

Leaders Who

Ask

Building
Fearless Cultures
by **telling less**
and **asking more**

CORRINNE ARMOUR

Sample Chapters

TESTIMONIALS

Leaders Who Ask: Building Fearless Cultures by telling less and asking more

Deep within everyone is unbounded potential and the role of the leader is to draw this out. This is not achieved through instructing or telling but through suspending judgement, asking questions and listening intently. This book provides a powerful approach for leaders to build culture by assisting one human being at a time to transform their life. This is truly the great honour of leadership.

Dr David Cooke, Managing Director - Konica Minolta Business Solutions Australia

Corrinne has helped me realise the value of embracing a less directive leadership approach. If you want to ask more and tell less, this book sets out how in an engaging way.

Simone Zelencich, Executive Director, People & Culture - The Royal Children's Hospital

Leaders today need the critical balance between business and people acumen. They are expected to have a range of tools to increase business performance as well as develop the critical soft skills needed for setting a culture that focuses on people and stimulates innovation.

I recommend this book to leaders who strive to set a high performing culture by motivating and empowering all within their organisation, thus enhancing leadership, organisational performance and staff retention.

Matthew Jackson, Chief Executive Officer, Parks Victoria

Incorporating aspects of coaching into your leadership practice can leverage some strong results in individual and collective team engagement and performance over time. Corinne's book provides a framework to work within and great tips to try. This isn't a quick fix, rather an opportunity to reflect on your leadership impact and question whether there are improvements you can make. After all, we are only as successful as the teams and culture that we build and enable.

**Bridgid Connors, Chief Human Resources
Officer - Monash University**

A large proportion of leaders I meet in the service sector think they need to have all the answers. This limiting belief exists because they have not yet realised the power of questions.

When I witness great leaders ask staff rather than tell, the result is a highly engaged workforce, and an engaged workforce is a precursor to quality customer service. The questioning techniques this book presents are practical and highly effective for developing staff in the workplace. It will be a valuable resource for me to introduce to organisations that are determined to create consistent quality service cultures.

**Jaquie Scammell, Australia's Leading Customer Relations
Expert, author of *Creating a Customer Service Mindset***

Corrinne has the ability to create a mindful and highly effective leader in all of us through her gift of making complex things simple.

The 'coach as leader' techniques explored by Corrinne have connectivity to collaborative and innovative cultures that bring energy and engagement to our organisations, similar to the way Corrinne herself brings energy and clarity to your leadership team.

Always reflective in her style, Corrinne will make you examine yourself. The book is a capacity building journey that creates a greater depth of personal awareness through better understanding your own leadership style and preferences, forcing you to be overt in your intentions.

It provides the practical tools to do what I love the most: build a culture of innovation and curiosity—a productive and engaged sweet spot.

Sarah Cumming, Managing Director - Gippsland Water

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and **asking more**

CORRINNE ARMOUR

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Published by Bacca House Press

BHP

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ISBN: 978-0-6482812-1-4

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

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This book uses case studies to enforce the meaning behind its relevant chapter. Names have been omitted or changed to protect individual privacy.

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PREFACE

Warning

Reading this book will do nothing for your leadership capability, nor the engagement and productivity of your team. Just as buying a fabulous new set of power tools from Bunnings won't make you a handyman, reading this book won't make you a better leader.

To become a better leader, you need to **do something** with what you read.

Are you ready to build a Fearless Culture? Are you willing to hold back what you know and ask your people what they know? Do you have the courage and commitment needed?

No? Then find another book.

Yes? Then welcome. I am delighted to lead you on this journey.

My wish for you is threefold:

1. that you develop a set of competencies that are valuable to a leader
2. that you are able to employ them to build the capability of individuals, teams and whole organisations through formal, structured conversations, informal corridor conversations, and by conducting effective and engaging meetings

3. that you discover the power of asking more and telling less to build Fearless Cultures.

The first working title for this book was called 'The Lazy Leader'. It was a tongue in cheek title—the *leader who asks* is not lazy. Yet once established they might appear to be lazy because leadership seems almost effortless for them.

No longer jumping in with the answers, they have the courage to let go of the need to control. Armed with coaching skills, they build rapport quickly, listen deeply and their questions engage others. While they always seem to have a purpose, they also have a sense of creativity about them and a belief that outcomes will be achieved. They run great meetings without appearing to put effort into either the planning or the chairing. You can see them in the corridors engaging in animated conversation. And when you walk through the open plan office, there's a buzz of energy and productivity.

A vision of the Pied Piper comes to mind ... that's the *leader who asks*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Being allowed into the hearts and minds of leaders is an honour and privilege. To all the leaders and leadership teams I have worked with over the last fifteen years, thank you for the trust you have placed in me, and for the great work you are doing. A special thank you to those whose stories I have shared in the pages of this book.

Gratitude to my family: my parents, Ian and Helene, who were my first coaches, my sister Fleur, who always supports me, and Min Thein, Jessi and Maithy who are now perhaps my greatest teachers.

My first two books were co-authored with Anneli Blundell and Belinda Cohen. Whenever I became stuck writing this book, I have channelled their wisdom and encouragement.

Thanks to my support team who keep me facing the right direction every day: Sheryl, Gladys and Melinda. And to my wonderful editor, Joanna Yardley.

My constant inspiration for doing more and being more comes from the Thought Leaders community. Thank you to everyone who helps me to constantly lift my standards and the impact of my work, especially Matt Church and Peter Cook.

And finally, thank you to you—the reader. You are a leader who cares enough about your impact to want to become *a leader who asks*. The world needs you.

This book is dedicated to all leaders who know that leadership is the answer and that they are part of both the problem and the solution.

