Thinking LEADERSHIP
Leaders are people who have a vision, a plan to achieve it and a knack for drawing out the inherent talents and resources within their team to facilitate that outcome.

**Leadership today is not about having the right answers but rather asking the right questions.**

It is the skill of encouraging new ideas, challenging unproductive or entrenched mindsets while nurturing and capitalising on the unique talents, wisdom and experiences of the team.

The innovation age of the Twenty-First century requires a new style of leadership. The Twentieth Century command and control approach just doesn’t work anymore because our world is so much more complex than ever before and moving fast. Once upon a time having all the right answers would have got you great results. But today in the innovation age, with the explosion of information, knowledge and new technology no one can hope to have all the answers to the complex challenges and issues that we now live with - no matter what field of endeavour they may be in - whether business, the public sector, education, manufacturing, not-for-profit. Today it is more important to be able to ask the right questions.

“The leader of the past was the person who told. The leader of the future is the person who asks.”

*Peter Drucker*
"Learning to ask good questions that prompt people into higher levels of thinking, problem solving and reflection is an essential skill for contemporary leaders."

Dr. Irena Yashin-Shaw
Within any organisation leaders who ask good questions will bring about a number of positive outcomes. They will:

- Encourage new ideas
- Challenge unproductive mindsets
- Prompt people into higher levels of thinking and problem-solving
- Help people to acquire a more strategic and not just a tactical approach to their jobs.
- Create a more self-reliant teams
- Tap into their people’s vast store of unique knowledge, wisdom and experiences.

Adopting a ‘question asking’ approach is a sure-fire way to kick-start high quality thinking and creative problem-solving. This in turn will generate innovation and harness a team’s talent and creativity.

Human evolution has been driven by asking good questions and then striving to answer them. Organisational evolution and sustainability depends on this as well. Nurturing a ‘question-asking mentality’ among employees makes them and the organisation responsive to change, adaptable and innovative. And that is really important in the for success in the innovation age - where yesterday’s solutions won’t solve tomorrow’s problems.

Asking good questions helps people to keep their thinking fresh, their outcomes innovative and their careers moving forward.
Good Leaders Ask Good Questions

Good leaders who are looking to develop their people find a way of consistently stretching them by leading them out of their comfort zone into their learning zone. The learning zone is the place where people can

- Develop new skills,
- Gain fresh insights and
- Acquire valuable experience

The actual name for this zone is Vygotsky’s Zone of proximal development after the great Russian psychologist. He called it - зона ближайшего развития. But we’ll just call it the learning zone. Good leaders, through asking good questions prompt and nurture people to operate in their learning zone so they can become lifelong learners. I came across a great quote recently by Shoshana Zuboff, Professor Business Administration, Harvard Business School. She said “Learning is the new form of labour”. By helping their people to become lifelong learners, good leaders equip them with a very important success tool. In the process, the leader who does that, also acquires a really empowered team of effective thinkers and problem solvers.

If you have an organisation populated with lifelong learners, good thinkers and good problem-solvers by extension you have a LEARNING ORGANISATION. That, in turn means you have an enterprise that will be innovative and responsive to change, able to meet the challenges of our complex globalised marketplace.

As our world and the global economy transforms itself before our eyes, only organisations that can adapt, evolve and innovate effectively will survive. In nature the organism that can adapt quickly has the maximum chance of surviving and thriving in transitional times. Organisations seeking long term sustainability in the innovation age also need to develop mechanisms for adaptation. This is more likely to be achieved with an autonomous workforce that is skilled at problem-solving and committed to life-long learning.
Why We Need A ‘Question Asking’ Culture

In the absence of leaders who ask good questions and encourage their teams to do so as well, organisations can develop a dangerous phenomenon called GROUP THINK. This is a place where no one questions ideas, policies or actions. There are many examples of dreadful blunders and poor decisions being made when leaders don’t raise questions. For example do you remember watching in horror on January 28, 1986, like so many of us did, when the Space Shuttle Challenger exploded 73 seconds into its flight. Later it came to light there were serious concerns about the reliability of the 'O- ring' - a sealing component that prevented hot gasses escaping – but when it came time to ask the questions – the people who should have didn’t. If we analysed many manmade disasters we’d find that there had been a lack of intelligent, independent questioning.

