

Powerful Coaching Questions for Leaders

Real questions, used by a real director, with a real team of 80.

Three rounds, six months apart, tested and refined over 18 months of genuine conversations. Plus a bonus set of questions for senior leaders, and a simple way to turn what you hear into real action.

PREPARED BY

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Why This Matters

Having effective one-to-one conversations with team members is one of the most critical, and often missing, skills of leadership. It is also powerful to ask high-level coaching questions of everyone on your team, not just your direct reports.

These conversations:

- Provide the opportunity to connect with and lead each individual
- Provide insight into every team member and the culture
- Provide transparency and accountability across the team
- Demonstrate you care and are focused on more than just delivery
- Acknowledge achievement, strengths and opportunities
- Dissolve doubt and build clarity and certainty
- Build connection, relationships and trust
- Build respect for you as a people leader
- Help maximise an individual's engagement and output
- Help you recognise and identify emerging and top talent

The questions in this guide are the actual questions asked by a director I coached for two years. At the time, she led a team of 80, and throughout those 18 months and beyond, she sat down with every single person, twice a year, and worked through three rounds of these conversations. This is one of many long-term coaching relationships I've built over the years, working with leaders well beyond a single engagement. What you're holding is not theory. It's a tested, real system.

A quick word before you dive in

Read through these questions and you could be forgiven for thinking, I already know to ask my team how they're going. On the surface, they look simple. But the value was never really in the wording. It's in the fact that most leaders don't actually stop to ask, consistently, of everyone, not just the direct reports who happen to cross your path each week. And it's in everything that sits around the questions: the engagement it builds, the perspective you gain, the insight into people you might otherwise rarely hear from at all.

How to Use These Questions

Set the right cadence for your capacity

Twice a year works well for a team of this size, but there is no single right answer. If your team is large, once a year, or 30 minutes instead of an hour, is still genuinely valuable. The point is consistency, not frequency. A shorter conversation that actually happens beats a longer one that keeps getting pushed back.

For some leaders, even that isn't realistic. If sitting down one-to-one with a large number of people simply isn't achievable right now, think outside the one-to-one format. You could pull these questions into a simple written document instead, one person fill in and return, either with their name attached or anonymously. Collected across the team, these responses become a pool of insight you can review in one sitting, giving you the same themes and signals without needing a live conversation with every person. It's a genuinely useful fallback when the ideal format isn't the achievable one.

Hold the space well

- Listen more than you talk. This is their conversation, not a status update for you.
- Create real safety. If people sense it will be used against them, you'll get polished answers, not honest ones.
- Resist the urge to solve or defend in the moment. Just take it in.
- Follow up. If you ask and nothing visibly changes, the exercise loses its power fast.

What to listen for

Individual answers matter, but the real gold is in the pattern across everyone. As you move through your team, notice:

- Recurring frustrations, the same blocker named by several people independently.
- Emerging strengths and talent you may not have clocked yet.
- Engagement signals, energy, tone, what lights someone up versus what drains them.
- Culture patterns, what people say is working and what they quietly avoid saying.
- Development themes, common gaps that point to a team-wide need, not just an individual one.

Leadership Tip

Keep a simple running note as you go, one line per theme per person. You are not trying to remember 80 conversations perfectly. You're trying to spot the shape of the whole team.

The Questions

Below are the actual questions asked by the director, spanning three rounds, six months apart, of conversations with every person in her team.

Round 1

1. How are you?
2. What is your role?
3. Which team are you in?
4. What do you think has gotten in the way of our business area's success in the past?
5. What changes would you like to see?
6. What are your key strengths?
7. What are your key areas for development? What are you working on to address this?
8. What is your view on the culture of our business area?
9. What have you personally done to contribute to a constructive culture?
10. What would you like to see addressed as the number one priority?
11. What do you need from me to be successful and happy in your role?

Round 2

1. How are you? What's keeping you up at night?
2. Have you felt a shift in the last 6 months, any change in direction, expectations, culture?
3. What have you done differently in the last 6 months? What's been your focus? What's next?
4. What have you observed from leadership that we should keep doing, stop doing, or change? What's one thing you want to see that isn't currently happening?
5. What are you hearing from your clients outside of our business area?
6. How do you think we are managing recruitment, secondments and development? What's your feedback?
7. What feedback have you received in the last 6 months?
8. Are you meeting with your manager or team leader regularly? What would the ideal amount of time with them look like for you, and do you feel the time you have now is effective?
9. What self-awareness or professional development have you undertaken in the last 6 months? What's next?
10. What are the key elements of our culture that need more focus?

Round 3

1. How are you? What is keeping you up at night?
2. On a scale of 1 to 10, how do you feel about coming to work each day? Tell me why you gave that score.
3. What do you love about your job?
4. What needs improvement?
5. Do you feel challenged?
6. What has motivated you lately?
7. What have you achieved in the last 6 months?
8. Is there anything impacting your ability to achieve?
9. What are you doing to help in the current focus period?
10. What are you hearing from your clients outside of the business area?
11. If you were me for a day, a week, or a month, what would you do differently?
12. Give me three words to describe: our business area, your manager, me, and three words I'd use to describe you.
13. Anything else you would like to share?

Bonus: Questions for Broader Leadership Conversations

If you're a senior leader in a small to medium business, these questions extend the same thinking to a strategic and team-wide level, useful in leadership team meetings, culture reviews, or your own senior 1:1s.

