

# 5 Questions Successful People Ask (and 5 they **don't** ask)

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## Introduction

*Raising new questions and new possibilities, and regarding old problems from a new angle, requires creative imagination and marks real advance in science.*

### [Albert Einstein](#)

Questions, as Albert Einstein relates in the quote above, help us frame our thinking and define our problems. We can rarely think of an answer outside of the way we've framed the question, so it stands to reason that the questions we ask – particularly those we ask ourselves – will drive our thinking and our behavior.

If we're looking to take our lives – professional, personal, spiritual, physical – to the next level, we need to change the types of questions we ask ourselves. The purpose of this report is to help you take a look at the way you speak to yourself and to make some changes along the way. I've included five questions you should be asking yourself to broaden your thinking and make you more successful, and five more to stop asking yourself because of their limiting influence.

Whether you want to compete in an Ironman triathlon, start your own business, or find a way to move your family to the country and live in a log house you made with your own two hands, the encouragement and suggestions in this report will help you define your path and remove obstacles that may have been holding you back.

Let's get going!

## **Five Questions to Ask Yourself #1: What Are My Highest Value Activities?**

*We hear only those questions for which we are in a position to find answers.* Friedrich Nietzsche

It's a common complaint among busy people: They reach the end of the day, only to realize that although they were running from project to project and crossing things off their list, they didn't make any movement towards their largest goals.

If you can identify with this scenario, you've got an issue with the kind of tasks you're undertaking. While it's great to be busy and feel productive, it's even more important to do the things that matter. The key to making this distinction is this question:

### **What are my highest value activities?**

The answer to this question is going to be unique to you. No coach, no matter how skilled, can tell you what you derive the most value from. It stems from a combination of your unique gifts, talents, and skills, and your overall goals and dreams. Marry the two, and you've got a list of the things that only YOU can accomplish – and these are the things that should get priority on your daily to-do list.

If you find yourself getting sidetracked by tasks that aren't on your highest-value list, you need to find a way to extricate yourself from them. You can delegate them to someone else, hire another person to do them, or just simply stop. Every minute you spend doing something "below your pay grade" is a minute you aren't reaching your full potential. Concentrate on the tasks that you and only you are capable of doing, and leave the rest to someone else.

Think of it this way: If you call Amazon.com, Jeff Bezos doesn't answer the phone. He doesn't respond to customer complaints. He doesn't sweep the floors, order more paper for the copy machine, or make sure the cafeteria is fully stocked on coffee. He leaves those details to others, and he focuses on the projects and activities that only he can do: Visualizing the future path for Amazon. Focus works. If it's good enough for Jeff Bezos, it's good enough for you.

## **Five Questions to Ask Yourself #2: What is the one thing I could do today to move myself forward?**

*Successful people ask better questions, and as a result, they get better answers.* Tony Robbins

Sometimes we get stuck in the overwhelm of life. There are simply too many projects, too many things to do, too many people clamoring for our attention, and too much information. We aren't at all sure on what we should do next, and so we retreat to the comparative peace and quiet of a game of solitaire on our computer, or we check our email yet again, or we head to the refrigerator.

When we find ourselves taking the long way home to avoid dealing with the snarl that appears to be our life, we need to stop. Instead of avoiding the tumult, we need to dive in, looking for that one loose end that will unravel the mess and lead us to our goals. Sounds too easy, eh? It really is.

When you come to a stuck spot and you are baffled as to what to do next, or you are tempted to run away and hide in a pint of Ben & Jerry's Chunky Monkey, ask yourself this question:

### **What is the one thing I could do today to move myself forward?**

Sometimes the answer is a big task – “Buy a ticket to the \$1000 conference.” But most of the time, it's something very simple: Make the phone call, buy the book, answer the email. In fact, the answer is often so simple that we've discounted its power, which is why we've been feeling lost. Just like with a knot in a rope, sometimes it just takes a bit of wiggle room to make the whole thing loosen and come free.

