



AN INTERVIEW WITH

Frank Sesno

ASKING QUESTIONS LEADS THE WAY FORWARD

BY CHRISTIANE TRUELOVE

Author and journalist Frank Sesno spoke with *AMA Quarterly* about his book *Ask More: The Power of Questions to Open Doors, Uncover Solutions, and Spark Change* (AMACOM, 2017). He discussed how executives and managers especially can benefit from using the right questioning techniques to tackle the most difficult aspects of employee evaluations. Sesno is director of the School of Media and Public Affairs at the George Washington University.

Frank Sesno is an Emmy Award-winning journalist and creator of PlanetForward.org, a user-driven web and television project that highlights innovations in sustainability. His diverse career spans more than three decades, including 21 years at CNN, where he served as White House correspondent, anchor, and Washington bureau chief. Sesno has covered a diverse range of subjects, from politics and conventions to international summits and climate change. He has interviewed five U.S. presidents and thousands of political, business, and civic leaders—ranging from Hillary Clinton and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Microsoft founder Bill Gates and broadcast legend Walter Cronkite.

What inspired you to write this book?

FS: What inspired me to write this book was a number of things—being a questioner myself, doing it for a living, doing it with people from all walks of life, and seeing around me how much was left on the table because others didn't ask questions. When I was at CNN, a senior executive joined the company, and I watched him ask no questions as he arrived. Ultimately, he was not successful. I have been on boards of trustees and I have covered presidents. And thinking about leadership, I've found that when you don't ask questions, you don't find stuff out.

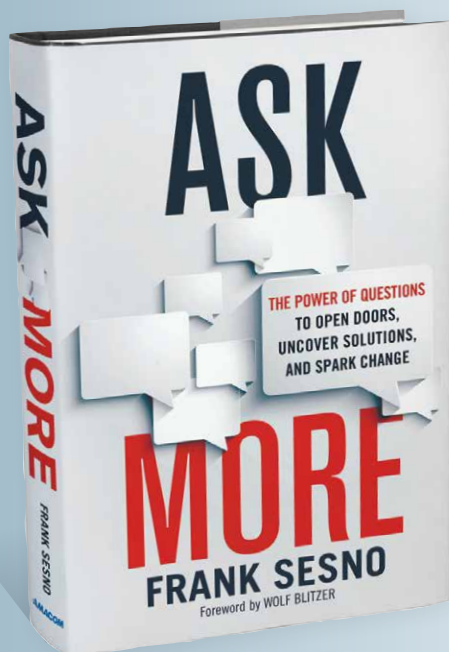
So what I wanted to do was come up with a more coherent approach. I came up with categories of questions. But

really, the reason why I wrote [the book] was because I've found that if people don't ask, they don't know. If they don't ask, they don't have an opportunity to listen. And if they don't listen, they don't learn.

My observation is, I've done this for a living, but I see around me so many opportunities for people to go so much deeper on so many different levels. That's what I wanted to share.

Fear seems to be the biggest barrier to asking questions. How do you tackle that?

FS: You have to ask permission. That's one of the things that I hope comes across in the book—that is, the act of



If You Want the Right Answer, Learn to Ask the Right Questions

BY FRANK SESNO

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 opens our minds and captivates 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

asking permission really creates a dramatically different experience. That asking permission comes in different ways. For example, there is a therapist in my book. People make an appointment to go see her. They grant permission by making the appointment, and therefore they open up.

When I interview someone on the air—or when someone goes on the air with Terry Gross, who is another one of the questioners that I interviewed for the book—they grant permission by saying, “Yes, I want to come out and I want to sit in front of a microphone.”

All of my students, when they sat down and did an oral history with family members, each one of them learned something profound about a family member in that process, and it was really because they asked permission. They made an appointment to talk with that family member and ask them questions about their lives. So I think one of the most important elements is that granting of permission. David Isay is in the book, and he started this thing called StoryCorps. StoryCorps is where two people sit in a recording booth and one interviews the other. They wind up having this remarkable conversation—and it’s that granting of permission [that makes it possible].

So the first thing, when bridging these fear divides, is that granting of permission. “May I ask you about this?” “How about if we have a chat about this next week?” “Let’s talk about where you’re going with your career.” That process is immensely helpful.