Strategic Direction

- What's the one thing that, if it didn't happen this year, would put our biggest goal at risk?
- Where are we spending time that no longer matches where we say our priorities are?
- If a competitor could see everything we're doing right now, what would worry them least?
- What would we stop doing tomorrow if we were building this business from scratch today?
- Do you have real clarity on the strategic objectives of the business, and how your team fits into that?
- What's the blind spot for leaders in this business right now, at any level?

Culture & Engagement

- What's something people say quietly to each other but not to leadership?
- Where in the business is trust strongest, and where is it thinnest?
- What behaviour do we say we value that we don't actually reward?
- If someone shadowed us for a week, what would they conclude we actually value?

Growth & Development

- Who on the team is ready for more than we're currently giving them?
- What capability gap will hurt us most in twelve months if we don't address it now?
- What's one thing you learned this year that changed how you lead, perform or show up?
- Who's quietly doing the work of a role above theirs already?
- If you could invest in any course or experience for your own growth, no budget limit, what would it be?
- What's a skill this team will need in two years that almost nobody has today?

Feedback & Communication

- When did you last receive feedback that actually changed what you did?
- What do people need to hear from leadership that they aren't currently hearing?
- Where does information get stuck on its way from the top to the front line?
- How would you rate the quality, not just the frequency, of feedback in this business?
- What's something you've been meaning to say to someone but haven't yet?
- When feedback goes wrong here, what usually causes it?

Legacy & Impact

- What do you want this team to be known for in two years?
- What would you regret not having tackled if you left this role tomorrow?
- What's the difference only you, specifically, are positioned to make right now?
- What's one decision today that our successors will thank us for in five years?
- If this team disappeared tomorrow, what would the business actually miss?
- Looking back on this period in a few years, what's the one thing you'd want people to say we got right?

Turning Insights Into Action

Asking the questions is half the work. What you do with the answers is what actually builds trust, or quietly erodes it if nothing visibly changes.

Feeding it to your leadership team

Share themes, not individual disclosures. Nobody should recognise their own words repeated back verbatim in a leadership meeting, that breaks the trust that made the answers honest in the first place. Instead, aggregate. "Several people across the team raised X" carries the same weight without exposing anyone.

Reporting back to the wider team

Close the loop, even briefly. A short update, "here's what I heard, and here's what we're doing about it," is often the single most powerful part of the whole process. It's the proof that the conversations were real, not a box-ticking exercise.

A simple process

1. Listen, across every conversation, without trying to solve in the moment
2. Look for themes, what keeps coming up, independently, from different people
3. Discuss with your leadership team, aggregated, never individually attributed
4. Decide on one to three actions, small and real beats big and vague
5. Communicate back to the team, plainly, so they know it landed somewhere



About Rachael

I've spent 25 years coaching leaders, and before that I built and sold my own company. I sat on Telstra's top-talent leadership panel, and I designed and led the Department of Transport's Elevate Your Leadership program.

I work with senior leaders who are ready to lead with more clarity, more presence, and less reactivity, and with women in leadership at a genuine turning point, ready to make their next chapter the one that counts.

Elevate Her Leadership

Purpose, Impact, Legacy. If you're a woman in senior leadership feeling the pull to take stock and make the next era genuinely count, this is built for you. Coaching that gets you out of the pool, and into the clarity and energy to lead your next chapter well.

For more information, visit madleaders.com.au or madleaders.com.au/elevate-her-leadership.

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What Clients Say

"Rachael provides exceptional service by way of participant support, program design and continuous improvement. Her passion for leadership and practical approach in building leadership capability is what makes her a brilliant practitioner to work with."

Danielle Fancellu, Senior Organisational Development Consultant, Department of Transport & Planning

"Setting up these key management systems has helped me lead a team of 70 more effectively. It led me to enrol 12 leaders in my team in this program."

Vanessa Nativo, Director Finance Services

"Through coaching sessions with Rachael I have been able to quickly achieve clarity and a sense of purpose around what my goals are. The clarity has provided a sense of relief by taking away the noise."

Kym Myall, Director Risk Assessment and Intelligence, Australian Taxation Office

"I have engaged Rachael's coaching services periodically over the last 5 years. Rachael has a unique and vibrant way in which she engages an audience and individuals to set and achieve goals, and it is always a pleasure working with her."

Donna Durston-McKenna, Head of People & Culture, Very Special Kids

"Just wanted to let you know how much we appreciated your presentation. At our recent breakfast we had a record attendance, and you are the first speaker we have asked back due to such overwhelming interest. The response has been phenomenal."

Kate Wilkins, Member Relations Executive, CPA Australia

"The tools have helped me manage the noise and focus my efforts on the activities that benefit my team and organisation. I delegate better, I communicate better, and I'm more strategic and less reactive."

Malcolm Gibson, Chief Radiographer, Dandenong Hospital, Monash Health

"Your combination of coaching, team coaching and coaching skills training has supported our leadership team to move to the next level. We are more aligned, focused and have a better understanding of how to be effective leaders."

Stuart Draffin, General Manager Planning and Development, City of Stonnington

"Rachael opened my mind to possibilities I hadn't even considered. The sessions helped me explore my values, understand my personal and professional purpose, and be confident I can make the right choices."

Charles Boorman, Program Planning Specialist, VicRoads

"The coaching, enthusiasm and insight Rachael provided throughout my journey has not only enabled me to discover a great deal about myself, but more importantly made me conscious and able to refocus on how I can progress positive change."

John Karabatsos, Manager IT Market Interface Solutions, Australian Energy Market Operator