Sample Chapters

The Leader Who Asks: My story

Many years ago, I was leading a cross-functional project team of 70+ people. At short notice, I was asked to participate in the pilot of an internal training program, and then provide feedback before the program went live across the organisation. Being a bit of a learning junkie, I said yes without knowing what the program was really about. Turns out it was 'Leader as Coach' at a time when 'coaching' was not known or understood in the corporate world.

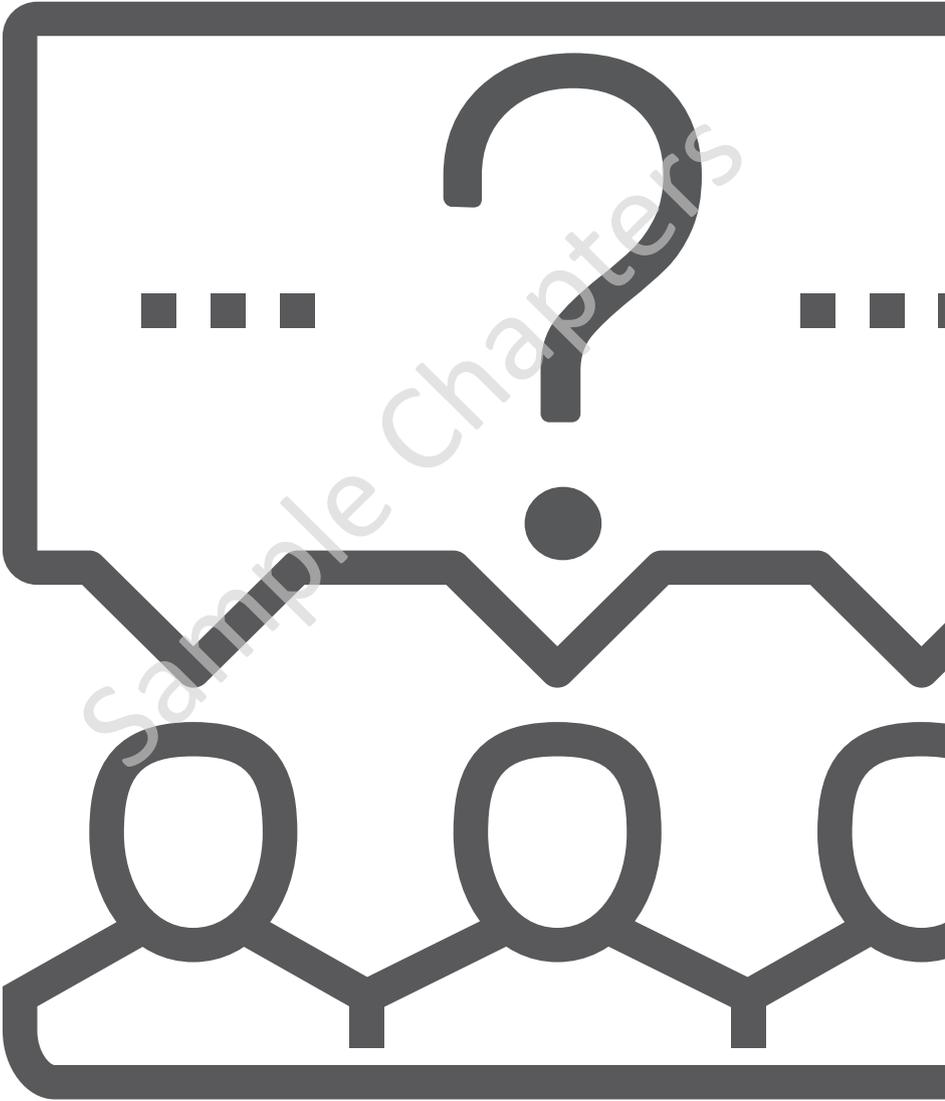
That day blew my mind, and I left energised and inspired. I had shifted from not knowing that coaching even existed outside a sporting context, to understanding that a coaching approach was the way I naturally led. Prior to that workshop, I was already aware that my leadership style was a little different from many around me: I preferred to ask questions and guide learning rather than give answers—tell less, ask more. (I have always been comfortable, as a leader, not having all the answers.)

I had sometimes wondered if I were a bit 'lazy', not really a leader at all. But that day, I discovered that my leadership style was valid. And I gained ways of codifying coaching skills and extending my competency with new tricks and tools. I felt empowered and ready to step up and use my shiny new coaching skills.

That first coaching skills program did two things for me. First, it validated (and extended) my natural leadership style.

Second, it set me on a career path that focused more on coaching, and led me to where I am now—a leadership expert who helps others develop Fearless Leadership and build Fearless Cultures

Sample Chapters





Sample Chapters

Chapter 1

What's happening?



Craig sighed deeply, clearly shaken. The staff engagement results had blindsided him. He was surprised at the lack of positive movement since last year, despite the focused efforts from him and the whole executive team.

After last year's survey, the CEO made engagement a priority across the organisation. Focus groups were conducted to understand the sentiments and the issues; project teams were put in place; and a number of initiatives were successfully implemented. A complete refresh of the organisation's values had begun.

Craig had also focused on making changes to his own behaviour as a leader, and he had been looking forward to seeing what impacts that had on his division's engagement results.

The results were just as bad as last year. It seemed that people hadn't taken any notice of the good work that had been done. Sure, it takes a long time to make an impact on an organisation of this size and the external climate had been challenging with two key competitors taking significant market share over the last year, but what more could he do?

