

"If you want to build relationships and organizations rooted in honesty and openness—improving learning, innovation, and results in the process—this book is required reading."
—KIM SCOTT, New York Times bestselling author of *Radical Candor*

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of people around you

for unexpected breakthroughs
in leadership and life

ask

JEFF WETZLER

Foreword by AMY EDMONDSON, Harvard Business School professor
and author of *The Fearless Organization* and *Right Kind of Wrong*

BOOK SUMMARY

ASK

By Jeff Wetzler

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Ask by Jeff Wetzler

Tap Into the Hidden Wisdom of People All Around You for Unexpected Breakthroughs in Leadership and Life

The summary in Brief:

Author Jeff Wetzler aims to reveal to his readers the world that opens once you start asking questions. He believes that simply asking the right questions of the right people can uncover vast amounts of information that would otherwise remain hidden. Although he primarily addresses his book to business professionals, he emphasizes that the importance of questions extends beyond the workplace. The principles he presents can be applied to any area of life where someone wants to identify pitfalls and weaknesses and discover strengths and new opportunities. He divides his book into three parts. The first section addresses the challenges people face in relationships, particularly when it comes to asking questions. The second part covers what he calls “The Ask Approach,” and the final section teaches readers how to incorporate this approach into their leadership roles and personal lives.

After observing how many people wish they could read others’ minds, Wetzler states that “people overestimate their ability to make accurate inferences about what others around them are really feeling or thinking at a given moment.” Unfortunately, Wetzler argues, most of our inferences are inaccurate. This is partly because body language and empathy can fail to provide enough insight into others’ thoughts and feelings. He asserts that the only reliable way to know what someone is thinking is to ask them directly. However, this is not always easy. Wetzler believes problems arise because people are not properly taught how to ask the questions, they need answers to. “Couple this dearth of knowledge,” he writes, “with social norms that emphasize self-reliance, competition, and conflict avoidance, and you begin to understand why so many of us avoid asking.” Fortunately, Wetzler believes that once people learn to ask quality questions, we will all be better off, and this skill can indeed be learned.

The Invisible Problem

Wetzler opens each of his chapters with an essential question the chapter attempts to answer. In Chapter 1, he asks, “What do you most need to know that people are least likely to tell you?” He shares the story of when he worked for Teach for America, during which their Northwest Summer Institute suddenly faced major challenges. This was a serious situation because this training prepares many teachers to work with students in the fall. Despite problems having arisen for quite some time, nobody told Wetzler about them for months. Although the issues with the Summer Institute were eventually resolved, Wetzler realized that even though he asked many questions, his actions had not created an environment where colleagues felt comfortable telling him the truth. Instead, they tried to solve problems on their own without his help. He knew something had to change.

Wetzler then goes on to describe a tactic he learned, called “the two-column case.” When people use this technique, they create two columns on a sheet of paper. In the right column, they write down



what was said during a conversation? In the left column, they then “write the unspoken thoughts and feelings they experienced throughout the interaction.” This exercise helps people realize how much they are holding back from saying, and when extrapolated to the other person, can help a listener understand how much a speaker may be withholding in a conversation. These thoughts and feelings are essential. Wetzler explains that it is our problem when others hold back from sharing, as our decision-making and relationships suffer due to the omissions. Wetzler shares four categories of information that people generally withhold:

1. “Their struggles and frustrations...and what help they need
2. What they really believe or feel about an issue...and where their views come from
3. Their honest feedback for you...and suggestions for how you can improve
4. Their most audacious ideas and dreams...which they fear might sound crazy.”

Barriers to Sharing

Wetzler’s second chapter tries to answer the question, “why don’t most people tell you what’s most important for you to find out?” Wetzler believes there are four main reasons why people withhold information: they’re worried about how their words could affect themselves or others, they lack the energy to deal with the answer, they don’t believe their opinions or feelings will be valued, and they don’t have the right words to express their feelings properly.

Wetzler thinks that the top reason people hold back from sharing is because “they are worried about the impact of sharing.” These effects can vary depending on the situation. For example, in some cultures, people are very concerned with saving face, so they may worry about embarrassing you with their insights. While trust can help reduce some of this hesitation, sometimes a closer relationship can make sharing harder because the stakes are higher for the person trying to open up. Another issue is one of estimation. People often believe they will cause more harm than they actually will with a disclosure while underestimating the benefits they could gain reaping.

