JUDGMENT

The Question Before the Decision

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PETERSEN LEADERSHIP | PERSPECTIVES • CRITICAL THINKING & JUDGMENT

Why Great Leaders Think Differently—and Ask What Others Miss

> *A leader can ask two dozen questions and still miss the one that matters. The purpose of critical thinking is not to collect questions. It is to discover what we do not yet understand, make a more responsible judgment, and move forward with the humility to learn.*

The power—and the limits—of a familiar framework

A graphic by Christian Rebernik, “24 Questions to Sharpen Your Critical Thinking,” groups questions under Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How. This is an accessible way to approach an unfamiliar problem. The six interrogatives are not new; Rudyard Kipling famously celebrated them as his “six honest serving-men” in Just So Stories (1902). Their longevity is part of their strength: we can remember them when the situation becomes complicated.

Several questions in the graphic deserve a permanent place in a leader’s vocabulary: What am I assuming without proof? Who is missing from this conversation? When would be the wrong time to act? How can I test this before committing? Each pushes against a predictable leadership weakness—unexamined assumptions, incomplete perspectives, poor timing, or premature commitment.

But there are limits. Twenty-four questions may be helpful before a major strategic decision; they are not a practical script for a 30-minute conversation. Some categories are awkward. “Where will this decision lead?” is really a question about consequences, not geography. More importantly, a list alone cannot tell a leader which question matters now, which answer is trustworthy, or when enough inquiry has occurred.

What questions cannot do for us

The mere presence of questions does not establish that people are thinking critically. A team can collect data to defend a conclusion already chosen. A leader can invite dissent and then punish the person who offers it. A meeting can sound thoughtful while everyone avoids the decision.

We must distinguish curiosity from inquiry and inquiry from judgment. Curiosity notices a problem. Inquiry examines it fairly. Judgment weighs imperfect information, competing values, risk, and timing. Leadership adds accountability for what happens next.

In my experience, the question most likely to change the direction of a conversation is not always the most sophisticated. It is often the simplest question no one has been willing to ask.

A seventh dimension: SELF

The six familiar categories examine the situation around us. Effective leadership also requires examining the person doing the thinking. I would add a seventh dimension: SELF—not as a substitute for facts, but as a check on how our emotions, identity, and experiences shape what we perceive as fact.

Ask yourself: What am I feeling about this situation? Am I defending a position because it is correct, or because it is mine? Which fear, loyalty, or ambition may be affecting my interpretation? What evidence would genuinely change my mind?

This is not an argument that emotion is the enemy of sound judgment. Feelings can alert us to genuine danger, unfairness, or a threat to values. The problem occurs when we fail to recognize their influence. That distinction is central to the message of The Facts Don't Matter: people respond to their interpretations of reality, not simply to a spreadsheet of facts.

Nor should we assume that every poor decision reflects ego or fear. Leaders sometimes lack crucial evidence, face unavoidable tradeoffs, or confront circumstances that change unexpectedly. Critical thinking requires both honest self-examination and appropriate humility about uncertainty.

The Petersen lens: IQ, EQ, and AQ

I have long believed that intellectual intelligence (IQ), emotional intelligence (EQ), and adaptability intelligence (AQ) must work together. The questions we ask—and the answers we can hear—depend on all three.

INTELLIGENCE	CONTRIBUTION	THE QUESTION TO ASK
IQ • Intellectual	Tests evidence, definitions, assumptions, and options.	What would prove this belief wrong?
EQ • Emotional	Recognizes human consequences, personal reactions, and unheard voices.	Whose perspective am I missing?
AQ • Adaptability	Experiments, learns, and changes course when warranted.	What will I change if new evidence emerges?

IQ without EQ may produce an analytically sound decision that damages trust. EQ without IQ can make it difficult to confront uncomfortable facts. IQ and EQ without AQ may leave a leader able to describe the problem but unwilling to change course. A complete leadership decision

requires all three.

Seven questions worth keeping close

For decisions that matter, I favor a short set of adaptable prompts over an obligation to complete an exhaustive checklist. The following seven questions draw on the original 5W1H framework but deliberately add self-awareness, inaction, and ownership:

1. **What are we actually trying to resolve?** Separate the presenting symptom from the problem beneath it. A declining result may reflect a deeper breakdown in trust, service, strategy, or execution.
2. **What do we know—and what are we merely assuming?** Identify evidence, uncertainty, and information we could reasonably obtain. Ask in advance what would change our conclusion.
3. **Who sees this differently, and who has not been heard?** Seek the people closest to the work as well as those who will carry the consequences.
4. **What about my own thinking deserves examination?** Name the fear, attachment, pride, or experience that could make one option feel safer than it is.
5. **What will happen if we do nothing?** Treat inaction as a real alternative with costs, benefits, and risks—not as a neutral default.
6. **How can we test this before making an irreversible commitment?** Use a limited experiment when stakes and circumstances permit. For major proposals, a brief premortem can expose plausible failure points.
7. **What happens next, and who will own it?** Specify the next action, the accountable person, the evidence of progress, and when the decision will be revisited.