You’ve asked the hard questions, but you’re not getting the answers you require. How do you shape your questioning technique to get down to the nitty-gritty when the person you keep asking the questions of keeps dodging?

FS: As I point out in the book, there are different categories of questioning, and to know them comes in handy. We were talking a moment ago about the questions people may be fearful to ask—finding out your neighbor has cancer or something like that. That’s when making an appointment makes a big difference. When you ask those questions, you’re asking to draw someone out, and you’re listening for their emotions and their fears and their feelings.

What you’re talking about, and I have a chapter on this, is confrontational questioning, when the person is going to clam up. They are not responsive, they view you in a hostile manner, and they’re not going to cooperate. I’ve had this many times when I’ve interviewed political leaders and presidents, and you have to ask four or five times. You know that you may not get an answer, and that you may really annoy your subject. But what you have to decide is, what are you after? One of the themes in my book is outcomes. So if you’re asking me about questioning someone who’s not going to cooperate—they are a public person and this is something that’s going to take place in public—that’s one thing. Then you question for the record. You can ask three or four or five times. If they don’t answer, there’s not much

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.

My book *Ask More: The Power of Questions to Open Doors, Uncover Solutions, and Spark Change* shows you what you get when you ask for it. In each chapter I 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. Compared to when I got into the business, television interviewers are given less time and focus more on controversy and horse race than on explanation and substance. 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?

you can do—except you've exposed them. And that's very important.

But if you are talking to your kid or an employee in a private session, and they won't answer? You ask in multiple ways, each question drawing on what preceded it, trying to zero in on what was avoided in the question preceding it.

Our issue theme is performance evaluation. In that setting, how do you give feedback about the other person in a way that they will accept?

FS: That's always interesting and challenging. Well, the first thing is, turn it into a question. A lot of people will want to go into a performance evaluation with a statement: You didn't do this, you didn't do that, why were you late, etc. But the first step, in my view, is to turn statements into questions and draw that other person out. "What did you do well?" "Where are your strengths?" "What are your weaknesses?" In fact, don't even ask about weaknesses, because the wording really matters. If you ask "Where were your weaknesses?" that very question assumes a negative frame. Ask "What were the things that you would most like to change?" or "Where were the areas where you feel you most want to grow?" Or, "What were the areas that frustrated you the most?"

Regarding the whole notion of drawing people out and getting them to talk about it, there's another section of the book where I talk about questions without question marks.

This is a very important area; questions without question marks applies to this space. They're bridging questions, when you're talking with someone who is on edge or wary. That totally describes a job performance evaluation. The question without a question mark is, "Tell me more. Tell me about it."

If there is a performance issue, you can make the observation or you could ask the person about the area of performance that was lacking or lagging. Then ask them to "Tell me why that is. Tell me how you are feeling. Tell me what you think you'd do to address that."

In the empathy chapter [of the book], I talk a lot about body language and listening. In performance evaluations, especially when there are issues, even as you're presenting this to the other person—unless you're trying to fire them on the spot—if you're going to have a productive conversation, you want to be sure that the person feels you are listening and that you're trying to understand where they come from. Even if there are problems. And so, make them feel with your body language and voice tone that you are listening. You want the observation to come from the other individual as much as possible. And you can guide them with questions.

What was the most difficult interview you've ever done?

FS: Well, there were a couple of them. One of them was with Margaret Thatcher, because [she] challenged the

A student convinced me I should write this book.

Simone (I've changed her name) had arranged to interview her father—I'll call him Morley—for an assignment I had given my Art of the Interview class. A devoted family man, Morley kept his emotions to himself and was not prone to reflection. At first he refused. "Go find someone else," he told his daughter. But Simone persisted, and finally her father agreed to the interview, camera and all.

Simone had questions she always wanted to ask. Morley had issues he never wanted to discuss. They sat facing each other in the den, a place both of them knew well. Simone started with some innocuous open-ended questions, a classic interviewing technique. She asked about her father's college days and how he met his wife, Simone's mother. When Morley seemed more relaxed, Simone asked the question she'd been thinking about for a long time.