Dr. Robert Cialdini in his book “Influence : The psychology of persuasion” devotes a whole Chapter to the topic of Social Proof. That is where – people will go along with and not question things that they see other people going along with. It is a phenomenon that is pervasive across society and organisations and teams need to guard against it. And they can can by nurturing a question asking culture.
**Good Questions Will Help To Develop People**

I was a keynote speaker at a major government conference recently. I opened my presentation by asking the audience members to do the following activity.

Firstly to turn to the person sitting next to them and say “This is a great conference- you're going to get a lot out of it.” Then after they had done that to turn to the same person and ask, "This is a great conference. What is your key learning so far and how will you use that in your professional context?" Both those interactions were about the experience of attending this conference but vastly different in terms of bringing clarity to the value that people were gaining from the experience.

That second question really fires up the brain. People might have found themselves mentally sifting through some of the issues they were facing at work. They may have been thinking about a ......

- Strategic issue,
- A tactical problem
- An underperforming team
- How they could use the learning they were acquiring at the conference to help someone else at work.

What that question did was prompt them to:

1. Think about their key learning or insight from the conference
2. Mentally map it to various workplace contexts as they thought about how they might apply it
3. Adjust the fit and evaluate its usefulness or not for that context until they found one where it would be of most relevance
4. Articulate it to someone else and tacitly commit to applying it.

*One question generated all that higher level thinking and reflection.*
The table below provides a starting point for developing a toolkit of different kinds of questions designed to develop different kinds of capacities.

**Some questions to use for different purposes and in different contexts.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions that encourage strategic thinking.</th>
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<tr>
<td>● What are your goals?</td>
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<td>● What outcomes do you want to achieve?</td>
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<td>● What are the best ways by which to achieve your objectives?</td>
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<td>● What resources can we call on that we have never used or underutilised?</td>
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<td>● How have other people/groups/organisations approached similar challenges?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Questions that encourage creative problem solving.</th>
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<tr>
<td>● If I put this idea/concept/scenario/product into a completely different place or time what would happen to it?</td>
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<td>● Can I blend two or more ideas together to create a new one?</td>
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<tr>
<td>● What would happen if I did the opposite of what I should do?</td>
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<tr>
<td>● What would I see if I examined this situation/idea from a completely different point of view?</td>
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<tr>
<td>● What are the things I already know that I can brainstorm to get started with this project/problem/issue?</td>
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<td>● Can this be done in any other way?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Questions that encourage reflection</th>
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<tr>
<td>● What made this project interesting/exciting/challenging?</td>
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<td>● How did you nurture your own professional development in this process?</td>
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<tr>
<td>● What kind of help did you need for this project?</td>
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<tr>
<td>● What did you learn?</td>
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<tr>
<td>● What will you change or do differently next time?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Questions that encourage self awareness</th>
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<tr>
<td>● How do you feel about this?</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Why did this particular project challenge you/ excite you/engage you?</td>
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<tr>
<td>● What did you learn about yourself in this process?</td>
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<tr>
<td>● How did you benefit from this experience?</td>
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<tr>
<td>● What personal goals have you set?</td>
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<tr>
<td>● What are your learning goals?</td>
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Questions such as these can be good discussion starters or discussion 'deepeners' during scheduled staff or team meetings, briefing or debriefing sessions, mentoring situations, project reporting meetings or just over a cup of tea in the lunchroom.

*Notice that "Why are you behind schedule is not on the list."*

**Potential Pitfalls And Barriers**

There are some potential pitfalls which leaders adopting a 'Thinking Leadership' approach need to look out for.

*Thinking is hard work – which is why so few people do it*.  

