

# The Leadership Lab

## The Quest in Questions

*The journey of leading through great questions.*



**By Ovet Wilson**

Leadership in education today is complex. Principals navigate shifting mandates, increasing accountability, teacher shortages, student mental health, and ever-evolving instructional priorities. In this kind of environment, it's tempting to think that strong leadership means having quick answers and clear directives. However, the truth is, great leadership doesn't start with answers, it starts with curiosity.

John C. Maxwell, in his book *Good Leaders Ask Great Questions*, challenges us to rethink what it means to lead. He writes, "*Leaders who ask the right questions create a culture of discovery, dialogue, and growth.*" In other words, the strength of your leadership is not measured by how much you know, but by how much you're willing to learn.

When principals lead with questions, they model learning. They show their staff that growth is not a destination, it's a discipline. By asking the right questions, they uncover new perspectives, identify blind spots, and unlock the collective wisdom of their teams.

Too often, leaders feel pressure to be the one who fixes, decides, and directs. However, the modern principal must be something more: a facilitator of thinking, a cultivator of dialogue, and a builder of leaders. The ability to ask great questions is what transforms a manager into a mentor, a supervisor into a servant leader, and a school into a thriving community of learners.

In *Good Leaders Ask Great Questions*, Maxwell frames questioning not as a leadership technique, but as a leadership philosophy, a way of leading that fosters trust, clarity, and shared ownership. For principals, this means that instead of striving to be the person with all the answers, we must become the person who asks the questions that *draw out the answers in others*.

The following five principles are inspired by Maxwell's timeless insights and reframed through the lens of educational leadership. They offer a roadmap for principals who want to lead with greater wisdom, relational depth, and intentional growth.

## 1. Leadership Begins with Curiosity

Curiosity is the soil in which great leadership grows. Maxwell notes that great leaders “never stop asking why, what if, and how.” Principals who lead with curiosity don't rush to judgment or cling to old assumptions; they observe, listen, and seek to understand before acting.

When a leader remain curious they may ask questions like:

- “What advice would you give me in this situation?”
- “What's working somewhere else that we haven't tried yet?”
- “What part of our school day feels outdated or no longer serves our current learners?”
- “If you were in my shoes, what would you do in this situation?”
- “What strategies are helping students stay engaged?”
- “What barriers are we not seeing yet?”
- “If you could make one change tomorrow, what would it be?”
- “Where are we overcomplicating things that could be made simpler?”
- “Whose voice is missing from this conversation?”
- “What data or patterns are we seeing that might be trying to tell us something?”

Curiosity unlocks innovation. It communicates respect and partnership. When teachers sense your genuine curiosity, they let down their guard. They start thinking *with* you, not *for* you. A curious leader creates a learning organization; one where people continuously question, reflect, and refine. In today's schools, curiosity isn't optional; it's the key to adaptive leadership.

## 2. The Power of Humble Inquiry

Maxwell reminds us that “good leaders ask great questions because they value others.” That requires humility. Pride closes the door to learning; humility opens it. Principals who ask questions from a place of sincere interest, not inspection, create safety and trust.

Humble inquiry might sound like:

- “Help me understand what this looks like in your classroom.”
- “What are you noticing about student engagement?”
- “How can I support you more effectively?”

These questions don’t diminish your authority, they deepen your influence. Humility doesn’t mean uncertainty; it means you value people more than positions. It means you believe that collective wisdom is stronger than individual expertise.

When staff know that their principal listens more than lectures, they start bringing you not just problems, but solutions. Humility builds community, and community sustains momentum.

### **3. Leading Teams Through Questions, Not Commands**

Maxwell writes, “Leaders who ask the right questions encourage others to take ownership.” This truth is vital in schools, where lasting change happens when teachers and teams internalize the *why* behind the *what*. Command-and-control leadership produces compliance. Question-driven leadership cultivates commitment.

Instead of saying: “We need to raise test scores,” try asking, “What instructional practices have you seen make the biggest difference in learning?”

Instead of declaring, “We have to fix discipline,” ask, “What’s at the heart of these behaviors, and how can we address the root causes together?”

Questions shift ownership. They move conversations from *I* to *we*, from mandates to motivation. When people feel ownership, they invest effort. They innovate. They grow. Your role as principal is not to be the loudest voice in the room, but the one who helps others find *their* voice.

### **4. Asking Questions of Yourself**

Great leaders never outgrow self-reflection. Maxwell challenges every leader to ask, “Am I growing as fast on the inside as my organization is on the outside?”

For principals, that means taking time to pause, evaluate, and reset. School leadership can easily become reactive, constantly solving problems, answering emails, and putting out fires. However, wise leaders carve out space for reflection, because growth doesn’t happen by accident. The open the individual to a deep sense of meta cognition. When we think about our thinking and ask ourselves questions around those thinking we are operating at a very high metacognitive level.

Ask yourself regularly:

- “Am I leading people or managing programs?”
- “Where have I stopped learning?”
- “What blind spots might be limiting my impact?”
- “Am I creating leaders or producing followers?”

These questions realign your focus. They help you distinguish between *busyness* and *effectiveness*. Remember: the school will rarely rise above the growth level of its leader. When you invest in your own reflection and development, you raise the ceiling for everyone you lead.

## 5. Questions That Build Legacy

Maxwell says, “A legacy is created not by what we leave *for* people, but by what we leave *in* people.” The questions you ask as a leader shape how others think, lead, and serve long after you’re gone. Legacy-driven principals don’t just ask about today’s tasks; they ask about tomorrow’s leaders. They build systems, relationships, and habits that outlast their tenure.

In your leadership meetings, try asking:

- “What did we learn from this experience?”
- “Who can we empower to lead this next phase?”
- “How can we sustain this success without relying on one person?”
- “Who can we develop to take this responsibility?”

These questions turn your school into a leadership incubator. They communicate that success is not about dependence on the principal but about shared ownership of excellence. When you lead with that mindset, you don’t just improve a school, you multiply leaders. And that’s the ultimate measure of impact.

## Bottom Line

John C. Maxwell’s wisdom echoes through every great school: *Leadership is not about knowing everything, it’s about creating environments where others can discover answers together.* The most effective principals ask, listen, and learn. They transform moments of questioning into moments of growth. So the next time you’re in a meeting, a classroom, or a difficult conversation, resist the urge to have the last word. Instead, ask the next *right* question. You may find that the answer was already in the room waiting for your leadership to draw it out.

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