These are prompts, not a fixed sequence. A coach might use only one. A CEO facing a major investment may need all seven and additional domain-specific analysis. For legal, safety, regulatory, or personnel decisions, the depth of inquiry should match the potential harm and the authority involved.

The meeting test: three questions, not twenty-four

I once observed a CEO who routinely held direct-report meetings that stretched to four hours. When I asked participants what those meetings had accomplished, they often struggled to identify much of substance. Employees also told me they rarely saw their leaders outside those meetings. That experience reinforced a personal rule: I would leave a meeting at the 50-minute mark. Others could continue, but I would not remain simply because time had been scheduled.

Our organization ordinarily held one weekly all-hands meeting. Because we would not all reconvene for another week unless something unusual arose, people needed to prepare, prioritize, and use that shared time wisely. The 50-minute rule was not hostility to conversation.

It was respect for people's time—and for the obligation to make conversations useful.

For an ordinary leadership meeting, I would begin with just three questions:

- **What matters most in this discussion?**
- **What are we overlooking or assuming?**
- **What will be different when we leave?**

If those questions reveal a consequential decision, expand the analysis. If they do not, stop asking and get back to the work. The objective is not to complete a checklist; it is to improve the work of leadership.

A culture that welcomes hard questions

The quality of organizational thinking depends on whether people are willing to speak. Amy Edmondson's research on psychological safety and learning behavior reminds us that the environment matters: people are more likely to learn together when they can take interpersonal risks without assuming they will be punished for doing so. Psychological safety is not the absence of accountability. It is the ability to surface a concern, a mistake, or a contrary view while standards still apply.

This directly informs The Culture We Create. The strongest cultures do not require every person to agree with the leader. They permit capable people to challenge an assumption respectfully, bring forward unwelcome information, and be heard before a decision becomes irreversible. A leader who asks, "Who is missing from this conversation?" must be prepared to listen when that person arrives.

The same principle applies to coaching. In The Art of Asking the Right Coaching Question, I argued that a list of powerful questions cannot replace the coach's judgment about timing, listening, and client readiness. For a CPBC coach, the critical-thinking prompts are resources, not a script. The coach should not take ownership of the client's decision simply because the coach knows another question to ask.

A practical exercise for CPBL and PBCA

For a CPBL 401 leadership discussion, a CPBL 402 strategy session, or a Lead With Purpose workshop, I recommend a brief exercise with four steps:

- **Choose three.** From the original 24 questions, select the three you personally neglect most often.
- **Add one SELF question.** Write a question that exposes the emotional influence or untested attachment most likely to affect your judgment.
- **Apply the questions.** Use a real but appropriately shareable current decision. Identify what changed in your understanding.

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Commit to one action. Choose the next step, name the responsible person, and set a point for reviewing results.

In CPBL 403, the exercise can extend to implementation: what did the leader learn after acting, and what had to change? Its value is not that participants memorize 25 or 29 questions. It is that they discover which questions their habits most often prevent them from asking.

From questions to leadership

In a companion paper, The Courage to Decide, I examined the question, “What would my replacement do?” It helps leaders step outside the emotional investment they have in past choices. That is a useful question, but it does not replace the discipline developed here. The replacement may see what the incumbent has normalized; the incumbent may understand commitments, relationships, and obligations the replacement would miss.

Critical thinking begins before we decide. Courage becomes essential when thought must turn into a choice. Execution tests the quality of that choice. Adaptability requires us to learn without treating every revision as an admission of failure.

> *The mark of a thoughtful leader is not the number of questions asked. It is the willingness to ask the uncomfortable one, hear the answer, exercise judgment, and act.*

Selected sources and related Petersen papers

Rebernik, Christian. “24 Questions to Sharpen Your Critical Thinking.” Undated infographic provided for discussion; the six-category structure and example questions are credited to Rebernik.

Kipling, Rudyard. Just So Stories (1902), “The Elephant’s Child.” Reference to the six interrogatives.

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Petersen, Jim. The Courage to Decide (2026); The Art of Asking the Right Coaching Question (2026); The Facts Don’t Matter (2025).