and Feel

In his book, *Ask: Tap Into the Hidden Wisdom of People All Around You for Unexpected Breakthroughs in Leadership and Life*, author Jeff Wetzler wants to open up, for his readers, the world that becomes available once you start asking questions. He is convinced that in the mere asking of the right questions of the right people, you can open up vast swaths of information that otherwise would be invisible to you. While he addresses his book primarily to people working in business, he maintains that the importance of questions is not just relegated to the world of work. The principles he lays out can be generalized to any area of life where a person wants to recognize pitfalls and weaknesses and unlock strengths and new opportunities. He breaks his book up into three parts. The first section deals with problems people face in relationships, particularly when it comes to the asking of questions. The second part covers what he calls, "The Ask Approach," and his final section teaches his reader how to build this approach into both their leadership roles and their personal lives.

After discussing how many people wish they could read the minds around them, Wetzler states that "people overestimate their ability to make accurate inferences about what others around them are really feeling or thinking at a given moment." Unfortunately, most of our inferences, he maintains, are incorrect. This is in part because both body language and a person's empathy can fail to provide adequate information into the thoughts and feelings of others. Wetzler maintains that the only accurate way to determine what another person is thinking is through asking them directly. This is not always easy. Wetzler believes difficulties arise because people have not been properly taught how to ask people the questions they need answers to. "Couple this dearth of knowledge," he writes, "with social norms that emphasize self-reliance, competition, and conflict avoidance, and you begin to understand why so many of us avoid asking." There is hope, however, as Wetzler believes that we will all be better off once people learn to ask quality questions, and this skill is, indeed, learnable.

The Invisible Problem

Wetzler opens each of his chapters with an essential question the chapter attempts to answer. In Chapter 1, he asks, “What do you most need to know that people are least likely to tell you?” He tells the story of when he worked for Teach For America when their Northwest Summer Institute suddenly faced major challenges. This was a drastic situation because this training is what would prepare large numbers of teachers to face students come fall. Despite the fact that problems had been arising for quite awhile, nobody told Wetzler of the problems for months. While the problems with the Summer Institute were able to be overcome, Wetzler was left realizing that even though he had asked many questions, whatever he had done did not create an environment that was conducive to his colleagues telling him the truth. Instead, they attempted to solve problems on their own without his help. He knew something needed to change.

Wetzler then goes on to write about a tactic he learned called “the two-column case.” When people use this technique, they create two columns on a sheet of paper. In the right column, they write down what was actually said during a conversation. In the left column, they then “write the unspoken thoughts and feelings they experienced throughout the interaction.” This exercise helps people realize how much they are holding back from saying, and when extrapolated to the other person, can help a listener realize how much a speaker may be withholding in a conversation. These thoughts and feelings are important. Wetzler explains how it is our problem when others hold back from sharing because our decision-making and relationships suffer because of the omissions. Wetzler shares four categories of information that people generally withhold:

1. “Their struggles and frustrations...and what help they need
2. What they really believe or feel about an issue...and where their views come from
3. Their honest feedback for you...and suggestions for how you can improve
4. Their most audacious ideas and dreams...which they fear might sound crazy.”

Barriers to Sharing

Wetzler’s second chapter attempts to answer the question, “why don’t most people tell you what’s most important for you to find out?” Wetzler believes there are four primary reasons why people withhold information: they’re worried about the impact their words could have on themselves or others, they do not have the energy to deal with the answer, they do not believe their opinions or feelings will be valued, and they do not have the words required to properly share their feelings.

Wetzler believes that the number one reason people hold back sharing is because “they are worried about the impact of sharing.” These impacts can be different in various contexts. For example, in some cultures, people are quite concerned with

saving face, and as such, they may be concerned with embarrassing you with their insights. While trust can help overcome some of this reluctance, sometimes a closer relationship can actually make disclosure more difficult because the stakes are higher for the person trying to share. Another problem is one of estimation. People often believe they will cause more harm than they actually will with a disclosure while simultaneously underestimating the benefits they stand to reap.

While people fail to disclose information because they worry about the effects on the other person, some people fail to disclose information because they fear they will reap negative repercussions themselves. These possible repercussions include possible fears of both judgment and rejection, and people are susceptible to these fears in all areas of their lives. A fear of rejection also does not need to stem from personal rejection. If a person sees a colleague or friend get rejected for sharing an opinion, they likely will not feel comfortable sharing their own ideas, particularly if they are not high in the organizational hierarchy.

