

ASK, DON'T TELL

An E-Book by Gary B. Cohen

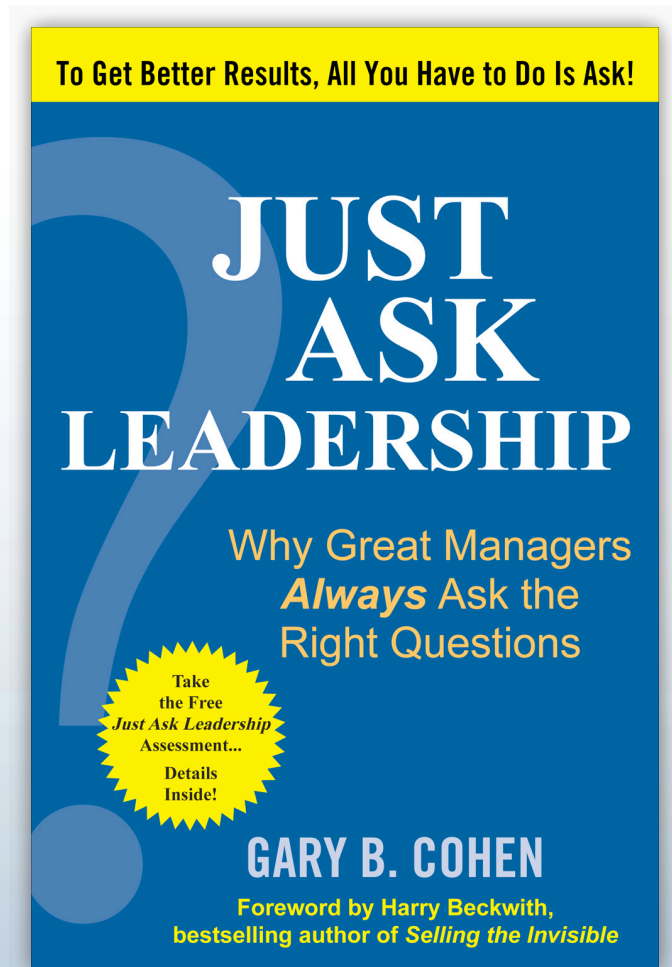
Based On The Book

JUST ASK LEADERSHIP

Why Great Leaders *Always* Ask the Right Questions

by Gary B. Cohen

Illustrations by Corey Sauer



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Illustrations by Corey Sauer
corey@whichwaystudios.com
[Which Way Studios Web Site](#)



About Gary B. Cohen

As President and Co-founder of ACI Telecentrics, Inc., Gary Cohen grew the company from two people to 2,200 employees and reached \$32 million in sales at the company's peak. ACI grew at an average compounded rate of over fifty percent for almost thirteen years. Currently, he is Partner and Co-founder of CO2 Partners, LCC, operating as an executive coach and consultant. His international client list runs a wide range of organizations—from small entrepreneurial companies to multi-billion-dollar enterprises. His book *Just Ask Leadership* is being published by McGraw Hill and will be released September of 2009.

Gary received his B.S. from the University of Minnesota, where he triple-majored in International Business, Intercultural Communications, and International Political Science. Prior to attending Harvard Business School (Owner President Manager Program), he attended Covey Leadership Center and Disney Creative Leadership workshops. He has served on numerous boards, including Outward Bound National Advisory Board, All Kinds of Minds, Shalom Home Alliance, Alzheimer Board of Governors, American Teleservices Association, I.C. Systems (one of the nation's largest collection agencies), and Richfield Bank. He has been a member of TEC (The Executive Committee) and written or been recognized in articles for *Wall Street Journal Europe*, *Wall Street Journal Asia*, *Financial Daily News*, *USA Today*, *Washington Post*, *Business Week*, *Wall Street Reporter*, *Venture Magazine*, *Paul Pioneer Press*, and *Profits Journal*. He has been a columnist for *JobDig*, writing exclusively on the topic of leadership. Among his many accomplishments, he was an Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award Finalist (*Inc. Magazine*) and Henry Crown Fellow (*Aspen Institute*); in addition, ACI was recognized as one of *Venture Magazine's* Top 10 Best Performing Businesses and *Business Journal's* 25 Fastest Growing Small Public Companies.

Contact Gary

gary@co2partners.com
[CO2 Partners Web Site](#)



Create Better Decisions: Whose Decision Is It?

As clients meet with me to discuss leadership, inevitably the conversation turns to decision-making. Making decisions is one of the most taxing job responsibilities that leaders have. In my experience, leaders suffer more than they should because they make too many decisions. Too often, they fail to ask, “Whose decision is it?” or “Who is the decider?”

