

What Is a Great Question?

There are no fixed, black-and-white rules that determine that one question is good and another is lousy. For example: “Why?” can be a wonderful question. It can be an unexpectedly insightful question that penetrates to the core of the issue. But “Why?” can also be a terrible question. It can come across as cynical, critical, and reproachful—especially when asked of a subordinate or a child.

Nonetheless, power questions have certain characteristics. They may embody one or more of the following characteristics.

Power questions are questions that:

1. Dig under the surface to uncover root causes and underlying causes
2. Help clarify the issues and focus the conversation
3. Create a common vocabulary and a common understanding of the situation
4. Uncover other peoples’ dreams, ambitions, and aspirations
5. Help you understand and connect with others’ most important priorities and needs
6. Push people to see their own experiences and issues from a new perspective
7. Test for alignment and consistency
8. Help the other person reach his or her own conclusions
9. Reframe the problem
10. Create learning
11. Inspire commitment

Finally, good questions are authentic and sincere. They don’t manipulate. They are not cynical or sarcastic.