Remember, you're not looking for the grand gestures or huge movements (“I need to sell my house and move to Idaho”); you're looking for one thing you can start and accomplish TODAY that will let you make progress. Often, it's something you knew you needed to do but were avoiding; other times, it's something you hadn't realized was holding up the works. In either case, identify it, write it down, and make it happen.

If all you did was ask yourself this question day after day, and then take action on the answers, you'd soon find yourself closer to your goals than you ever imagined.

### **Five Questions to Ask Yourself #3: What is blocking me right now?**

*Judge a man by his questions rather than his answers. Voltaire*

Knowing what you need to do and doing it are two very different things, just as having a map for running a marathon and actually making it to the finish line are miles (26.2 miles or 42.16 kilometers, to be exact) apart.

The gap between knowing and doing can be the result of many things:

- Skill. You know what to do, but you don't know HOW to do it. For instance, you know the next step in your business is to create a website opt-in form so people can easily join your mailing list, but you have no idea how to do that. You've got a SKILL problem.
- Mindset. You know what to do and how to do it, but you don't think you can. You're stuck because you lack confidence in yourself, or there's some other mental block. You've got a MINDSET problem.
- Emotion. You know what to do and how to do it, and you even know you can do it, but you don't want to do it. You avoid making the phone call for fear you'll be rejected, or you don't tackle your taxes because you're afraid you'll owe money. You've got an EMOTION problem.

The only way to get past your obstacle is by identifying its source, and the only way to identify the source is by asking yourself:

#### **What is blocking me right now?**

When you ask yourself this question, you need to go past the obvious. What may seem like a skill issue ("I don't know how to create an opt-in form") may actually be a mindset or emotion issue ("I'm afraid of technology" or "I don't think this will work even if I do create it"). Be relentless in asking yourself "What is blocking me?" over and over until you get at the root of your true issue.

Once you've identified the problem, you can figure out a way to address it. If it truly is a skill issue, you can learn how or hire someone else to do it for you. If it's a mindset or emotion issue, you can work with a coach or other trusted person to help you blow past those blocks.

The question may seem simple, but the results are huge.

## **Five Questions to Ask Yourself #4: What would happen if I didn't do this task?**

*Live your questions now, and perhaps even without knowing it, you will live along some distant day into your answers.* Rainer Maria Rilke

Once something makes it onto our task list or into our calendar, it's nearly impossible to remove it. What seemed like a good idea at the time – posting an extra video every week on your blog, running the school book drive, heading up the task force, stopping by Starbucks to get coffee for the weekly staff meeting – has suddenly become written in stone.

While none of these activities are bad in and of themselves, en masse they eat away at our precious hours, leaving us little time for the things that matter most to us and our long-term goals. But we often don't question our involvement; we figure that once we signed up, we're stuck.

The good news is that obligations – even ones we once said “Yes” to – are not eternal sentences. Just as you once said “Yes,” you can now say “No.” But it can sometimes be difficult figuring out what obligations are essential and which are not. That's where this question comes in. As you go down your list of responsibilities, ask yourself:

### **What would happen if I didn't do this task?**

For instance, what would happen if you didn't head the school carnival this year? Most likely, the PTA would find someone else to take it over.

What would happen if you didn't host the family Thanksgiving dinner that takes you three weeks to prepare for and three more to recover from? Most likely, the family would find another place to congregate.

What would happen if you didn't post that extra video every week on your blog? Most likely, the world would keep turning. Or, if it is really integral to the success of your business, you'd get so many demands for the return of the weekly video that it would soon become clear you need to add that item back onto your to-do list.

There are, in actuality, very few items on our calendars that are essential. Either someone else would step in to take our place, or somehow the job would get done, or we'd all survive without coffee at the next staff meeting.

Of course, there are some tasks and obligations that are essential, ones where you are, in a word, irreplaceable. Find those activities and concentrate there. Gracefully back out of the rest, or pass the task on to someone else, or quietly stop doing it and see if anyone notices.