"Before I was born a child passed away," she said. "Can you tell me what happened?" For more than 20 years, the family had faithfully commemorated the child's birthday, but they had never really talked about what happened.

"She was born premature," Morley said. "She lived for about a day and a half. Her lungs hadn't fully formed. That created a series of other problems." He paused. Then came the secret he'd

never told anyone, not even his own parents.

"Your mom and I decided that we would disconnect her from life support." His voice trailed off. He swallowed hard, trying to stay in control.

Simone kept going. "Was it a difficult decision? How did you and mom handle that?" Her father teared up. So did she.

Morley's words came slowly. "At the time it was very hard.... It was probably hardest to see some of our friends with kids at that time." Another pause. "But those experiences shape you." He looked at his daughter. He saw a beautiful and smart young woman—his legacy and his love. Still emotional, Morley told her she wouldn't be alive if that terrible event had not occurred.

Simone's head was spinning. To learn the details was difficult enough, but to see her strong, unshakable father so upset revealed a vulnerability she had never seen.

"I understand now, after what he had been through, why I meant so much to him," she told me later. "I understand why he has always made such an effort to spend time with me, to be there for important events in my life, to tell me how proud he is of me. Now when he gives me a hug I don't pull away as quickly. When I miss his call I make sure to try him back right away."

Simone uncovered a deep secret, discovered a different side of

premise of the question. Very few people will do that. If Margaret Thatcher didn't like the question, she'd ask you why you were stupid, what a naïve question, what a stupid question. Her whole demeanor was to put the questioner on edge, put the questioner on the defensive. That was very difficult because one must be completely prepared for an interview such as that. Even though I was very prepared, I was not prepared for her to go on the attack like that, the way she did.

The other very difficult interview that I did, which is in the book, was with Yasser Arafat, where not only was he not going to answer the question but he was also prepared to act erratically and irrationally in front of a live audience and cameras. And he nearly walked out of the interview. That's in the chapter on confrontation. I knew I was going to ask him a confrontational question, and I knew he was going to be confrontational in response. But I underestimated just how confrontational and how awkward it could be. I was even in a more awkward position because I was sort of half journalist, half gracious host, because I was doing this at a live event and was supposed to be facilitating conversation, not foreclosing it.

Another very difficult interview I had to do was with David Duke, who you know is back in the news. He was running for governor of Louisiana, and yet I knew full well his past as grand wizard of the KKK. So I really had to think hard about what kind of interview I was going to do. Was I going

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her dad, and changed the way she related to her father simply because she asked. More, much more, than an oral history came from her questions.

And so I began to explore the power of questions in their different forms.

I talked to dozens of people, master questioners if you will, to understand how they used questions in their lives and professions and to see what we could learn from them. The inquiry teachers in this book comprise some of the most fascinating and successful people I've met, some famous and some not so famous. The arc of their lives has been assisted by their ability to question the people and the world around them.

The book begins with a problem. If you've ever confronted something that's gone wrong, with time running out, you know that asking the right questions can make the difference between a good call and a catastrophic mistake. Chapter 2 introduces you to people who diagnose problems for a living: a nurse-practitioner in Appalachia, a renowned corporate turnaround artist, and my neighbor, the roofer. They're all experts at asking questions to pinpoint a problem so they can fix it. You'll see how you can zero in, listen hard, and draw on experience and instinct.

Chapter 3, “The General's Charge,” shows you how to stand back and think big when the stakes are high and the outcome

is unclear. Strategic questions ask about choices, risks, and consequences. They force you to challenge conventional wisdom and your own biases. They lead to better, clearer thinking and better planning when you're weighing big decisions. As General Colin Powell explained to me, great strategic questions can inform the hardest decisions, just as failing to ask the right questions can lead to disaster.

If you want to connect with someone, you will see how the experts do it as you read Chapter 4, “From the Inside Out.” Empathetic questions can bring you closer to people you know or have just met. These questions help you become a better friend, colleague, partner, or family member. They lead to deeper understanding and discovery. You'll hear from a family therapist, a Harvard professor who teaches empathy, and from one of the best interviewers in America, NPR's Terry Gross.