While people fail to disclose information because they worry about the effects on the other person, some people fail to disclose information because they fear they will reap negative repercussions themselves. These possible repercussions include fears of judgment and rejection, which can affect people in all areas of their lives. A fear of rejection also does not need to stem from personal rejection. If a person sees a colleague or friend get rejected for sharing an opinion, they are likely to feel uncomfortable sharing their own ideas, particularly if they are not high in the organizational hierarchy.

The next barrier Wetzler discusses is people who have difficulty articulating their thoughts. This can happen because people think more quickly than they can speak, they do not have the necessary communication skills, and they worry that the words they can find are not appropriate. The latter problem often stems from emotional speech that people may have been conditioned to suppress.



Wetzler's fourth barrier is a "lack of time or energy." This occurs when people know that providing insight into a situation will inevitably draw them more deeply into the problem than they have the energy to deal with. Wetzler notices this tendency in himself at times, and when he does, he tells those around him that he really is interested in what they have to say and that they have full permission to stop him from what he is doing. He tells his people that he will provide them with all of the attention he can give them.

A final barrier to communication occurs when people feel their opinions are not valued. This does not have to be an accurate assessment for it to be a powerfully prohibiting one. People can determine that you do not want to listen based upon prior experiences with you or even with experiences with people in a similar role to you. When people try to share and nothing changes, it can lead to people losing hope. Despite the seriousness of the barriers presented, Wetzler maintains, "Many of the barriers described in this chapter can be immediately overcome simply by asking."

Choosing Curiosity

There are five key pillars to Wetzler's Ask Approach. These include choosing curiosity, making it safe, posing quality questions, learning to listen, and reflecting. Regarding choosing curiosity, Wetzler asks, "How can you awaken your curiosity to make new discoveries and unexpected connections?"

Unfortunately, in conversation, people often already believe they know what the other person will say, which stops the conversation before it can even begin. Curiosity, described as a drive state, can help overcome this. There are various types of curiosity, and Wetzler focuses on connective curiosity, which "is a desire to understand more about the thoughts, experiences, and feelings of other people." This type of curiosity benefits both the speaker and the listener because when the listener feels that what they say is taken seriously, they tend to experience an increased desire to share information. For Wetzler, curiosity is a choice rather than an innate trait, and it is a choice anyone can make.

A common problem people face is focusing on one aspect of a person's statement, then drawing conclusions and creating stories based on that piece of information. All of this, of course, is subject to confirmation bias—the tendency to focus on information that confirms what we already believe while ignoring other evidence that might point us in different directions. To counteract this tendency to rush from a situation to a story, it's important to introduce curiosity at different steps in the listening process. This can happen when someone asks themselves questions at each stage, remaining open to the possibility that their conclusions or story may be inaccurate. It's also crucial to recognize that a lot of information is inaccessible without honest answers, including "others' true intentions and motivations."

Cultivating Safety

Next, Wetzler turns his attention to figuring out how to make other people feel safer in sharing. This is frequently an issue when differentials in power arise from factors such as age, sex, position, race, or any other variable. Wetzler states, "sometimes being asked to share, particularly in a professional context, feels less like an invitation and more like a social threat." In such situations, it is crucial to



consider the questions asked and the manner in which they are posed. People must feel psychologically safe in order to share, and studies have shown that businesses and organizations can sink or soar based on how free people at different levels feel in expressing their thoughts and ideas.

Despite the importance of psychological safety, Wetzler states that it is not entirely achievable in a work environment where there is always some risk involved in speaking out. To make speaking out safer for everyone, Wetzler introduces the safety cycle. The first step of this cycle involves building connections. This can be done by sharing meaningful stories and being vulnerable oneself. Additionally, it is crucial to find the right time and place for a meaningful discussion—somewhere that is suitable for the person you're asking questions of. Next, opening up oneself is vital. This happens when the person seeking information recognizes that they possess insights the other person may not have. Sometimes, question askers are hesitant to share too much because their words and opinions could bias the other person, which can take more time. However, this is an essential step in fostering psychological safety. Finally, the third step in the safety cycle is radiating resilience. This becomes possible when topics are made discussable, as the participants acknowledge that there are things they may need to say that others might not want to hear. Furthermore, it is important for the listener to respond calmly and appropriately when people share information they find uncomfortable hear.

