

How Leaders Lead Post-Pandemic: Explore Mysteries More than Solve Puzzles



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The post-pandemic era has arrived or will soon come. Many offer insights on the new normal for the world of work: hybrid work settings, digitally-enabled work processes, and agile organizational actions. We are somewhat hesitant to predict a new normal given the incredible uncertainty of the 2020–2021 crises where few would have predicted the pandemic, civic injustice, economic granularity, political discord, emotional disorders, or other challenges.

We also recognize that this people/organization mélange of crises provides an opportunity for significant transformation of the human capital agenda for talent, leadership, organization, and HR.

Since we are in the business of observing, studying, and advising leaders, we want to help leaders better lead while they may not clearly know the context (e.g., hybrid, digital, agile, etc.) in which they do so. With others, we have crafted lists of leadership skills that may help leaders lead, but how do leaders apply these skills when a new normal is not predictable? The ability to lead from a position of not knowing will be the leadership differentiator for the future.

Often people turn to their leaders to find answers to organization questions: What is our organization's purpose (vision, mission, strategy, goals)? How do we deliver on this purpose (ensure accountability, teamwork, change processes)? How do we help our people do their

best (build competence, commitment, and experience)? How do we create the right culture to help our organization succeed in the marketplace?

Post pandemic logistical puzzles grab leaders' attention, but perhaps in the unknowable future, leaders will be **less** often tasked with answering these urgent questions and **more** challenged with asking the right questions. [As thoughtful colleagues point out](#), asking thoughtful questions often:

- Shape agendas more than providing smart answers does.
- Increase rather than limit possibilities.
- Engage others in discovering options.
- Allow for continuous learning and adaptation.

Leadership curiosity or the ability to explore options and ask good questions may be more important than total clarity in an unknowable normal. Exploring options or mysteries may be the path to wisdom and insight rather than intellectual cleverness, problem-solving, or question answering.

Adapting [Gregory Treverton's](#) thoughtful distinction between puzzles and mysteries (and [Malcolm Gladwell's](#) use of this typology), we suggest that leadership puzzle-questions are out to find clarity or a right answer; however, leadership questions born out of curiosity raise alternatives. Crossword puzzles have a solution that requires problem-solving ability, and for those who are the best puzzle solvers, they learn the methods, short-cuts, and techniques. Curiosity leads to inquiry into mysteries that cannot always be solved but can be explored in order to make progress.

Post-pandemic leadership may be more about anthropology and curiosity rather than analytics and solutions. Let us summarize in figure 1 how leaders can be more oriented to curiosity rather than clarity.

	Leaders as Puzzle Solvers	Leaders as Mystery Explorers
Required when	Solution is known	No one solution exists
Primary agenda	Solve problems; be good at clarity	Generate options; be more curious; gain engagement
Approach to action	Set direction with confidence; focus on finding answers; set targets	Share problems to co-create direction; focus on process of sifting options
Use of information	Rely on analytics skills to access and test data	Rely on anthropology skills to observe and make hypotheses
Starts with	Content: what needs to happen	Context: why do things need to happen
Use of power	Demonstrate power by getting things done	Empower others to share in how things are done
Deals with ambiguity	Resolve uncertainty; reduce ambiguity	Harness uncertainty; embrace the unknown
Emphasis	Detect how to resolve a challenge	Guide future events by changing patterns
Approach to problem solving	Solve paradoxes by seeking the right solution	Navigate paradoxes by accepting and living with tension
People perspective	People are primarily a resource	People are part of a social and organizational system
Personal drivers	Create certainty downwards	Encourage expression of doubt upwards
Capability is created by	Training; process; techniques	Collaboration; teams; crossing boundaries