Craig's leadership style had served him well until now, and he wasn't sure what he was missing. There was so much that needed to be done, and it wasn't as if he had any spare time. He dropped the report back onto his desk and stared out the window. Maybe it was time for a different approach?

Craig's story is soul destroying, isn't it? As I move between a diverse range of organisations across multiple sectors, I see dedicated and committed leaders working hard (perhaps too hard). Despite their good intentions and their best efforts, they are struggling to achieve their own potential and are unable to unlock the potential of their teams. This constrains organisational culture and impacts the bottom line. That's a lot of wasted effort.

Is there untapped potential across your organisation? Are you building engaged and productive teams? Or are you stuck in expert mode, solving all the problems yourself, rather than empowering and developing your teams and building a Fearless Culture?

Leadership matters. We know it matters inside the organisation because we have all experienced good and bad leadership. Leadership matters externally too. When stock market analysts are valuing public companies, part of what they are looking at is the quality of leadership in the organisation. A study by Deloitte calculated a leadership premium of up to 15.7%.¹ This means that when you are under good leadership, there is a boost to your share price of almost 16%. And of course the opposite is also true: there's a 16% hit on your share price for poor leadership.

Why is it happening?

Being a leader feels like hard work

As leaders, we feel we are constantly telling people what to do.

It seems there is never a time when someone is not waiting for us to solve a problem or provide an instruction on what's next. It's tiring; it keeps us stuck in the day to day and prevents us from doing anything strategic. The weight of leading a team—whether it's 10 people or 10,000—can be heavy.

Sometimes we feel the responsibility of having to 'know' everything and as leaders, we can get anxious if we don't have all the answers.

Our ability to communicate with and engage our team directly impacts its success. The team meeting is a common way to meet this need. But **many leaders struggle to run an effective meeting**, creating instead a monologue better suited to inducing sleep than building shared purpose.

And then there are those crucial performance conversations—the ones we put off. We stew on what to say, how to say it, and how the team will respond. Perhaps there are **people in your team who need some extra support**. Providing development feedback can be hard and thankless work, especially when there is no shift in behaviour or outcomes.

All this can translate into sleepless nights.

What if there was a way to empower your people to solve problems themselves? What if you didn't need all the answers? Would you like a way to prepare less for meetings, and yet have more engaging conversations and better outcomes? How would it be to feel more confident in performance conversations?

Staff engagement is patchy

Maybe your organisation is growing rapidly, and that's exciting, right? You are all doing great work, and the customer values what you are delivering. But with growth comes risk and signs of organisational growing pains are showing. Old ways of communicating are not working so well, and with greater size and complexity it's becoming harder to keep messages consistent.

Maybe your organisation isn't growing; it's been around for a while and the legacy of history is slowing things down.

The annual engagement survey shows that staff engagement scores are still low, despite the actions to address this. (And you didn't need a survey to tell you that anyway, did you?) Not matter what you try, it's hard to make a real connection with your team. While it's easy to give direction, providing inspiration is so much harder. People seem stuck and lacking in purpose.

Problems may be simmering under the surface, and it's hard to identify the real issues. You may not have the confidence to surface tensions, or you lack the framework to respond. When challenges arise, you find yourself fighting fires rather than proactively building team culture.

It's important to retain what is great about your organisational culture and leadership style. How about embracing additional ways of communicating, operating and leading?

Leadership bench-strength is lacking

In a 2013 Australian Employee Engagement Survey, 38% of the 2,223 professionals who responded did not agree with the statement 'my manager helps me perform at my best'.² There's something wrong with this picture, and I don't think it's changed much in the few years since.

A key responsibility of leadership is developing others, and yet **it's challenging to grow our people.** While we might have the right intentions, we get busy and performance conversations don't happen outside the annual performance review process. (And even then, most of the conversations are simply to tick the box.)

Or perhaps you do prioritise regular feedback discussions, but they don't seem to have much impact. Conversations on the job—where you know it counts—get awkward and opportunities are missed. Staff members are not progressing as you would like, and despite your focus, they complain there's no investment in their development.

When people feel undervalued, undeveloped, and disconnected from organisational purpose, they may let you know by leaving. Is it time to bring some new tools into your leadership toolkit?

The results aren't there

Team performance across the organisation is inconsistent with some teams not delivering on expectations, and there is a lack of individual and team accountability. You might be thinking the lack of ability to hit team KPIs is because of the quality of people in the team. Other teams in the company work well, and yet you seem unable to turn this around.

In many organisations, especially where there is a strong professional expertise (such as hospitals, law firms, engineering practices), GMs have reached the level they are at through **excellent technical skills** and willingness to work hard.

Perhaps that's you.

But now you are struggling to engage. You are working too hard, trying to control processes and people, and still not getting results.

Your primary expertise in (say) medicine does not automatically give you a secondary expertise in leadership. You may need help to build leadership capabilities to engage, empower, and develop your people. Like asking more and telling less.

Let's empower leaders
to be brave enough
and skilled enough to
connect deeply, lead
fearlessly and achieve
results that transform.

Sample Chapters

You see that more is possible

Perhaps your team is performing really well: there's a healthy team dynamic, strong relationships within the team and with stakeholders, a culture of giving and receiving feedback, and performance targets are being met. Unlike Craig, who we meet at the beginning on the book, your engagement scores are high.

Yet you believe that more is possible.

There is a better way

If you are looking for a way to step up as a leader and continually grow your team so that the whole team steps up too, this book will help you.

Let's empower leaders to be brave enough and skilled enough to connect deeply, lead fearlessly and achieve results that transform. Let's build leadership. Let's create Fearless Cultures.

What is a Fearless Culture?

