

# 12 Smart Questions Every Court Leader Needs to Ask

Janet G. Cornell

The April 2014 issue of *Inc.* magazine included “35 Great Questions” that every leader must ask, asserting that a leader should probe through questions to foster innovation, creativity, and excellence. Court leadership also should involve asking questions, and what follows is a proposed set of 12 questions that a court leader should ask for continual evaluation and operational excellence.

Skilled leaders ask questions to obtain critical information. Proactive

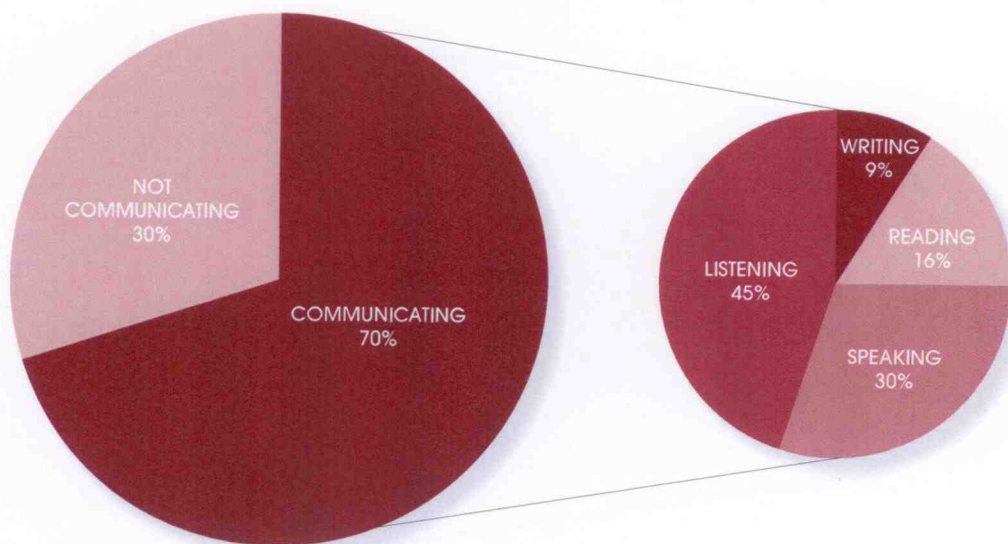
leaders keep asking questions until they know how and why that critical information is influencing or affecting the operation of the court. Savvy leaders will be persistent in questioning, use the art of inquiry, and manage by asking questions (perhaps we should call it “inquiry-based leadership”).

In the workplace, a great amount of time is used for communication. The chart below shows that 70 percent of the time is expended on some type of communication—listening, speaking,

reading, and writing. Court leaders can increase their success by posing questions about the operation and finding opportunities for listening.

Courts (and court leaders) have begun to assess and evaluate the functions of the court to demonstrate accountability for the use of resources and facilitate the sharing of information and data (metrics and measures) about court performance. These leaders engage that assessment by asking questions and seeking information, and

## Time Spent Communicating



Source: <http://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/listening-skills.html#ixzz3Imk4Db6L>

experienced individuals understand that they do not possess all the answers.

So, what are the most important questions that a proactive court leader should continually ask? Suggested questions follow for consideration. In fact, for each main question, there are related questions, which are also important to consider.

1. **What is our purpose** — our mission and vision? How is our work fulfilling our mission, or where do we need to reestablish that linkage between our daily functions and our overall mission? Where do we want the organization to go?
2. **How are we doing?** What do we do well, and where are we excelling? What are we not doing so well, and where are we not performing to the optimal level? What should we do more of (or expand)? What should we do less of (or stop or eliminate)? What should we do differently to be better?

3. **What do our users, customers, collaborators, or stakeholders have to say about how we are performing?** Who should we be asking? Are we asking the right individuals (for example, are we avoiding asking the same people over and over)? What do they say, and do they recognize our important court role? Are we getting information from our clients or court parties? Are we getting feedback from our justice partners? Are we creating an atmosphere where feedback is welcomed?
4. **Where do we need to revamp or refresh our operations?** Which of our functions and areas should be reengineered to become more efficient, to expand upon economies of scale, or to eliminate redundancies?
5. **What prevents us from making the changes necessary?** Where are the barriers to improvement? What do we need to do to move our overall performance to the next level?

6. **What changes have we made in the last reporting period?** What have been the impacts of those changes, and have we adequately shared those outcomes with our leaders? With our funders? With our system stakeholders?
7. **Are we continually assessing ourselves?** In what ways do we continually self-evaluate ourselves with data? What performance

### WHY ARE QUESTIONS SO IMPORTANT? (AUTHOR: JOHN C. MAXWELL)

1. Questions unlock and open doors to obtain answers.
2. Questions are the most effective means of connecting with people.
3. Questions cultivate humility.
4. Questions help you engage others in conversation.
5. Questions allow us to build better ideas.
6. Questions give us a different perspective.
7. Questions challenge mindsets and get us out of our ruts.

data do we need? What counts that we are not counting? Can we expand upon the current metrics, so that we have greater performance analysis? Do we have any "blind spots" in considering our operations?

8. **Did we make progress in our operation today?** If so, how and where? If not, where and why not?
9. **Are we leveraging our limited resources and talents?** Are we using them (both human-resource-based and financial) to the greatest degree possible?
10. **How do we sustain changes and enhancements so that we are continually improving?** How can we ensure we continue the changes and enhancements that make our court perform at optimal levels?
11. **What is the message we need to give about the work that our court performs?** How are we using outcome- and evidence-based measures to talk about the business of the court organization? How do we tell our story?
12. **Is there anything else that we should be asking of our operation?** Are we being open-minded in our consideration of how we are functioning?

Readers are encouraged to consider how to apply these in their courts. A court leader should be able to question the status quo and attempt to assess operational aspects continually. John C. Maxwell, a prolific leadership author, also notes that leaders should ask themselves the following:

1. Am I actively seeking feedback and input to move the team forward?

2. Am I really open to other people's ideas?
3. Am I able to change my opinion based upon new information?
4. Do I act defensively when criticized, or do I listen openly for the truth?
5. Do I ask questions in every conversation?

Jason Fried notes that we can use deceptively simple questions:

1. What is important?
2. What should be the same?
3. What needs to change?

Asking questions should not be limited solely to the court manager. Questions such as those proposed here should be used by all in a court leadership role: judicial officers; court executives; and court fiscal, technology, and operational leaders. The questions may also serve as good discussion topics for bench and court staff meetings. One employee used questioning in the workplace by simply asking: What should I do more of? What should I do less of? What should I do differently? The result was helpful feedback on operational performance, and it was obtained in a non-adversarial manner.

Consider this about successful leaders:

- they should be proactive, not simply reactive, to emerging issues;
- they demonstrate courage, vision, and take risks to pursue new ideas;
- they need to be "wired" to continually assess and "scrutinize data points" for operational goals, actions, and success; and
- they ask questions to obtain valuable information.

Asking questions and listening are leadership traits that will benefit court users (litigants, defendants, customers); the funders of the court (councils, boards of supervisors or governors, budget offices); and the variety of justice system stakeholders and partners.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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