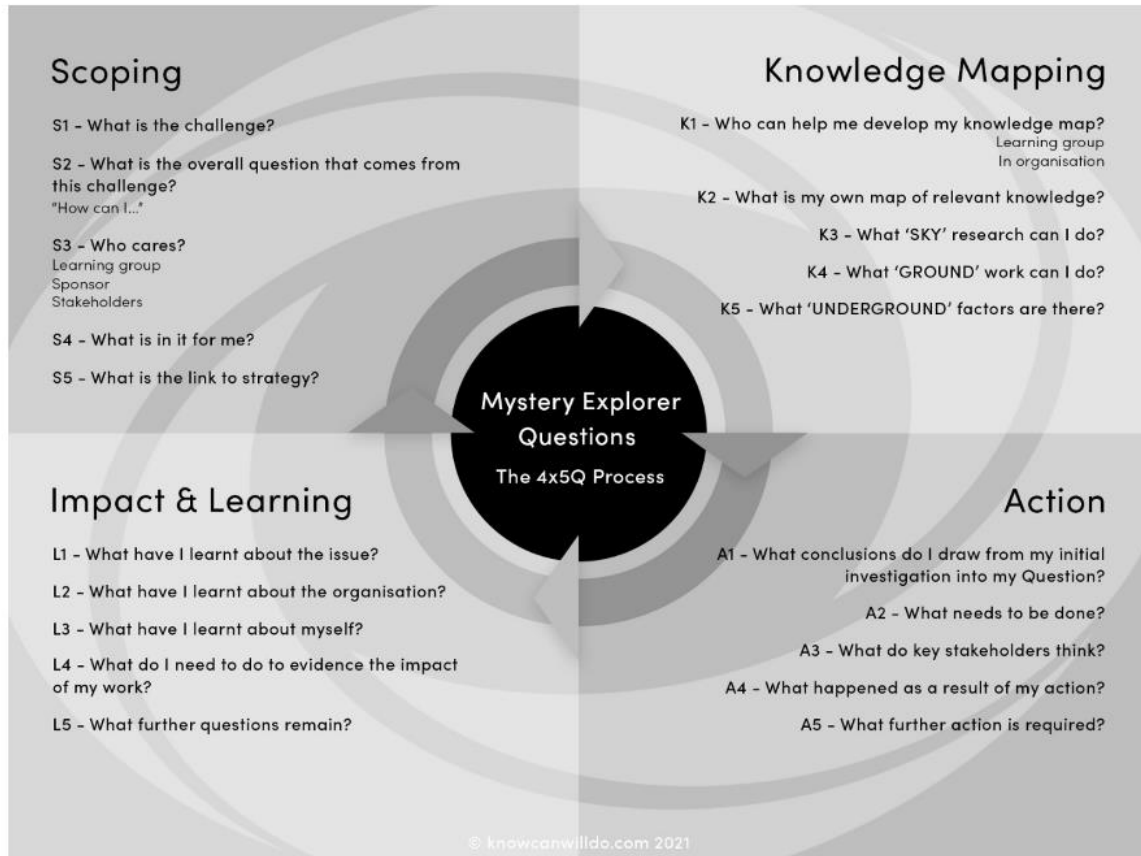
Asking the Right Leadership Questions

To help leaders become mystery explorers through increasing curiosity, we suggest a typology for asking the right questions (see figure 2). This can be used collaboratively with teams working on strategic or organizational transformation challenges.

- Scoping questions emphasize the context of the leadership challenge (e.g., defining a purpose, creating a plan for execution, enabling employees, building the right culture).
- Knowledge mapping identifies those with information to respond to leadership challenges.
- Action refers to possible steps forward.
- The impact and learning area ensure a cycle of continuous improvement.

For each of these four categories, we have proposed five questions that leaders might ask to demonstrate curiosity and to emphasize exploring mysteries more than solving puzzles (see figure 2).

Figure 2:
Questions to Discover the Future: The 4x5Q Process



Case Study of Leadership through Questions

A leading care sector organization faced significant transformational challenges. Its reputation was based on human values and care for the elderly in its homes and communities. However, the introduction of new technologies had lagged behind innovations in the market. Multi-site locations led by local leaders had developed multiple different practices and systems. The CEO wanted to drive streamlined, sustainable transformation that would extend beyond simply digitizing the business. Executives recognized an opportunity to use the 4x5Q typology to drive this change and help leaders simultaneously develop their leadership capability.

Leaders were grouped into teams and briefed by an executive on the three-year business plan. They then scoped a leadership question to research and address over a six-month period. Questions ranged from the more strategic (“How can I understand the changing market for later life care and use this intelligence to influence future strategies?”) to the more operational (“How can I engage my team to embrace the introduction of new technologies to support our service delivery?”)

Team members supported each other as they developed their research inquiry, which was conducted both within the business and externally. This meant leaders had to commit time and effort to such future-focused leadership challenges despite the reactive challenges of supporting residents and staff through and beyond the most demanding of times due to the

pandemic. The process of asking questions increased variety and helped this company make progress.

Conclusion

No one doubts that leaders matter in emerging from the 2020–2021 crises. To become effective, leaders in this unknowable normal need to move beyond solving puzzles to exploring mysteries by being curious. The question framework we offer may help leaders lead into the future.

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