



3 Questions That Self-Aware Leaders Ask Their Followers

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There are a plethora of questions that effective leaders can ask. Ponder the significance of the three below. As you will notice, these questions are geared toward organizational dynamics first, then your self-awareness.

1. What energizes you most in your service here?
2. Is there anything happening or not happening within our ministry that stifles your enthusiasm?
3. What are you reluctant to tell me about my leadership that needs to be said?

Now, let's take a moment to explain what we mean by "self-awareness."

"Self-Awareness": A Working Definition

What is "a self-aware" leader, and what is "self-awareness"? There are a lot of definitions currently offered from the broader culture as well as from Christian circles. Sometimes these definitions are incomplete. Therefore, we offer this understanding:

Self-awareness is the ability: 1) to identify and monitor our thoughts and feelings, and 2) recognize how these thoughts and feelings, and their accompanying behaviors impact the people around us. Self-awareness, at its best, is Gospel-focused (fueled by Christ's priorities for your life), Holy Spirit-dependent (drawing from and guided by a supernatural Source outside us), and communally-discerned (requiring the assessment of other wise, mature people). All of these components in unison will lead to a sober judgment of oneself. Finally, self-awareness is not self-absorption; the goal of self-awareness is not merely to be self-actualized. Instead, the goal of self-awareness is to love others well, even in those times when our lives are not going well.

In Old Testament wisdom literature, self-awareness, as an expression of wisdom, is enhanced by: 1) observation and reflected-upon experience, 2) instruction from the wise, and 3) learning from mistakes. Therefore, self-awareness consists of a growing awareness of foolishness and an accompanying desire to turn from it and acquire a heart of wisdom. Correspondingly, with Jesus Christ as the personification of wisdom itself, and by virtue of our union with Him, our self-awareness will expand with time, but only as we live dependently upon the Holy Spirit with others who are mature, Christlike seekers of wisdom..

Setting the Stage for Asking the Questions

Let's go back to the three questions we raised at the beginning of this article.

What often gets in the way of effective leadership is our unchecked beliefs about ourselves. Sometimes as leaders we consider ourselves more advanced in our spiritual/emotional maturity, biblical/theological knowledge, life experience, and cognitive capacities than those we lead. This being the case, we suspect that we are beyond being teachable by those who follow us. Yet, as experience often bears out, leaders can learn a wealth of things about themselves and their approach to ministry from the input of their followers—not to mention ministry peers.



As leaders we might not be willing to ask these kinds of questions because we don't think they are necessary. We can tell ourselves that this is just a waste of time. Or, we might find fault with the wording of the questions and conveniently rationalize away their relevance to matters at hand. Or, if we are truly honest with ourselves, we feel deeply inadequate in carrying out the process, and we also may be intimidated by possible outcomes.

We observed in one Christian organization how a leader's continual refusal to have a 360 review was a contributing factor to his dismissal and the organization's eventual dissolution. It is true that when a leader ignores his blind spots, this will result in the unnecessary frustration of his followers and an erosion of their trust in him.

Although you may prefer to do this one-on-one, it is important to remember that "power differentials" can create an "intimidation gap" that prevents many from wanting to meet with you alone to give input. So then, consider selecting a handful of men and women you trust, to whom you can address these questions. Perhaps these questions can be asked via email to allow time for processing. Then set up a time to meet with three or more of these folks collectively rather than individually.

As a way of emotionally preparing for this meeting, it is crucial to apply what one wise counselor calls "The JADE principle": Do not JUSTIFY, ARGUE, DEFEND, EXPLAIN why you are who you are, and why things are done the way they are. If you are not able to commit to this principle, you are NOT ready to ask the three questions. This point CANNOT BE STRESSED enough. Defensive responses like these perpetuate a "conform, comply, or say good-bye" culture.

Unfortunately, the following scenario can unfold. A follower in an organization will come to a leader with a concern. Then, in the moment the quick-thinking leader will ARGUE, DEFEND, or EXPLAIN himself and his actions in an antagonistic way. In these kinds of situations, followers leave the conversation manipulatively silenced and needlessly discouraged. Unless there is heresy or serious sin involved, this kind of reactive rejoinder is FOOLISH and not good leadership.

For this reason and others, before going into any kind of input meeting, ask yourself:

- What things can "push my buttons"?
- Where do I feel most threatened?
- What am I trying to protect?
- How focused am I on my image rather than on the spiritual development of my followers?
- Where is MY foolishness showing up in this moment?

When tempted to defend your yourself, ask the Holy Spirit to help you convey something like this toward the end of the meeting: "You have given me some things to think about. Give me some time to process more fully, and let's meet again. I know that this has been difficult, but I really appreciate your input." Throughout the input time, ask as many clarifying questions as possible. And, steer clear of asking any questions that are accusatory and cross-examining in nature. Genuine curiosity is foundational to powerful, effective listening--and leadership. Also consider that this process will enhance trust and create a climate of safety for your followers.



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What's Next?

Many leaders will resonate with this process, but will likely feel overwhelmed in its implementation. Truth be told, such a process requires a certain measure of courage and vulnerability. You WILL need help. If you would like to develop this level of leadership, seek the wise counsel of a trusted mentor or coach.



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