When leaders take the burden of responsibility too far, they either want to protect others from making tough decisions or they want to extend their power. The result is often poor decision-making because these leaders do not have sufficient information. And the team members who should have made the decision do not gain valuable experience. Instead of adhering to the old Harry S. Truman adage, “The buck stops here,” these leaders should do a better job of clarifying job responsibilities, trusting their team members to make good decisions, and then holding them accountable.

Lord Carrington, whom I knew for a brief time, was minister of the British Defense Department during the Falkland Islands war. The war was launched because of a mistake a radio operator made on one of the frigates out at sea. Lord Carrington was obligated via ministerial responsibility (the British version of “The buck stops here”) to resign. After all, if

he was doing his job, all those under his command must be doing their jobs, too, no matter how far removed—including the radio operator. This practice is outdated, in part, because it takes accountability away from the person who is directly responsible. And it results in leaders who are either too controlling or unjustly blamed for the bad decisions of others.

“Perhaps you can help me with a problem I’m having, Gary,” Todd, President of one of the largest financial services company on the east coast, said as we sat down to coffee. “I have this woman who works for me. She’s grown her department by thirty percent in the last year. But she hasn’t been showing up at the weekly executive meetings even when she’s in the office. Her boss thinks everything’s fine and keeps citing the thirty-percent figure, but the competition in that industry segment is scoring even higher. Plus, her department is the doorway into my company for many customers.” I asked Todd what exactly the problem was. He said, “Her!”

I asked, “Are you sure?” He looked at me quizzically. “You’re saying the problem lies with me?” I asked him whom she reported to. He said, “She reports to Dave.” I then asked, “So whose problem is it?” Begrudgingly, he said, “Dave’s.” We then investigated why he thought it was his problem to begin with. This employee did not show up for Dave’s meeting, but since it was Todd’s company and he had heard complaints, he felt it reflected badly on him. Since I don’t have an emotional investment, it was easier for me to see who was the decider here than it was for Todd. And, since Dave is invested in this woman in many ways that Todd is not, Todd might be able to supply some perspective to Dave that he is currently missing.

As a leader, Todd shouldn’t ignore the fact that he had heard complaints about this particular employee. Instead, he must hold Dave accountable for his people. Once Dave is alerted to the issue, it is no longer Todd’s issue. If Dave fails to act, however, then Todd must confront a new issue: Dave’s failure to manage his team members.

Since Todd is impacted by the failure of the employee to attend his meeting, I suggested a strategy that helps set clear boundaries. I encouraged him to cancel the next meeting if one or more people did not attend. I find it hard to employ shaming tactics, but, at the same time, they can be extremely effective. In this case, the message would be loud and clear: everyone’s participation is critical to the process. And, based upon my experience, I doubt Dave would have to cancel more than one meeting.

Employee empowerment begins with leaders asking themselves four words over and over: “Whose decision is it?”



What Is My Guiding Question?

“Ohm……” Meditators use sounds like this one to help them find peace, harmony, and direction. These sounds are repeated over and over again until they become ingrained. In the meditation process, the day’s irritations-sirens, horns, slips, spills, criticisms, etc.-slip away.

Guiding questions can have a similar harmonic effect. They can make sorting through distractions and options much easier. Not surprisingly, many leaders find them invaluable. Greg Farrell, President and CEO of Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, said to me, “You know, Gary, the question I am wrestling with is not should I work with a guiding question, but what guiding question should we work with when setting up each expeditionary learning model?”

When I decided to write a book, I knew I needed a guiding question. What was I looking to answer? After much thought, I settled on, “Why is it that exceptional leaders spend so much time asking questions?” Now I can always come back to the question and ask, “Am I writing the right material to answer that question?” Writing a book, like building a business or organizing an event, is filled with so many interesting distractions. I wanted to read every book on leadership and the art of questioning. I wanted to interview as many leaders