Fearless Cultures get results. The performance bar is constantly being lifted through timely conversations that promote curiosity and lead to individual and team development. The things that matter are surfaced and resolved.

When groups of people come together, the conversation is focused, lively and creative. Innovation is an approach to everyday activity—creating and harnessing insight—and not just a concept that's peddled around the organisation. People at all levels feel empowered in their roles. They feel they are being invested in, and supported and cared for. This environment promotes the kind of positive risk taking that comes from safety to challenge, to try things out and to fail.

WHAT'S HAPPENING?

Fearless Cultures have a buzz about them, and you don't need to see the staff survey results to know that engagement is high. Accountability is in action every day: personal accountability, team accountability, and the willingness to hold one another accountable.

In Fearless Cultures, leaders tell less and ask more.

Sample Chapters





Chapter 2

**The Leader Who
Asks Ladder to a
Fearless Culture**

Sample Chapters

Asking more and telling less is hard to achieve. Building a Fearless Culture doesn't happen overnight. In fact, it doesn't happen very often, and when it does, it's the result of the cumulative focus of the leaders across the organisation.

Before we start, let's be very clear: we are talking about the leader's **coaching focus** and **skill**, not their technical skill. You, and most of your leaders, will be highly competent in your technical skill set. Your technical skill set was probably a major contribution to promotion to a leadership role but it is unlikely to be a key factor in success at the leadership level.

A leader's primary skill set might be accounting, nursing, design or law, and for each the secondary skill set is leadership. This book focuses on the secondary skill set; it explores the leader's skill in the nuances of connecting with, engaging, and developing their team members.

As a leader, your success comes from the team's success, and not your own; it's your **leadership** expertise that matters. A key way to access and accelerate the success of the team is through becoming a *leader who asks* and embracing a coaching approach.

Let's have a look at leaders through the lens of their coaching focus. Imagine a ladder, and like most ladders, we begin at the bottom.

THE LEADER WHO ASKS LADDER TO A FEARLESS CULTURE

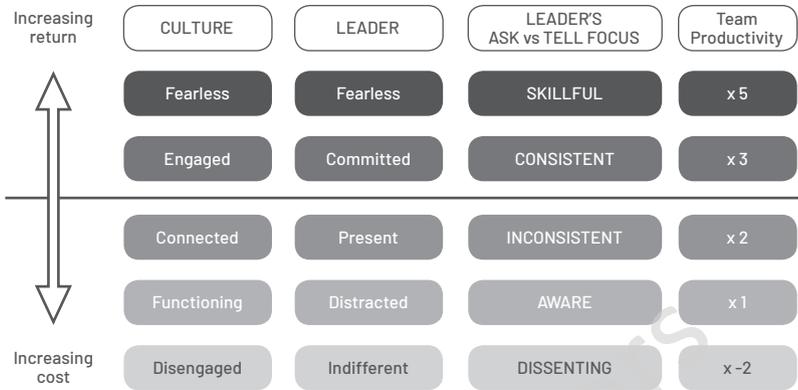


Figure 1: *The Leader Who Asks Ladder*

The Indifferent Leader

The **Indifferent** Leader (and really I am using the term 'leader' here for consistency, and not because this group has earned it) does not engage in a coaching focus at all. They may be completely unaware of the possibility, or they may be **DISSENTING** from a coaching focus. Full stop!

This leader may never have had the opportunity to experience or learn a coaching approach, or it could be something they have heard of but with which they disagree. *'It's quicker and more effective to tell people what to do. After all, we pay them to do a job, don't we?'* The culture of this team is **Disengaged**, and not surprisingly team productivity is low, probably at cost to the business.



Meet Jessica, the Indifferent Leader

Quick witted, a strong strategic thinker, technically gifted, and highly ambitious, Jessica attained her first senior leadership position in her early 30s. Those close to her thought she had the ability to reach CEO level, and yet few believed she would. A recent staff survey indicated that Jessica's team was disengaged, with most staff believing that Jessica cared little about them, nor that she was willing to invest personally in their development. Her executive colleagues experienced her as competitive, untrusting and needing to be in control.

For her part, Jessica was frustrated with the stagnating skill level of her team, its lack of willingness to take accountability for individual and team results, and its reluctance to put in any discretionary effort. She worked long hours to achieve good results, and she could not understand why her team was not willing to do the same.

As an Indifferent Leader, Jessica's primary leadership style was directive and impersonal. People in her team were unsure of how they could improve because their performance was never assessed or developed.

Her career success to date resulted from ambition and hard work, a high IQ and an almost Machiavellian approach to leadership. It wasn't that she was deliberately controlling and disempowering, Jessica simply didn't appreciate the importance of connecting with people and the value of a coaching approach overlaid on her existing leadership style.

Indifferent Leaders are dissenting towards a coaching approach. They may:

- be very competent technically
- have a strong and inflexible leadership style that does not include coaching
- focus on commanding rather than building rapport
- deliberately disregard the need for asking, instead telling their people what to do
- have a weak leadership style and weak technical skills
- have a low care for people, or a lack of ability to express the care they have
- be a new leader and are learning the ropes of leadership
- or they may be like Jessica—simply unaware of the alternatives.

Whatever the 'cause', this leader is indifferent to the value of coaching skills and their team is likely to be unproductive and disengaged. Absenteeism could be a problem in this team. Or worse, 'presenteeism', where people have checked out and yet still come to work each day.

Indifferent Leaders are a big risk to organisational culture. The Dale Carnegie Institute estimates that 'reactions to him or her explain 84% of how employees feel about their organization'.³

The Distracted Leader

Next up the ladder, we have the **Distracted** Leader. This leader is **AWARE** of a coaching approach but has yet to embrace it. They typically know more is possible from their leadership and are beginning to look for ways to make that happen.