Want to know a secret, maybe a dangerous one? In Chapter 5 you'll learn how careful, patient questioning can build a bridge to someone who doesn't want to talk to you. These bridging questions reach out to people who are wary, distrustful, and even hostile. You'll see how an expert in Dangerous Threat Assessment uses them to solve difficult, and sometimes volatile, human puzzles. He asks questions without question marks. Understanding how this is done will help you communicate, if not with terrorists, then at least with teenagers.

to do a really tough, accusatory interview that dwelled on his past? Or was I going to do a more informational interview that sought to determine how his past influenced what he actually wanted to do as governor if he won and was responsible for the laws of the state?

What was the upshot of that? Did he become confrontational?

FS: I did. I'm actually trying to work up a piece on how to cover President Trump.... I feel that no one in public life can divorce themselves from their past, especially if their past is very public and very outspoken. You don't get a chance to say "never mind." And so, the questions you ask in a situation like that, if done right, will bridge the past with the future. They will hold you accountable for the past, while also granting enough space for some degree of evolution presumably and for respectful questions about how you will run the future. But I was tough on him. My question to him was, "How can someone who has made comments that are directly racist and anti-Semitic deserve a shot at an office such as this?" So that was a very tough interview.

And then I would say that there are many personal conversations I've had that are very tough, like with my mother's doctors when she had her cancer.... You try and talk to these guys, and they won't open up. And when they do, they won't really answer your questions. They don't answer them in a holistic way.... I've talked to people who have developed, for this very reason, a three-page list of

the kinds of things to ask doctors and to come back at them on: What are the options? What are the consequences? What are the different side effects of a particular medication? What is the trendline of a particular disease and what can we expect? There are literally pages of these questions, because if you don't ask with that degree of precision, chances are nobody is going to offer you the information. You basically become an advocate through your questioning....

In most cases, getting back to how to ask questions, are people able to be an advocate for their position? In view of the election, there have been a lot of complaints about how the media failed to ask the right questions.

FS: I think the danger is when the question mark starts to fade away and people start to become more assertive and curious. My read of the media coverage of this campaign is that there were conclusions drawn—that Donald Trump was untenable, that Hillary Clinton was ahead in the polls in all the states that mattered, that certain things were inevitable. They didn't ask the right questions about what her weaknesses were, about what his strengths were, about how powerfully people felt about "Trumpland." They didn't ask and translate for the wider electorate the experiences that were going on out there. Certainly in the cable world, it was more about assertion than anything else. It was the argument culture again.

"If you want to get creative juices really flowing, ask people to imagine, to set their sights high, to pretend gravity doesn't exist."

And if no bridge can be built? Chapter 6 will show you how you can use confrontational questions to hold people accountable for what they've done or said. While this kind of inquiry is often unpleasant, as I once discovered in a bizarre encounter, it does establish a record. Know what you're after, as Anderson Cooper explains. Be prepared for the consequences, as Jorge Ramos recounts. But as you will see, if you have the courage of your convictions, know what you're talking about, and can ask with precision, you can be a more formidable adversary.

How many times have you heard that you should think outside the box, be original, and take a chance? In Chapter 7 you'll realize you can get there through questions, not commands. If you want to get creative juices really flowing, ask people to imagine, to set their sights high, to pretend gravity doesn't exist. What

do California Lieutenant Governor and former San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom and Hollywood television series creator Ed Bernero have in common? They both use questions to transport people to a place where they cannot fail.

In Chapter 8, "The Solvable Problem," you'll see how you can create a sense of purpose and mission through your questions and inspire people to pitch in, or maybe even write a check. You'll meet Karen Osborne, who has raised millions of dollars, and Rick Leach, who wants to feed the world. You can borrow from their approach to become your own pied piper. You'll discover surprising ways to improve listening, set common goals, and take concrete action.

Chapter 9 ventures into the unknown and the unexplained to see how scientific questions can solve the mysteries of the world. You will meet the doctor-researcher who threw himself at HIV/AIDS and Ebola when people were dying and the public was in panic. You'll also find inspiration and ideas you can apply in your own life.