Chances are, you know where you're needed.

## **Five Questions to Ask Yourself #5: Will this matter five days from now? Five weeks? Five years?**

*There is frequently more to be learned from the unexpected questions of a child than the discourses of men.* John Locke

When we're in the midst of our life, it can be tough to get perspective on what's happening. Little things naturally seem big, big ones seem huge, and things that have the potential to truly change our world from the inside out sometimes get overlooked because they're disguised as not-big things. It's tricky to make decisions in the moment when we don't have a clear view of our lives.

Emotions cloud our judgment, too. We get scared, anxious, overwhelmed, and tired, and looking at a minor inconvenience is like looking at a fun-house mirror; everything's distorted and off-kilter. It can be easy to lose perspective and overreact – or underreact. That's when this question (actually, this series of questions) comes in handy:

### **Will this matter five days from now? Five weeks? Five years?**

This question is an automatic game-changer. Suddenly, the parking ticket, the overdue report, or the missed meeting doesn't seem so tragic. Sure, if you had your druthers, you'd have arrived on time, skipped the \$40 parking fine, and met your deadline. But five days from now, the parking ticket will be forgotten, in five weeks, your boss won't remember you missed your due date, and in five years, no one will remember whether you were at that meeting or not.

Just as these questions can help put irksome occurrences in their proper place, they can also help you hone in on what's really important. Skipping your daughter's last baseball game might not seem that big a deal to you, but will she still be brokenhearted next week? If so, maybe it's worth leaving work early to make the opening pitch.

What's interesting is that something that isn't important now may very well be so five years from now. Exercise, for example, builds up interest over time; one missed workout is no big deal, but over five years, those missed minutes at the gym add up. That's why this question is so powerful. It levels the playing field to make important things appear more important, while stripping the not-so-important things of their power. With the emotion removed, you can see things as they really are, and then make your decisions accordingly.

## **Five Questions to Stop Asking Yourself #1: How can I make so and so do such and such?**

*I never learn anything talking. I only learn things when I ask questions.* Lou Holtz

One of the most common misconceptions we have as humans is in our ability to change other people. We somehow think that through punishment, force, reward, or just plain strength of will, we can change other people.

We see this all the time: Women attempt to change boyfriends and husbands, parents try to change their kids, and coworkers try to change each other. But somehow even if we achieve short term success, it's never long-lasting. Ask any parent who's tried to force a baby to eat strained peas. Even if you get them into the mouth, they're coming right back out again.

And that's why we need to put a cease and desist order on this particular question:

### **How can I make so and so do such and such?**

The simple answer is, you can't. Maturity – and happiness – come when we realize that the only person we can truly change is ourselves. And when we start focusing our efforts there, things just seem to naturally adjust.

Harriet Lerner, a respected psychologist, has written a series of books on relationships. Her premise is that relationships are dances of sorts, and just as in a mambo or a waltz, if one partner changes how he or she is moving, the other has to adjust. The key to creating a change in the relationship, then, is to look at your own behaviors and actions and change them.

You might be wondering why you have to do all the work. After all, if your spouse would stop drinking or your boss would stop nitpicking or your kids would just act a little more respectful, life would be great. That may be true, but here's the key: You can't do anything about their behavior. You can only change your own. And the sooner you face that and accept it, as disappointing and unfair as it may be, the sooner you'll be on the path to a better relationship.

Acceptance can be tough; so tough, in fact, that it can keep people mired in broken relationships and dead-end jobs for decades. Instead of asking how you can make the other person change, then, you need to ask yourself what you're willing to do to be happy. The changes required on your behalf may be far less drastic than you think.

## Five Questions to Stop Asking Yourself #2: Whose fault is it?

*Who questions much, shall learn much, and retain much.* Francis Bacon

As Sir Francis says, asking questions is a good thing. But you have to ask the right questions – ones that empower you and open your possibilities. Unfortunately, some questions do just the opposite. Instead of making you think more creatively, they shut down the flow of energy, making you defensive and angry. One such question is this:

### Whose fault is it?

This question is a wolf in sheep's clothing. It seems kind of innocuous at first. After all, once we know at whose feet we can lay the broken valve, the lost account, or the argument, we can make sure it never happens again.