Distracted Leaders work hard, yet they are not rewarded with the results they might like or expect. *'I have tried everything to get my people engaged, and nothing works. I am starting to wonder if it's me.'* This wondering might keep them awake at night.



Meet Jordan, the Distracted Leader

Jordan is the CEO of an aged care provider. He is committed to his team, the residents, the families they support, and to the sector as a whole. His passion fired his long working week, and yet he is exhausted.

Jordan felt like everyone relied on him. He had tried various strategies to get his executive team to take greater ownership and step up, and yet still found himself the 'go to' person for solving problems across the organisation. Others were reluctant to make decisions without endorsement from the CEO.

Jordan was stretched and recognised the need to reduce his operational focus so he had the headspace to focus on the strategic issues of organisational growth in a sector undergoing significant change.

He was looking for help, which he thought would come in the form of training and support for his executive team. He also had sufficient self-awareness to begin questioning how his

own leadership style could be contributing to the challenges he faced.

Jordan's realisation that his own leadership style was limiting his executive team was a confronting one. His efforts to be supportive were seen as micromanagement. His drive to provide the answers was limiting his team's ability to make mistakes and learn. Worse still, Jordan's behaviour was being modelled by the executives, with a flow on effect of micromanagement through the organisation.

Aware leaders are distracted in their coaching focus and may:

- be very competent technically
- be aware of some coaching skills and are either not confident to use them, or not convinced of the value of applying them
- be observing other leaders building productive and engaged teams, and wondering what their secret is
- be aware that their current approach is not working and be seeking alternatives.

Their team will be **Functioning**—certainly not disengaged yet not engaged either. This is a lost opportunity for increasing productivity and developing organisational culture.

The Present Leader

The **Present** Leader has taken on the challenge and opportunity of a coaching approach, yet is **INCONSISTENT** in its application. This leader is encouraged by the hard measure of increased team productivity and the soft measure of a greater feeling of connection among team members. They invest in building rapport, strengthening relationships, asking questions that lead to insight, and providing real-time feedback that builds skill and confidence.

Then deadlines loom or a team member is on leave so the pressure increases and the coaching approach is dropped in favour of a directive style. *'I like the coaching approach, and know it is working, but I don't have time for it right now.'* Curt instructions are given, and feedback opportunities are missed. Team members, while still feeling connected, are unsure of what to expect from an inconsistent approach to leadership.



Meet Lola, the Present Leader

On the executive team, Lola has embraced coaching skills to support her approach to leadership. She is conscious of 'asking' rather than 'telling' when her managers come to her with problems, and her intention is to empower her people. She has always been committed to the concept of continual development and now, with a coaching approach, she has found a way to support this.

Lola recently told me that 'I am getting some of the best results I have ever got. And I feel as if I am working less. I am

just having coaching conversations.’ Lola is well on her way to becoming a coaching leader.

Feedback from her team indicates that Lola’s coaching approach is still inconsistently applied. She moves unpredictably between leadership styles and her team doesn’t know what version of Lola will show up. This is not surprising as Lola builds new habits to balance a more directive approach to leadership.

With continued focus, Lola will certainly move up the Leader Who Asks Ladder.

The Present Leader has coaching skills in their leadership toolkit and draws on these skills often and yet still inconsistently. They are beginning to see the benefit of a coaching approach on team culture and on productivity. Team members are likely to feel more **Connected** to this leader, and their development needs are considered important; however, the inconsistency of the leader’s style will impact team productivity and morale.

The Present Leader may also be erring on the side of too much coaching by taking a coaching approach when other tools from their leadership toolkit would be more appropriate.

There is a tipping point here, where the conscious and competent application of coaching skills create a breakthrough in culture and productivity. This is the invisible line that once crossed can’t be seen but can be felt by everyone—the line of decreasing cost and increasing return.

The Committed Leader

The **Committed Leader** is **CONSISTENT** in their application of coaching skills. The committed leader's aspirational goal is to develop productive teams and engaged cultures.



Meet Paul, the Committed Leader

Paul, a GM, describes his earlier leadership style as 'Fix-it man'. His sense of identity came from being able to solve problems and sort out issues for people. Prompted by feedback he was getting from his team, including terms like 'micromanager', 'highly opinionated' and 'controlling', Paul engaged a leadership expert who encouraged and supported him to adopt a coaching approach.

Now (some years later), Paul's style is 'listen, coach and influence. Assist my direct reports to come to conclusions themselves.' Coaching skills are near the top of his leadership toolkit.

Of course, there are times when he directs, times when he mentors, and times when he applies other leadership styles. Mostly though, he coaches in a formal sense through career development conversations and performance reviews, or simply informal corridor conversations on his way around the organisation.

Paul has developed a library of questions that prompt his managers' thinking and leads them to their own insights. This builds his direct reports' confidence that they are capable and are growing as leaders.

Engagement scores are high across Paul's teams, with excellent productivity measures to match.

It's important to note that Paul hasn't always led in this way. In the first year in this role, he struggled to connect with some of the managers who report to him; he was often stressed and felt a great need to know all the answers. His development to a leader who asks has been deliberately and progressively achieved.

The Committed Leader embraces coaching skills and makes them their own, adapting to what's needed by the people, the situation and the task. This leader makes judgments in the moment and applies coaching principles to their leadership to build **Engaged** and productive teams.

The way the Fearless
Leader shows up
optimises the potential
of individuals in
the team, and of
the team itself.

Sample Chapters

The Fearless Leader

At the top of the *Leader Who Asks Ladder*, we have **Fearless Leaders** who may be highly skilled in their primary expertise (marketing, engineering, IT etc.), and who are **Skilful** in applying a coaching focus.