The next barrier Wetzler discusses is people who have difficulty putting their thoughts into words. This can happen because people think more quickly than they can speak, they do not have the necessary communication skills, and they worry the words they can find are not appropriate. The latter problem frequently has to do with emotional speech that people may have been conditioned to keep inside.

Wetzler’s fourth barrier is a “lack of time or energy.” This occurs when people know that providing insight into a situation will inevitably draw them more deeply into the problem than they have the energy to deal with. Wetzler notices this tendency in himself at times, and when he does, he tells those around him that he really is interested in what they have to say and that they have full permission to stop him from what he is doing. He tells his people that he will provide them with all of the attention he can give them.

A final barrier to communication occurs when people feel their opinions are not valued. This does not have to be an accurate assessment in order for it to be a powerfully prohibiting one. People can determine that you do not want to listen based upon prior experiences with you or even with experiences with people in a similar role to you. When people try to share and nothing changes, it can lead to people losing hope. Despite the seriousness of the barriers presented, Wetzler maintains, “Many of the barriers described in this chapter can be immediately overcome simply by asking.”

Choosing Curiosity

There are five key pillars to Wetzler’s Ask Approach. These include choosing curiosity, making it safe, posing quality questions, learning to listen, and reflecting. When it comes to choosing curiosity, Wetzler asks, “How can you awaken your curiosity to make new discoveries and unexpected connections?” Unfortunately in conversation, people frequently already believe they know what the other person will say, and this stops conversation before it can even start. Curiosity, described as a drive state, can help



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overcome this. There are multiple different types of curiosity, and Wetzler is concerned with connective curiosity which “is a desire to understand more about the thoughts, experiences, and feelings of other people.” This type of curiosity helps both the speaker and the listener because when the listener feels that what they say is taken seriously, they actually experience an increase in a desire to divulge information. For Wetzler, curiosity is a choice rather than an inherent trait, and it is a choice anyone can choose.

One problem people frequently face is they choose one aspect of a person’s statement to focus on and then they draw conclusions and tell stories based upon that piece of information. All of this, of course, is subject to confirmation bias or the tendency people have to focus on information that confirms what they already believe while ignoring other information that could point them in other directions. In order to overcome this tendency to move quickly from a situation to a story, it is important to insert curiosity at different steps in the listening process. This can happen when a person asks questions of themselves at each step of the process, leaving themselves open to see how their conclusions or story may not be accurate. It is also important to keep in mind that there is a lot of information that we cannot access without honest answers to questions, and this includes “others’ true intentions and motivations.”

Cultivating Safety

Next Wetzler turns his attention to figuring out how to make other people feel more safe in sharing. This is frequently an issue when there are differentials in power that can arise from age, sex position, race, or any other number of factors. Wetzler states, “sometimes being asked to share, particularly in a professional context, feels less like an invitation and more like a social threat.” In these situations, it is important to consider the questions asked and the ways they are asked. People must feel psychologically safe in order to share, and studies have shown that businesses and organizations can sink or soar based upon how free people at different levels feel in expressing what it is they have to say.

Despite the importance of psychological safety, Wetzler affirms that this is not absolutely achievable in a work environment where there is always some level of risk in speaking out. To make speaking out safer for people, Wetzler proposes the safety cycle. The first step of this cycle involves creating connections. This can be done through sharing important stories as well as through being vulnerable oneself. Further, it is important to find both an appropriate time and place to have a meaningful discussion. This should be a time and a place conducive to the person you are asking questions of. Next, opening up yourself is important. This happens when the person looking for informa-

tion acknowledges that there are insights that the other person has that they, themselves, are not privy to. Sometimes question askers are reluctant to share too much themselves because their words and opinions could bias the other person, and it takes more time. Still, this is an important step in building psychological safety. Finally, the third step in the safety cycle is radiating resilience. This becomes possible when topics are made discussable because the conversational participants acknowledge that there are things they may have to say that others do not want to hear. In addition, it is important for the listener to try to react calmly and appropriately when people share information they do not want to hear.