Perhaps. But laying blame isn't the important thing: solving the problem is. Playing the blame game causes issues far beyond any benefit:

1. **It wastes time.** While you could be concentrating on fixing the problem, you're running around trying to make someone else the bad guy.
2. **It wastes energy.** Knowing who is at fault isn't really necessary; knowing how to fix the problem is. Sure, it can get you off the hook ("I swear, it wasn't me!") but it doesn't fix the issue at hand.
3. **It wastes relationships.** Trying to put the blame on someone else can irreparably damage your relationships. Trust erodes, and people start worrying about covering their rear ends rather than working together.

It's natural to want to direct negative attention elsewhere, but it isn't really necessary. In fact, the most powerful people on any team are those who solve problems rather than those who never cause any.

Not only will you cement your role as a valuable team member when you focus on solutions rather than problems, you also gain the trust of your co-workers and colleagues. They become more willing to take risks, to be open, and to help you out because they know you're going to do the same for them. This makes for a stronger team all around.

If you are working with others who try to focus on blame-laying, call a time-out. Remind them that the important thing in the moment is to solve the problem, and that you can go back later to find out why it happened and who was at fault. But you may very well find that once the problem is solved, no one wants to revisit the issue. Perfect! That keeps the focus on moving forward, rather than on going back.

### **Five Questions to Stop Asking Yourself #3: What's Wrong with Me?**

*There are no right answers to wrong questions.* Ursula K. Le Guin

The problem with some questions is that they're just plain wrong, right off the bat. They are based on false assumptions, they lead the questioner in a faulty direction, and they end up taking you on a wild goose chase that can lead nowhere good. This is one of those questions:

#### **What's wrong with me?**

At some point in their lives, everyone, deep in their soul, has felt that they are "less than," like they just don't make the grade. They wonder what everyone else has that they don't, why "they" have it so easy, and what they did wrong to make the gods curse the very day they were born.

Yes, everyone has those moments; some of us are just better at hiding it than others. Even the most successful people on the face of the earth, from Oprah Winfrey to Sidney Poitier to Roger Maris would admit that there were times when they just didn't know if they could measure up.

While it's natural to start falling down the well of self-doubt, it serves no purpose. Each time you give in to those demons, you allow yourself to get sucked a little further from your real power. Pretty soon, all you're doing is sitting on the couch with a bag of chip in one hand and the remote in the other, watching hours of "Beverly Hills 90210" reruns and wondering how Shannen Doherty got away with her diva behavior.

Don't go there. Don't even take one step in that direction. As soon as you get the "woe is me's," freeze. Go do something productive, preferably someone whose position in life is so disadvantaged when compared to yours that you'd feel like a complete ass complaining about your life any longer. Volunteer at a soup kitchen, read to kids on the critical care ward at the hospital, or take a load of old towels to the animal shelter. Get outside yourself and stop worrying about you. Worry about someone else for a change, and see what you can do to make their lot in life a little easier.

We've all got things wrong with us, whether it's an extra-large nose, an extra-large chip on our shoulder, or an extra-large behind. The only difference between those who make it and those who don't is that some of us stop thinking about their faults and do it – hit the homerun, write the best-seller, start a revolution – anyway.

## Five Questions to Stop Asking Yourself #4: How Can I Do This Faster?

*We thought that we had the answers, it was the questions we had wrong. Bono*

Speed is good. Just ask Danica Patrick, FloJo, or Keanu Reeves. But which is worse: Doing the right thing, too slowly, or doing the wrong thing really, really fast? My vote is for the latter. That's why I believe you need to stop asking yourself this question:

### How can I do this faster?

Efficiency in and of itself is not a bad thing. It's highly prized by manufacturing line engineers, train conductors, and Swiss bankers. But just doing something faster doesn't earn you a gold star. In fact, spending resources – even in an efficient manner – on something that doesn't need to be or shouldn't be done at all is more wasteful than taking too long to do the right thing. Not only are you directing valuable money, time, and energy in the wrong direction; you're also falling behind on the things you should be doing.

