Ask More: The Power of Questions to Open Doors, Uncover Solutions, and Spark Change
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Excerpt
Chapter One
Why Ask?

Smart questions make smarter people. We learn, connect, observe, and invent through the questions we ask. We push boundaries and we discover secrets. We solve mysteries and we imagine new ways of doing things. We ponder our purpose and we set our sights. We hold people accountable. We live generously, to paraphrase John F. Kennedy, by asking not what others can do for us, but what we can do for them. Curiosity can open our minds and captivate our imaginations.

But the fact is, most of us don’t really understand how questions work—or how to make them work for us. In school we study math and science, literature and history. At work we learn about outcomes and metrics, profit and loss. But never do we study how to ask questions strategically, how to listen actively or how to use questions as a powerful tool toward accomplishing what we really want to achieve.

Questions—asked the right way, under the right circumstances—can help you achieve both short-term and lifelong goals. They can open doors to discovery and success, bring you closer to a loved one, and even uncover answers to the universe’s most enduring mysteries. Insightful questions help you connect with a stranger, impress a job interviewer or entertain at your next dinner party, and they can be the keys to a happier, more productive and fulfilling life.

This book will show you what you get when you ask for it. In each chapter I will explore a different type of question, driven by its own approach and listening skills. By the end of the book, you’ll be able to recognize what to ask and when, what you should listen for, and what you can expect as the outcome. Each chapter offers stories and looks at the genre through remarkable people who have used questions to motivate, and excel.

For nearly four decades it’s been my job to ask questions. From an inner city school to a technology revolution, from the Brandenburg Gate where a president said, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” to the inauguration of the first African American president, I have had the privilege of being there – watching, listening and asking. I’ve interviewed world leaders who shaped history and heroes who dedicated themselves to the poor and the disabled. I’ve questioned avowed racists and the richest man in the world. As a journalist and interviewer, I
have been enriched by these experiences and privileged to share them publicly – on CNN, NPR and other media, and in front of live audiences. Now I teach college students how to ask to get information, to find the facts, to hold the powerful to account and to create revealing moments for the world to see.

As my fascination with inquiry has grown, I’ve become increasingly alarmed about the questions we ask – or don’t ask – in public and daily life. Technology has revealed endless horizons, but it has also created a quick-hit, search-engine culture where a fast answer can obscure deeper inquiry. The polarization of politics, amplified by social media, has fractured civic discourse and infused it with invective instead of dialogue. The news media, reflecting and reinforcing these trends, have grown shorter and sharper. Sincere questions too often play second fiddle to certainty, ideology, and outrage. But what if we asked more and asserted less? What would we discover? How much better would we understand the people around us? What if we went asking for solutions and posed truly creative questions that could change the world?