*Henry Ford*
Why is it such hard work? Because if we get pushed too far out of our comfort zone when problem-solving difficult problems, our endocrine system releases hormones which create a fight or flight response in the body. That creates a state of anxiety and is physically discomforting. Beyond the learning zone where people can enjoy the process of extending their experience and developing their skills, where they experience a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment is the Panic Zone which is not enjoyable at all - where they are thrown into 'the deep end'.

I’m not talking about having to deal with a sudden crisis and either one person or a whole team may feel like they’ve been thrown in the deep end for a while till it is dealt with. We've all experience that - it's a part of life. No I’m talking about the actual adoption of that as a strategy. Some bosses like to do this on a regular basis. They take the attitude "Around here it's sink or swim". It gives them a sense of control and dominance. But it builds resentment, stresses everyone, burns people out and often results in high staff turnover which is very costly to an organisation.

So the message for leaders is simple - make learning enjoyable!
Make Learning Enjoyable

When we make learning enjoyable, people will WANT to go on the developmental journey and that will ultimately build the capacity of the organisation. Knowing how to do that is a great leadership skill.

There are a few barriers to adopting such an approach. For example:

1. Some leaders may be afraid that if they don't have all the answers or if others think they don't have the answers they may be perceived as a weak leader.
2. There can be a real self-gratification buzz to solving someone else’s problem by giving them an answer.
3. It is often easier and quicker to provide an answer than to formulate a good question. If one of your team comes to you and says "Hey boss we're behind schedule on this project what should we do?" It may be much more time effective in the short term to just tell the team member what to do rather than helping them to work it out themselves by guiding them through the problem solving process. But chances are that next time there's a scheduling problem they will have to come to you again rather than being more autonomous. So ultimately in the long term it is not a time effective strategy at all.

A few suggestions

- Regularly set aside 15 - 20 minutes during staff meetings for some collaborative reflection, questioning and collective, creative problem solving. Most challenges facing a team, department or organisation could be addressed using this simple approach and tapping into everyone's creative problem-solving skills.
- Before mentoring sessions with emerging leaders give them particular questions that will effectively focus their attention and reflection so that the subsequent discussion during the meeting is more productive and insightful.
Build a ‘reflection’ component into ALL reporting e.g. “What did you learn from this experience?” So when people deliver information about the outcomes of various projects at meetings or to executive committees some part of that time is dedicated to articulating their own learning outcomes as well as the project outcomes. Make sure it is an integrated expectation - not something that is just tacked on. This will help them to extract the learning and transfer it to other projects and help make them more adept with more complex assignments.

Value the strategic importance of thinking time by encouraging people to engage in some official uninterrupted ‘thinking time’ at work either in their usual space or in a specially purposed area.

Encourage teams to critically reflect on progress at specific times through a project e.g. What’s working?; What’s not working?; Are we using our resources wisely?; What would we do differently from the beginning if we knew then what we know now? ....

Adopting the ‘Thinking Leadership’ approach is a long term plan. Enculturating a workplace to adopt mindful, self-reflective practices takes time. But it reaps enormous rewards.

Contemporary workplaces can become so busy that the emphasis on doing and taking action squeezes out the opportunity for thinking and taking stock. Yet the strategic importance of doing so is indisputable.
Dr Irena Yashin-Shaw is on a mission to liberate innovation, creativity and leadership within people and organisations.

A highly experienced, qualified and respected corporate consultant, educator, mentor and professional speaker she knows what works and why when it comes to helping individuals and organisations grow and develop. She thrives on demystifying, enabling and facilitating innovation and creativity and is skilled at unlocking the enormous human potential that languishes within most organisations.

Dr. Irena has a potent combination of deep academic knowledge and real-world entrepreneurial experience. With a PhD in creative problem-solving and a Master’s degree in Adult Education, she is well placed to help leaders develop effective approaches to innovation and creative leadership.

Although working across all sectors, for the last few years Dr. Irena has specialised in assisting public sector agencies to become more innovative. Her work in this area ranges from delivering single workshops or keynotes through to long term projects designed to change the culture of the organisation.

She is the author of Leading in the Innovation Age: Unleash knowledge, talent and experience to create an innovative workplace.

Purchase from: www.leadingintheinnovationage.com

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