Asking and Listening

Not all questions are equally helpful, and Wetzler’s Chapter 6 helps his reader tap into the most important questions to ask. Wetzler acknowledges the truth that many people have been made to feel ashamed for questions they have asked, and this can make them more reluctant to ask questions in the future. There are three types of questions that Wetzler suggests his reader avoid: “clumsy questions, sneaky questions, and attack questions.” The first set can be awkwardly worded questions that simply do not get the needed information because they fail to clearly ask for it. Sneaky questions, on the other hand, do not try to elicit information but instead are “designed to influence, convince, or maneuver the other person.” Attack questions go further and attempt to actually hurt the other person. Clearly none of these questions will elicit the answers desired. Helpful questions, Wetzler states, contain the following criteria: “They signal true curiosity... They are clear and direct... They invite honesty... They tap into the other person’s full story... [and] They create mutual benefit.” Good questions help a listener understand more clearly all aspects of what it is the other party thinks and feels in relation to the issue at hand.

Wetzler moves on to ask “How can you hear what someone is really trying to tell you?” Here, Wetzler wants his reader to listen to all that the other person has to say, and this involves listening to their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Many people confuse the concept of listening with hearing. True listening is a far more active pursuit than merely just hearing what the other person has to say. When people listen in order to learn, they pay attention to all it is the other person is saying. A big part of this is getting rid of distractions, both internal and external. In addition, it requires a listener to be quiet so the other person has ample opportunity to speak. One effective technique Wetzler shares is sometimes referred to as the looping technique. With this technique, a listener paraphrases back what it is they heard the speaker say and then ask whether their interpretation was

accurate. This helps a listener know that what he or she has said is valued, and it also ensures that the listener really understood what it was that was being said.

Responding and Reconnecting

In his final section on the *Ask* Approach, Wetzler turns to action as he states that “The hardest part of learning from others isn’t asking the questions, or even listening to the answers. It’s deciding what to do with what we hear.” He believes that when given the gift of thoughtful answers, it is a questioner’s responsibility to both reflect on what was said and to go back and reconnect with the giver of the answers. These steps are important for making sure that we understand what is most important and also in ensuring that communication is enhanced in the future rather than shut down. All of this does not mean that a person has to act on every bit of information they are given or accept as truth that which they know to be false. Rather, the listener needs to “separate the wheat from the chaff” and then respond in a way which makes the other party feel respected and appreciated.

Wetzler recommends that the first step in the sifting process is to record what was said. This “provides clarity and prevents you from second-guessing or immediately interpreting what you heard.” It is after this first step is done that a person can then mine what they have heard for nuggets of value. Wetzler recommends a three turn approach. In the first turn, a listener is tasked with reflecting upon their own story about the situation at hand. On the second turn, they are tasked with reflecting on next steps, and on the third turn, they should focus on their own “stuff” to determine if there are deeper factors at play. Wetzler offers numerous tools to aid in reflection including journaling, conversation, coaching, and therapy, all of which can help a person delve deeper when performing these three turns.

Once the reflection is complete, it is time to turn to reconnecting in a way that helps to enable future sharing. Wetzler recommends starting this process with honest gratitude for what has been shared. Then, it is important to share the impact that the other party’s words and insights had on the issue at hand. This includes sharing what you heard from the speaker so they know that their words and insights were taken seriously. Finally, it is helpful to let the other party know what actions are being considered because of the insights they shared. Because you may not choose to take all of the advice or act on all of the insights provided, it becomes important to explain the decision-making process to the other party as a form of reconnection after this process.

Broader Context

Throughout his book, Wetzler walks his reader through different steps to take in order to become better question askers. He includes explorations of numerous real world situations in which the asking of questions benefited either himself or other people, demonstrating real world applications for his principles. While much of the book focuses on individuals, his advice and principles are not just relegated to individual leaders. These tactics are meant to be used throughout all levels of organizations, and to emphasize this, one of his later chapters

focuses specifically on how to “unlock the collective genius of your team.” In addition, he includes a chapter on harnessing these techniques in education. After all, children are natural question askers until this tendency is conditioned out of them by forces wanting to tell children what to think rather than opening up their own potential for discovery on their own and through others. Because of this, he provides guidelines for working with children that help to enhance this question-asking capability in them while it is still present.

Wetzler believes in the power of people to learn from other people. This power is most hindered by the reluctance people have to ask good questions. This, in turn, leads others to shut down, and knowledge and insights become siloed. Asking good questions is a skill, and it is this skill that Wetzler helps his reader develop in his book.

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