The way the Fearless Leader shows up—their presence as well as the approach they take—optimises the potential of individuals in the team, and of the team itself. Their leadership builds highly productive teams and creates Fearless Cultures.

Fearless Leaders build Fearless Cultures. In Fearless Cultures, there are high levels of **engagement** across all levels (as contrasted to the average Australian workplace where engagement is around 24%).⁴ With higher engagement comes better workplace relations, reduced sick leave, greater discretionary effort—the list goes on In Fearless Cultures, people and teams take **accountability** for their behaviour, their work and their results. Fearless Cultures are productive cultures where people want to belong.

Their ability to draw out the wisdom from others means they lead dynamic and challenging meetings. People who work with these leaders feel they are being invested in. Their clients enjoy working with them because they learn something beyond the agreed transaction.

Fearless Leaders have the courage to connect deeply, lead fearlessly, and they (and their teams) achieve results.



Meet Frank, the Fearless Leader

Working in an international finance organisation, Frank is the type of leader who instils confidence in others, up and down the chain of command. He is often brought in to turn around an operational division or bring a major project back on track. While he is very results driven, his coaching approach raises the performance of people—individuals and teams—beyond what even they think is possible.

Frank is focused and calm. He is aware there are multiple ways to attain success. He knows that good people are often their own harshest critic and helping people uncover their own learning is far more powerful than allocating blame and judgment.

He is confident and steadfast as a leader, and at the same time will admit he doesn't have the answers and can show vulnerability.

Frank asks the kind of questions that keep you thinking way after the conversation has ended. One of Frank's special skills is silence; he asks a question and waits patiently while you gather your thoughts (and sometimes muster up courage to voice what you are thinking) and respond. He never fills the space, waiting instead for others to take up the invitation.

Frank knows his key role, as a leader, is to develop others. His presence and approach bring out the best in people and teams, and he builds Fearless Cultures along the way.

'Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others' –Jack Welch (former Chairman and CEO of GE). The Fearless Leader knows this. Technical skills are the ticket to play, not the road to success. Coaching competencies help the Fearless Leader achieve success through growing others.

Where are you on the *Leader Who Asks Ladder*?

Now that I have briefly explained each level of the *Leader Who Asks Ladder*, what are you thinking about your own leadership style? What's come up for you?

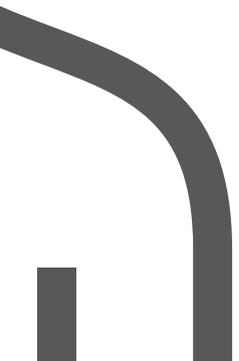
Where are you now on the ladder? Which level do you want to reach, and what would that give you? What benefits would it bring to your team? How would that advance the purpose of your organisation?



Chapter 3

**The *Leader Who Asks:*
What it is and what it isn't**

Sample Chapters



Building a Fearless Culture

Organisations that have developed a ‘coaching culture’—where the majority of people in the organisation use questioning techniques and coaching principles rather than telling people what to do—develop Fearless Cultures.

There are good reasons for investing in developing such a culture. Organisations that implement a coaching culture report these benefits⁵:

- **Engagement:** Increased engagement with people means they are more inspired to make decisions themselves.
- **Improvement focus:** People initiated continuous improvement projects, process improvements and fun events.
- **Productivity:** Increased productivity, decreased absenteeism and other non-scheduled work absences.
- **Collaboration:** Better feeling of work teams and increased collaboration within and across business units.
- **Increased performance:** Measured by key performance indicators.

Becoming a *leader who asks* is not about becoming a coach. This book is **not** about teaching you to be a coach. There are other books—and some great programs—that will do that.

This is about adding coaching skills and qualities to complement and extend your existing leadership style. The simplest and most

profound way to do this is to engage others through questions, rather than defaulting to a quick fix by providing an answer.

In the late 90s and early 2000s, 'Leader as Coach' programs were popular in the corporate world. The basic proposition of most of these programs was that:

- Coaches develop people effectively.
- Leaders need to develop people effectively.
- (Therefore) all leaders should be coaches (all the time).

This was not a smart idea, any more than it would be a smart idea to insist that all our leaders adopt a command and control leadership style. Turning all our leaders into coaches is:

- **Unrealistic:** Coaching is a professional discipline. Learning to be a coach takes extensive training, supervision and experience over long periods. With the leadership development budget available to most leaders in corporate Australia, this level of investment and attainment is unavailable.
- **Unwise:** Coaching is **one** leadership and development intervention. Insisting that leaders coach during every interaction is about as smart as inviting a chef to use a vegetable paring knife to cut all her ingredients. The best leaders are those with flexible leadership styles, and those who are able to adopt a situational approach.

In this book, we talk about complementing a leader's skills and not overwriting them. To build Fearless Cultures, leaders need to add coaching skills to their existing leadership toolkits. They

must make conscious choices about when to use elements of coaching skills right across their current leadership style.

So what is coaching?

When I work with leaders, there is usually a lack of understanding as to what coaching actually is, and how it is different from mentoring or other forms of development available to a leader. So before we go too far, let's get clear on what we mean by coaching in the context of building a Fearless Culture. We'll start by looking at what coaching is not.

Mentoring

Typically, a mentor has expertise in their field, and transfers knowledge, skills and experience to a less experienced practitioner. The mentor is 'older and wiser', either literally or metaphorically.

A leader acts as a mentor when they 'tell' a member of their team how to do something based on their experience.