Next come the money questions. You're trying to fill a job. You want the job. What you ask tests your compatibility and, just maybe, predicts the future. Chapter 10 shows you how these questions get asked—from both sides. You'll meet a CEO who goes for the team approach and a technology veteran who just might ask about your favorite aisle in the supermarket.

So the most important thing for journalists and for the public, in engaging their leaders, is to constantly play the role of healthy skeptic and not jaded cynic. A healthy skeptic is constantly asking, “Well, what are you going to do about this? How are you going to do it? What are the alternatives? What are the costs? What are the consequences? How are you going to build the political coalition?”

Getting back to the confrontational interview, how would you advise employers who are trying to interview employees who are confrontational about their evaluations? How can they be approached in a productive manner?

FS: That’s my bridge-building chapter. If an employee is going to be confrontational, if you confront them you’ll end up in a stalemate. That doesn’t work if you are actually going to be working with someone going forward. So I would recommend the bridge-building chapter for that one, where you’re dealing with someone who is hostile, who is wary, who is suspicious.... If you’re a manager and you have an employee, and the employee is in confrontational mode, you have to get them out of this mode so that they can listen. You want to get them out of the confrontational mode so that they can understand what’s at stake, what they need to do to address their own performance issues and get back on the team. It’s about getting them talking, getting them to open up. If a manager says “Here are the five things you need to do” and just shoves you out the door,

especially if it’s in a tense or confrontational relationship, the chances are pretty low that you’re going to have success there.

You have to get that person to understand what they need to do. I would argue that you do that through a series of questions. In terms of asking them, do they understand what the issues are? Explain the situation. The manager can actually pose questions to the employee as to what that employee would do to address the situation, what options are available to the employee. Does the employee understand that they are an outlier in this particular area? Does the employee understand that these issues are getting in the way of that employee’s advancement in the company? You get the employee to discuss this. You get the employee, through the questions that you, the manager, ask, to identify his or her own frustrations, weaknesses, and areas that they want to address.

Then you start laying out, again through questions, what are the options, what [do they think] are the best ways to approach this? “How can I help you?” asks the manager. So through the questions, the employee is the one coming up with answers, the one who’s articulating, literally putting into words, both the performance issues and some of the ways to improve them. That gives that person authorship.

That’s why we have goal agreements, because if the employee captures the goals, it’s more meaningful than if the manager just hands them to the employee. [AQ](#)

Entertaining questions can turn your boring dinner into a theater of wit and ideas and provocative conversation. Be your own talk show host. In Chapter 11, you’ll learn ways to draw out memorable dialogue and keep the conversation moving, using ideas from one of the most engaging and curious people I’ve ever met. Invite Socrates to supper—if you dare. Serve this recipe at your next meal and you’ll have everyone talking.

Finally, what does it all mean? Chapter 12 asks legacy questions that reveal your life story and craft an uplifting narrative of accomplishment and gratitude. These questions from the edge will help you step back and take stock of what you have done and the people you have known. Here, you meet the rabbi who gets asked about God’s intentions and read the curious words of a 25-year-old who questions her future. I introduce you to one of the bravest people I’ve ever met.

At the back of the book, I provide a guide that summarizes the question categories and their component parts, with a few ideas you can try to become a more effective questioner.

This book is not prescriptive. It doesn’t tell you how to ask in every situation. But it does offer examples that demonstrate the power of questions and the benefits of deep, nuanced listening. The categories reflect a range of curiosity. As you will see, each enlists different asking skills in search of distinct outcomes. Humans are built to be curious, that much is in our DNA. This

book illustrates how some of the most successful people have honed their curiosity and developed an ability to ask and to listen that has served them extraordinarily well.

Our questions reflect who we are, where we go, and how we connect. They help us learn and they help us lead because effective questioning marshals support and enlists others to join. After all, asking people to solve a problem or come up with a new idea turns the responsibility over to them. It says, “You’re smart, you’re valuable, you know what you’re doing—what would you do about this problem?”

My aim in writing this book is to show you the power of questions and how it can be applied effectively and freely. Enjoy and learn from the exceptional questioners you meet here.

And then, ask more.

Frank Sesno is an award-winning American journalist and former CNN correspondent, anchor and Washington bureau chief. He is director of the School of Media and Public Affairs at the George Washington University.

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