

5 Questions – How are you doing?

Turning the weakest question into a powerful connection

After the inspirational TED talk and the personal impact of the emotionally charged key speaker the question often lingers, ‘great, but what do I actually do?’ The **5 Questions** are a response to that conundrum. It was designed, tested and shared as a principled ‘doing’ technique that helps minimise anxiety and increases clarity through coaching as its predominant technique.

In the Spring of 2020 it was becoming clear that COVID19 was about to challenge healthcare leadership in a way never before experienced. This event was different to other crisis moments we have faced. The road traffic accident, the cyberattack, the terrorist atrocity. In those moments we throw everything we have at the immediate demand and within a few days, when everything has settled, we take stock - we debrief, offer support to our teams, learn lessons and move on, we go back to normal. **This was not that crisis.**

In reality of course that model was nested in a climate that was not serving all our teams as well as it could. That culture was experiencing low morale and engagement, high levels of bullying and harassment and poor diversity and inclusion. All was not rosy. Leadership remained at the heart of these challenges and the ability to create and sustain healthy relationships within a principled process while delivering high quality compassionate services continues to be the goal.

Lots has been said and lots has been done – more will be said and more will be done. We have been working hard making progress on culture and leadership but it has been slow and rather underwhelming. As big projects are undertaken the role of daily healthy leadership remains pivotal and returning to the idea that leadership is a verb, it is a ‘doing’ the 5 Questions emerge as a clear, principled ‘doing’.

Healthy leadership is a rhythm that understands the ‘doing’ and that rhythm cascades through teams. From the forming of effective teams, to communication, planning, prioritising, performance, climate, learning and well-being the rhythm is relentless. It cannot be ‘put on hold’ and does not respond well when ranked as important or not important. The 5 Questions emerged and were developed with these principles in mind.



HWE Healthy Leadership Rhythm

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Visible leadership – maintain contact
Valuing their opinion – truly listen
Action – keep your promises – regular feedback
Reward praise & care for hygiene factors.
Autonomy – they own and act.
Trust – allow them to get on with getting on
Care – time is a precious resource - be present

Rhythm Principles

There is nothing new in these principles and they reflect the ideas of 'Compassionate Leadership', 'Coaching as an Approach to Leadership', Collaborative Leadership' and other e modern organisational concepts.

The British Psychological Society and the Kings Fund produced papers at the start of 2020 that built upon already strong principles and while their intent was to offer support as our organisations enter the COVID19 crisis the principles remained, as principles should, intact. The 5 Questions are therefore not a COVID19 specific response but a manifestation of coaching, compassionate and collective leadership.

How do the 5 Questions work?

For principles to be effective they need to be lived, role modelled and experienced. This requires people to establish connections and at its most basic the tool is a connection.

The regular rhythm of these connections allow trust, culture and clarity to develop and those emerging healthy relationship remove uncertainty, increase support and tackle anxiety.



As we accept the rhythmic nature of the '5 Questions' in a 'Healthy Leadership Rhythm' understanding the way each element works matters in ensuring contextual and personalised versions serve individuals, teams and services.

How Are You Doing?

- We ask this all the time, it is almost our standard greeting, it is an alternative to 'hello'.
- Most people respond with 'fine thanks, how are you?' This question only has validity if your intent is to be truly interested in how others are doing...
- This exchange is a chance for you to share something with them, to be honest, and demonstrate who you are, what you are engaged in and that you care.
- It provides a follow up question.
- It does not have to be 'How Are You Doing?' it could be any warm and curious opening, 'Morning, how are you?' and other variations.
- Move swiftly onto better questions...

How Are Your Team Doing?

- By asking this you offer people a chance to talk in the third person – often a safer place when exploring difficult and unclear moments.
- It also reminds people they are part of a team and gets them to think about others and discover that their experiences may not be unique
- Third party is a safe language to answer question 1 – first person disguised as third person
- Facts, myths, emotions and barriers are explored and a deeper conversation is taking place.
- That connection to others and having your voice and feelings expressed and heard is important.
- Use your judgement – ask exploring and better questions.

How Are Your Colleagues Doing?

- This question allows people to offer a wider perspective – the nurse might offer insight into how the doctors are coping, Ward A might share a story about Ward B.
- We are part of a bigger team – we are not alone – we are all in this together
- This is the place to connect to ‘why’ of our work and be hugely curious about what others are experiencing.
- At this time useful exchanges are taking place and both parties are showing an interest, and accepting their role, in wider groups of people.
- As you become more confident with this rhythm you might find the confidence to ask the invisible sixth question **‘How do you think I am doing?’**
- **Use your own judgement – ask better questions**

The **‘How Are You Doing?’** question is simply the opener. Many people respond with ‘fine’ as they assess whether you really are interested, concerned and have the time to invest in listening. It is the establishing, quickly and comfortably, of a connection. Move on, be curious.

‘How Is Your Team Doing?’ creates a wider relationship, people are not alone, they are connected to others. It offers the opportunity to create a sense of belonging. In welcoming third party statements it creates a safe language and space. Honesty and authenticity will grow so be comfortable with that cultural and relationship development being a process. Expanding the conversation with **‘How Are Your Colleagues Doing?’** connects people and teams to the wider activity of the service. Clarity can be sought and offered on what is taking place as well as how we are undertaking our work. Maintain the connection to purpose and undertake with principles – why we exist?.

As confidence and understanding of the technique grows the personalisation of questions demonstrate competence and contextual awareness. Always be mindful of the purpose, principles and the reason this technique requires the stepping process from opening exchange to meaningful dialogue.

The move to question 4 is where we start to appreciate actions. The fundamental principle here is that we have established a coaching space. The previous exchange created a space in which confidence and trust in individuals and teams is high and a resistance to 'fix things' establishes a climate in which people recognise the power they have to influence and change. You cannot 'empower' others but through coaching you can create a climate where autonomy grows as control diminishes.