Sandy is an experienced project director who is highly skilled in the technical elements of project management. Her emotional intelligence and good people skills have resulted in a strong reputation across the organisation for being an effective influencer.

Steven is a young project manager operating in another part of the company leading his first big stand-alone project. He has had trouble relating to the project steering committee and has been unable to get committee members aligned on key project objectives.

Sandy is mentoring Steven on the best methodologies for stakeholder engagement, how to run effective steering committee meetings, and ways to influence senior leaders without being seen to be telling them what to do. Their conversations typically involve Steven outlining his current challenges, and Sandy sharing past situations where she has had similar challenges and how she addressed them. Steven finds these meetings invaluable and leaves with new techniques to try out immediately.

Training

A trainer teaches a person, or typically a group, how to do something. This could be a formal classroom session, or informal, on-job training. Leaders tend to train more often in junior leadership roles where they are showing people how to use predefined processes or approaches.

A leader acts as a trainer when they train operational staff on how to use a particular system, or when they teach someone how the company approaches customer service.



Ellen is a team leader in a bank's contact centre. Her team always achieves stand out customer service ratings, so Ellen is often invited to talk at induction programs for new staff where she does a segment on responding to negative customer feedback. Each time she covers the same things: the outcome they are aiming for, what to say, the systems to use, reporting that's required, and escalation processes available when needed.

Directing

Directing involves providing clear authoritative instructions, consistent with a 'command and control' approach. This approach has strong merit in some situations, and yet does not allow for the creation of 'insight': that flash of inspiration that brings together seemingly unconnected concepts to give a new understanding. (Insight is explained further in Chapter 3: How does the *Leader Who Asks* support insight?)

A leader directs when they tell staff what to do in clear and explicit terms, and no negotiation is invited.



Brian is a Commander for the fire brigade. On the fire-ground he assumes the role of 'incident controller'—the lead fire fighter in charge of this emergency incident. It's his job to assess the situation, make fast and informed decisions about how best to address the situation, and then issue clear instructions to all personnel, which he expects to be enacted immediately.

At times, Brian also needs to direct civilians (occupants of commercial or residential buildings, motorists, passers-by, etc.); therefore, the clarity of his messages and his ability to switch presentation styles is critical.

Counselling

Counselling has therapeutic origins and typically involves a focus on the past. While some developmental conversations may reference the past, leaders are not trained counsellors. Where it seems that overly strong emotions are at play, and resolution of the past is required, leaders should refer a person

to their organisation's Employee Assistance Program or other professional counselling providers for specialist support.



Belinda noticed that Natalie, normally one of her strongest leaders, had been behaving inconsistently. Belinda was unsure why. Deciding that an informal approach was best, she invited Natalie for a coffee, expressed empathy, reflected her recent observations, and asked Natalie if there was something going on.

Struggling to hold back tears, Natalie told Belinda her husband had been diagnosed with a serious illness, and that he had commenced treatment and wasn't coping well. Natalie was also worried about her three children, and was unsure how to communicate to them the seriousness of their father's situation.

Belinda knew she was out of her depth with this situation, and Natalie was grateful when Belinda told her about the company's Employee Assistance Program, which could provide counselling support. Natalie took up the counselling offer from experienced professionals. Belinda was then able to focus on how best to support Natalie in the workplace. Together they developed a plan that would allow Natalie to take time off when she needed to take her husband to treatment or to support her children.

Coaching

So if all that is *not* coaching, what is?



Figure 2: Development strategies of a leader

While coaching draws on some elements of all those styles, in its own right, it is something different again. Coaching is solution focused—we are seeking an outcome—and is based in the present and future. We may need to visit the past briefly in order to understand the present and create the future.

Sir John Whitmore, considered a pioneer of professional coaching, explains the essence of coaching as: '... unlocking a person's potential to maximise their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them'.⁶ What's important about this is the assumed potential a coachee has, and that the ownership for learning and development remains with the coachee.

If mentoring is about 'telling' and training is about 'showing', then coaching is about 'asking'. A key distinction of a coaching approach is the use of questions—a coach asks questions that help others develop their own insight and answers. **A coach tells less and asks more.**

The Leader Who Asks is not a coach

There are three key areas in which the *leader who asks* is not a traditional coach.

1. **The leader who asks retains some influence over the coaching focus.** Coaching in an organisational setting has evolved from both therapeutic and sporting origins. In *Challenging Coaching*, authors John Blakey and Ian Day argue that early organisational coaching took its biggest inspiration from person-centred therapy, which is grounded in the view that the client has vast resources needed for development, and the therapist's role is to guide the client to find their own answers according to the client's own agenda.⁷

This approach has formed the basis for traditional organisational coaching methods, where the coach has a role of holding the space while the client works things through.

The *leader who asks* has more influence over of direction of the conversation than a traditional coach might, and coaching by the *leader who asks* is often developmental in nature.

2. **The leader who asks may have knowledge.** Another way in which the role of the *leader who asks* may

differ from a professional coach is by having subject matter expertise. While a coach does not need subject matter expertise, coaching leaders will often have knowledge, and may have done the job of the coachee in the recent past. As we will see later, this knowledge often needs to be put aside during a coaching conversation.

- 3. The leader who asks chooses when to coach (and when not to).** A professional coach coaches—that is their job and that’s what they do. The *leader who asks* has a much broader job description, and coaching is not their job. Coaching is simply a tool that a leader will use to achieve KPIs through their team. The *leader who asks* chooses when to coach and when to use other forms of intervention such as those outlined above—and many others—based on the needs of the situation, the people, and the task, in the moment.

The leader who asks:

- draws on coaching qualities to unlock a person’s potential to maximise their performance
- facilitates self-directed learning by asking questions that build awareness and generate insight
- proactively supports the development of their people by helping people learn rather than teaching them.