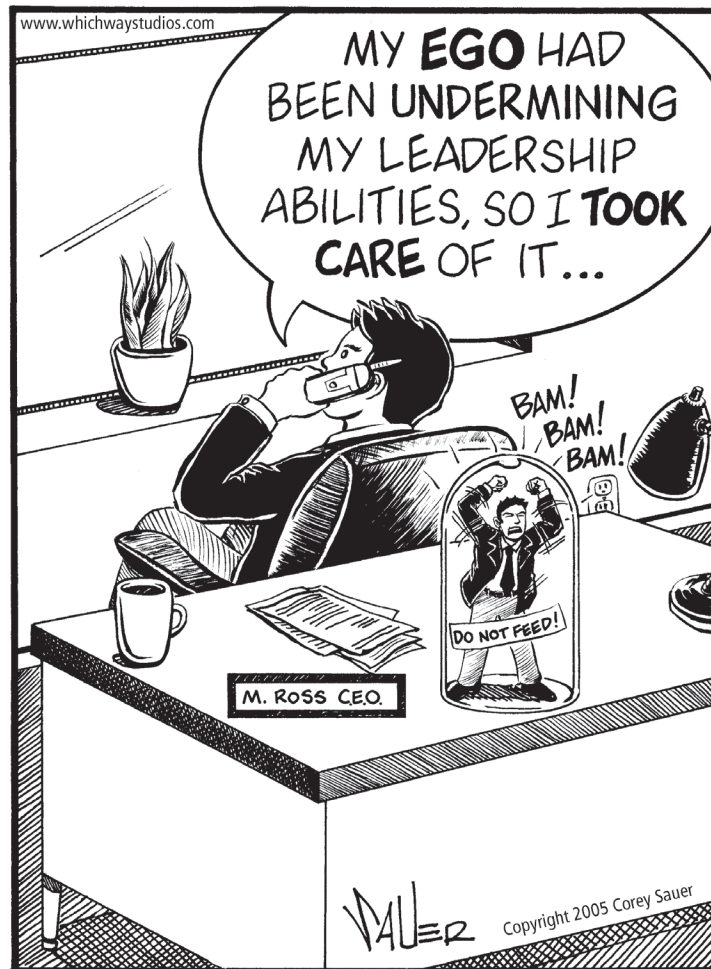
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as possible. Without my guiding question, I might have been redirected by my research and curiosity and wound up writing a book on pet grooming or, worse, a forty-volume encyclopedia. Instead, when I reached a crossroad, I returned to my guiding question. No matter how interesting or important the new information was, I made sure it helped answer my overarching question. If it did not, I set it aside or filed it away for future projects.

When you are writing a book, the consequences of your decisions are largely yours alone to suffer. In an organization, many more lives are affected. Do not make your subordinates follow your every whim. What overarching question are you trying to answer? Once you have settled on a question, let it guide you. Repeat it daily like a meditation sound. And, periodically, ask, "Am I asking the right question?" Keep asking this question until your heart and mind come together.

For more, see [Twenty Questions for Leaders to Ask](#) by Gary Cohen at [BusinessWeek.com](#).



How Does Your Ego Get in the Way of Leading?

Why is it important to lead with questions?
Why this strategy over others?

Organizations are made up of people. Like you, every employee has his/her own goals, aspirations, concerns, experiences, and dreams. And each of us has an ego. The ego allows us to believe that we are capable of performing many tasks successfully. In all likelihood, your ego is what propelled you to a leadership position. Your great effort and desire to succeed led to major accomplishments and accolades.

Here comes the paradox. Egos can vault you into a leadership position, but as a leader, you must set your ego aside. Your ego can prevent you from being an effective and truly great leader.

Before you became a leader, you likely operated as an individual contributor. You used your creativity and resourcefulness to meet objectives: a reduction of resources, an increase in quality, or an increase in revenue. If you asked questions, they were about how you could accomplish a specific task. In general, however, your ego discouraged you from asking questions and disliked having to follow orders.

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Egos want to accomplish and achieve. And, egos crave recognition from others.

Every time you accomplished a task and met the objective, your career moved forward and your standing in the organization or community grew. With each accomplishment, your ego grew, too. asked fewer questions and provided more answers. After all, with your success, others came to you as an oracle of information-perhaps even your boss or your boss's boss. You were in control.

As a leader, you must relinquish control. You must shrink your ego and concentrate on your altruism Your career advancement is no longer task oriented. Leadership is about allowing others the chance to achieve and flourish. You advance as a leader only when you place your employees' egos above your own. The heads of many organizations are not able to do this. Their companies may still succeed based upon their drive for individual success, but they are not true leaders or one thing, their employees will not be inspired to reach their full potential because they know they will not receive full credit for their efforts.

So, as a leader, why should you lead with questions? Because questions confer power and control to your employees. It allows their egos a chance to shine. And you, they, and the organization will all be better served.

For more, see [Just Ask Leadership review](#) at BecomeABetterLeader.com.



How Do I Demonstrate I Am Listening?

I have spoken to many leaders and the consensus is that listening to the answer is more important than asking the perfect question. Listening intently builds trust between you and the speaker. With that in mind, here are some tips to improve your listening:

1. Don't let your mind wander. Zen masters can keep their minds completely focused on one thought or conversation, but most of us can not. We might, for instance, latch onto one piece of information that the speaker has said. We grip it tightly and plan our response, rather than simply bookmarking this information and continuing to listen. In doing so, the speaker will see in our eyes that we have tuned out. Trust, confidence, and motivation will spiral downward.
2. Don't interrupt after asking a question. Leaders often have Type-A personalities, so they want to complete others' sentences. In all likelihood, they could probably do a better job of relaying the information, but that is not the goal of listening. Out-thinking your subordinates or showing off is not leadership. Patience is. Allow the speaker all the time in the world to provide you with an answer and to ask follow-up questions. Doctors at the

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