Asking and Listening

Not all questions are equally helpful, and Wetzler's Chapter 6 helps his reader focus on the most important questions to ask. Wetzler recognizes that many people have been made to feel ashamed for asking questions, which can make them less willing to ask questions in the future. He identifies three types of questions that his reader should avoid: "clumsy questions, sneaky questions, and attack questions." Clumsy questions are awkwardly worded and fail to get the needed information because they do not ask clearly. Sneaky questions are not about seeking information but are "designed to influence, convince, or maneuver the other person." Attack questions go further and aim to hurt the other person. None of these questions will produce the answers you want. Wetzler says helpful questions have these qualities: "They signal true curiosity...They are clear and direct...They invite honesty...They tap into the other person's full story... [and] They create mutual benefit." Good questions help a listener better understand what the other person thinks and feels about the issue.

Wetzler moves on to ask, "How can you hear what someone is really trying to tell you?" Here, Wetzler wants his reader to listen to everything the other person has to say, including their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Many people confuse listening with hearing. Authentic listening is a much more active process than just simply hearing what someone is saying. When people listen to learn, they pay close attention to everything being communicated. A key part of this is eliminating distractions, both internal and external. Additionally, it requires a listener to remain quiet, so the other person has enough space to speak. One effective technique Wetzler shares is sometimes referred to as the looping technique. With this method, a listener paraphrases what they heard the speaker say and then checks if their interpretation was accurate. This helps the listener know that their response is valued and ensures they truly understand what was being communicated said.



Responding and Reconnecting

In his final section on the Ask Approach, Wetzler discusses action and states that “The hardest part of learning from others isn’t asking the questions, or even listening to the answers. It’s deciding what to do with what we hear.” He believes that when given thoughtful answers, it is a questioner’s responsibility to both reflect on what was said and reconnect with the answer giver. These steps are important for understanding what truly matters and for ensuring future communication improves rather than breaks down. This doesn’t mean a person must act on every piece of information or accept as true what they know is false. Instead, the listener should “separate the wheat from the chaff” and respond in a way that makes the other person feel respected appreciated.

Wetzler recommends that the first step in the sifting process is to record what was said. This “provides clarity and prevents you from second-guessing or immediately interpreting what you heard.” Once this initial step is done, a person can then analyze what they have heard for valuable insights. Wetzler suggests a three-turn approach: in the first turn, a listener reflects on their own story about the situation. In the second, they consider next steps; in the third, they focus on their own “stuff” to see if deeper factors are involved. Wetzler offers various tools to support reflection, including journaling, conversation, coaching, and therapy, all of which can help a person explore more deeply during these three turns.

Once the reflection is complete, it is time to reconnect in a way that supports future sharing. Wetzler suggests beginning this process with sincere gratitude for what has been shared. Next, it is important to communicate the impact that the other person’s words and insights had on the issue at hand. This includes sharing what you heard from the speaker so they understand their words and insights were taken seriously. Lastly, it is helpful to inform the other party about what actions are being considered because of the insights they shared. Since you may not decide to follow all the advice or act on all the insights provided, it’s important to explain the decision-making process to the other person as a way to reconnect process.

Broader Context

Throughout his book, Wetzler guides his readers through different steps to become better question askers. He illustrates this with examples from real-world situations where asking questions benefited himself or others, showing practical applications of his principles. While much of the book emphasizes individuals, his advice and principles are not limited to individual leaders. These tactics are intended to be used at all levels of organizations, and to highlight this, one of his later chapters specifically focuses on how to “unlock the collective genius of your team.” Additionally, he includes a chapter on applying these techniques in education. After all, children are natural questioners until this tendency is suppressed by forces that want to tell children what to think instead of encouraging their potential for discovery on their own and through others. Because of this, he offers guidelines for working with children to foster and enhance their question-asking abilities while this trait is still developing present.



Wetzler believes in the power of people to learn from one another. This power is most limited by the reluctance people have to ask good questions. In turn, this causes others to shut down, and knowledge and insights become isolated. Asking good questions is a skill, and it is this skill that Wetzler helps his readers develop in his book.

The summary is not intended as a replacement for the original book, and all quotes are credited to the above-mentioned author and publisher.