What Can You Do To Help Them?

- When events are urgent and fast moving it is helpful if people feel they can act, they are responsible for events, they have some things they can control, they have responsibilities and are supported in taking action.
- Loss of control, mistrust in information, not being clear what to do next, being uncertain of who they can contact all provide opportunities for increased anxiety. Here these issues can be addressed.
- This question creates the opportunity to establish a climate where people can themselves become empowered. Empowered to support others but also to take on and own actions. When people are helping others they feel good about that act and good about themselves.
- In this moment you have not dismissed their concerns but you have developed strategies in which they can act – you cannot take on all the issues, fix all their problems – in encouraging them to help others they are helping themselves.
- **This is the moment for coaching to be your leadership approach**
- **Ask great, challenging, supportive questions**

This is the coaching space and within it better questions emerge.

- What challenges are you facing at moment?
- What one thing would you do differently?
- What one thing can you choose to change?
- How can you help your colleagues?
- What working well for you and the team?
- What do you find rewarding in your work?
- How are you taking care of you?
- What are you looking forward to?
- What worries or frustrates you?
- What matters to you?

Example Questions



While 'Coaching' is the style of leadership used within this technique the role is a leadership role. You are immersed in their issues and you have an opportunity to both utilise those coaching processes but also to act independently.

What Can We Do To Help You?

- You care for your people and your colleagues. This question tangibly demonstrates that. You care for them, they know you are there and you want to support them.
- Actions may emerge but you may also get some feedback. Be honest in this moment because, just like them, some things you have control of and some things you don't.
- If you leave the exchange with an action – keep your promises and communicate back. If you do they will know - you care, have their best interest at heart, are dependable, reliable, trustworthy, they aren't alone, you have their back.
- Direct them to other supportive services
- **Demonstrate compassion in your leadership**

When things are changing fast, when events are unpredictable and uncertain then anxiety, stress and confusion abound. These are not healthy for our performance. Our staff may be exposed to anxiety and stress over days, weeks and months and the accumulation of such negative emotions is unhealthy. Leadership through coaching, compassion and collaboration is not only a better way to create and sustain relationships but it improves performance and brings 'joy' into the workplace.

No one has a monopoly on good leadership, using this technique can come from anyone at any time, but some of us do have roles and responsibilities that require thought and consideration. Each and every day everyone in the organisation, at whatever level, has a supervisor, team leader, manager or senior – we are also surrounded by hard working colleagues. All of us can establish a healthy leadership rhythm that reduces anxiety and increases clarity. Those two things alone will create quality work environments.

Uncertainty is scary and people are anxious – you are anxious. Communicate with empathy, emphasise they have things they have control over, in all the uncertainty find elements of what is known, be open, be honest, be vulnerable, offer hope, acknowledge their concerns as real and valid, let them know we are in this together, we will be resilient, we will do what we can today and we will figure out more tomorrow.

Taking the time to ask these 5 questions every day means; you are present with your team, tangible actions will emerge for you and for them, they will be heard and you can share experiences, myths can be addressed, new facts shared, they know that you are accessible, they know they are not alone, they know you have their back. Touch base with your people every day, make the time to do this and get into a healthy leadership rhythm – let them know that every day and shift that you care and value them.

So, each and every day, preferably face to face (but use any means you can) check in with your people and colleagues and ask five questions. Spend a few minutes (even if on the phone), the questions encourage more than a cursory greeting. They do not need to take long but they will mean a huge amount. The essential part for leadership is to actively listen and respond with compassion.

Supportive Materials

Video – 100 Seconds – overview of the 5 Questions

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQ12f_hb05A

Video – Education (8mins) how the 5 questions work

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YK4pcfsOlvk>

Kings Fund – Caring to Change – Compassionate Leadership

https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/caring-change?gclid=Cj0KCQjw-uH6BRDQARIsAI3I-UfOizj4vZY1hJ8UP5c3BMBkg3R2REFvMR_Drvn08z6Fu-4ECGIZqAUaArFDEALw_wcB

Kings Fund – Myths on Compassionate Leadership

<https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/blog/2019/05/five-myths-compassionate-leadership#:~:text=loss%20of%20commitment%20to%20purpose,putting%20patients%20and%20communities%20first>

Kings Fund – Compassionate Leadership (COVID19)

<https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/blog/2020/03/covid-19-crisis-compassionate-leadership>

British Psychological Society – psychological needs of healthcare staff

<https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/psychological-needs-healthcare-staff-result-coronavirus-pandemic>

HBR – High performing teams need psychological safety

<https://hbr.org/2017/08/high-performing-teams-need-psychological-safety-heres-how-to-create-it>

HBR – The leaders as Coach

<https://hbr.org/2019/11/the-leader-as-coach>

Active Listening

<https://www.jodymichael.com/blog/improve-leadership-skills-through-active-listening/#:~:text=Improve%20Leadership%20Skills%20Through%20Active%20Listening&text=Healthy%20communication%20between%20leaders%20and,ideas%20and%20provide%20honest%20feedback.>

The importance of understanding why

<https://leaderonomics.com/leadership/the-importance-of-getting-people-to-understand-the-why>

HBR – the relationship between purpose, vision and principles

<https://hbr.org/2014/09/your-companys-purpose-is-not-its-vision-mission-or-values>

HBR – clarity (lack of it is the biggest leadership mistake)

<https://hbr.org/2012/04/the-biggest-mistake-you-probab>

Joy at Work

<https://www.success.com/joy-at-work/>

Further Information and Products

If you would like further information or copies of the products connected to 5 Questions or any of the HWE HCA Leadership Development please do not hesitate to contact:

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