How the *Leader Who Asks* leads

Let's not underestimate a coaching approach

It's easy to underestimate the power of a coaching approach and think that coaching skills are for one:one formal conversations only. This would be a mistake.

Coaching skills make formal one:one conversations flow, and the *leader who asks* is much more likely to get an outcome to which both parties are committed. That's only one of the many ways in which coaching skills can be applied. Coaching skills allow a leader to make an instant connection in a quick corridor conversation, and get outcomes that in the past might have taken multiple conversations, over many weeks.

Coaching skills will ensure that the *leader who asks* creates clarity about the intention of a meeting, and is able to facilitate a good conversation where everyone feels heard and has commitment to decisions.

Coaching skills will help the *leader who asks* to coach himself out of overwhelm or through a sticky situation. Selectively using the capacities of coaching will help the *leader who asks* to manage up and be more influential. Coaching skills can be applied in a broad range of leadership challenges.

Culture change needs *Leaders Who Ask* throughout the organisation

Typically, culture change starts at the top, and the ongoing support and modelling of the desired culture by the senior leadership group is critical. It's also critical that leaders throughout the organisation understand the vision, the values,

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and the expected behaviours, and can coach to that throughout the organisation.

Culture is the sum of every little thing we do each day. The *leader who asks* creates culture and change momentum through informal interactions as well as formal conversations.

The Leader Who Asks leverages the power of the brain

The *leader who asks* utilises what we know about the brain from studies in neuroscience.

I often hear complaints from leaders along a similar theme: *'I have been over this with her in the past and each time she agrees. Yet each time nothing changes.'* Leaders are frustrated that their good advice is being overlooked and their instructions ignored by members of their team.

So what's going on here? (The clue is in the brain!)

1. They are hearing you, they just don't care

To pay attention (and to change behaviour), the brain needs the right amount of dopamine. Dopamine levels are increased when a person sees relevance in the messages being delivered.⁸ If they don't have any ownership over the messages they are receiving, even when they 'hear' you, they just don't care.

2. There's nothing new, you have said it all before

The brain learns best when there is novelty or variety. Are you 'telling' them the same thing in the same way, over and over? I saw a funny cartoon recently. A parent was explaining to a child, in detail, what behaviour was

expected on a visit to Grandma's house. The kid was hearing 'blah blah blah'. What are your people hearing?

3. Their emotional brains are not engaged

When you give instructions, they may be listening with their 'rational brain', but this won't necessarily help with recall. Engage their 'emotional brain' to increase the chance they will remember and apply what you have said. Emotions focus attention on the stimulus, and through engaging the amygdala, emotions signal to the brain that an event is significant. This leads to enhanced recall.

Think about your own learning? Under what conditions are you more likely to listen, generate ideas, and take ownership?

So what does this mean? Simply that people are much more likely to remember things—and apply them to other situations—that they have worked out for themselves, than things their boss has told them. The *leader who asks* utilises that understanding.

How does the *Leader Who Asks* support insight?

The fundamental distinction between a coaching approach and many other forms of skill development is the use of asking and not telling.

Many problems can be solved by taking an analytical approach, and systematically working through the problem and possible solutions. The types of problems that are best solved with a coaching approach often require a different way: a new way of thinking about the problem and the solution. The questioning associated with a coaching leadership style helps find a fresh

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Sample Chapters

approach that generates a new understanding, and that's where insight comes in.

When people solve a challenge for themselves—rather than being 'told'—'insight' is involved. Insight is that sudden understanding—a 'Eureka' moment—when the brain takes seemingly unrelated ideas and puts them together in new ways to reach a new understanding.

Insights engage the brain's reward systems and trigger a release of dopamine: a neurotransmitter associated with the brain's rewards system known as a 'happy chemical'.⁹ The simple act of searching for our own answers is rewarding to the brain.

Insight activates the hippocampus, the area of the brain responsible for long-term memories.¹⁰ Insights are memorable because there is an emotional component; the amygdala—the part of the brain responsible for emotional arousal—is engaged.¹¹

Memory is also augmented with insight because we make rich neural connections to things we already know.

Problems solved via insight support application of the solution more broadly. The ability to generalise occurs when we are able to 'recognise new patterns in the problems we encounter and strategies we use to solve them', and to recognise this in subsequent situations.¹² So, one insight can address multiple challenges across different time and context.

Methylation

A little known fact is that I have a science degree, majoring in genetics. (Sadly, I have never made much use of all that knowledge pumped into my head.) There's a concept in genetics referred to as methylation. It's a process where you don't have to

change the sequence of the gene to change its function. Instead, a chemical layer or coding turns up or down the activation of a given gene. In other words, by changing the chemical and social conditions, the full expression of the gene ('turning on' the gene, for the non-geneticists among you) can be stimulated.

A while ago, I heard an interesting radio interview with a geneticist whose research was about using the process of methylation to trigger growth in ants. The result was **more** ants of bigger sizes than would otherwise occur, through encouraging the expression of growth genes. Interestingly, the ants' growth does not happen beyond the normal growth range: we don't get 2-foot long ants, but we do get more big ants within the standard range of ant sizes.¹³

What is your leadership methylating? As a leader, which leadership genes are fully expressed under your leadership?

The *leader who asks* 'methylates' **engagement, accountability, and productivity**, creating the conditions for these attributes to be fully expressed and developed within the 'normal range' of abilities. By adding coaching skills to their leadership toolkit, and bringing more *ask* and less *tell* into their leadership style, the *leader who asks* methylates for a Fearless Culture.