Think about it this way. You ask your teenage son to get his homework finished. Half an hour later, you check in on him and he says, "No, I didn't do my homework, but I did a great job killing all the zombies in my video game! I was really efficient, too – I've got a tank and a half of gas left!"

Umm... no. Now, not only is it a half-hour later, the homework still isn't done and your son has spent 30 minutes doing a wasteful task really, really well.

Here's when you know efficiency has become an enemy instead of a friend:

- You use efficiency as an avoidance technique to keep from handling the less pleasant, but oh-so-much-more important, tasks. You revamp your website for the umpteenth time, moving the sidebar a fraction of an inch to the right. You did it really, really well... but you should have been working on lining up sales calls for next week.
- You fall into comfort zones of things you do very quickly and very well, failing to recognize that it's the things outside your comfort zone that help move you closer to your goal.
- You keep doing tasks on automatic pilot, even though you could have outsourced them or automated them. After all, it's a no-brainer to sit and feed the copy machine – and you're working, right?

When you find yourself asking, "How can I do this faster?" stop and ask yourself if you should be doing that task at all. Many times, the answer will be no. Then you can let go and get on with your real work – the work that may not be as efficient, but makes a bigger difference in the long run.

## **Five Questions to Stop Asking Yourself #5: Do I Really Have to \_\_\_?**

*It is better to know some of the questions than all of the answers.* James Thurber

Inside of all of us is a three-year-old toddler who likes nothing better than to throw a screaming fit every time someone makes him do something he doesn't want to. It could be skipping dessert, writing the sales presentation, getting to bed at a reasonable hour, or putting the credit card away before buying yet another Eminem CD.

That three-year-old is sulky, whiny, and generally unpleasant, so much so that often we'll give in just so we don't have to listen to him whine anymore. While this technique works in the short run, in the long-term you end up suffering. After all, vegetables are good for you while ice cream seven days a week is not; the sales presentation must get done, you do have to get up early for work, and someone's going to have to pay that credit card bill.

You can tell when you're giving in to this little tyrant when you start asking yourself:

### **Do I really have to \_\_\_?**

When you catch yourself uttering this phrase, it's time for a reality check. Your rebellious streak is rising faster than the national debt, and if you don't keep it in check you're going to pay the price at some point. After all, the piper always wants to be paid – now or later.

It's interesting that one part of our brains knows very well what needs to get done while the other part rejects the whole idea. Without diving too deeply into the psychology of it all, it's easiest to just admit there's part of us that really would prefer to sit on the couch and eat cheese fries than head out for a nice jog around the reservoir. The duality exists, and one way to let your sane side win out is by never letting the little kid have the microphone.

As soon as you start wondering if you really have to go to work, answer that email, create the new web form, it's time for a smackdown. Instead of giving in to the beast and beginning a cost-benefit analysis of letting your diet slide for another day, stop thinking about it. Remember that you're dealing with a 3-year-old, and you cannot reason, outwit, or outsmart him. All you can do is refuse to engage. Remind yourself the decision has already been made, and don't revisit it. Pull the old, "Because I'm the parent, that's why." Then send him to bed without any supper and get on with your life.

## **Conclusion**

*For true success ask yourself these four questions: Why? Why not? Why not me? Why not now?* James Allen

Questions are powerful tools, but they can steer you off track. It's critical to examine the questions you ask to see if you're empowering yourself or limiting your ability to think creatively.

Many of these internal discussions are automatic: We don't even realize they're going on. Hopefully this short report will help you bring these internal dialogs into the light, where you can judge their usefulness.

Many people spend their lives "living the questions," as Rainer Maria Rilke put it so eloquently. May all your questions be empowering ones.