

CHARACTER TRUMPS CREDENTIALS



**170 QUESTIONS THAT HELP LEADERS
FIND AND TELL GREAT STORIES**

MARK SCHENK AND SHAWN CALLAHAN

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First published in Australia in 2015 by Pepperberg Press,
an imprint of Anecdote Technology Pty Ltd
PO Box 359, Pascoe Vale South, Vic. 3044
www.anecdote.com

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ISBN-13: 978-0-9923385-2-7

**TO OUR CUSTOMERS:
THANKS FOR A MILLION STORIES.**

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INTRODUCTION

We started collecting questions just over 10 years ago. The ones that interested us the most were those that prompted a story rather than just an opinion. Being a little geeky, we installed a wiki and whenever we discovered a new story-eliciting question, we'd add it to our collection. We are often employed by our clients to collect stories in their organisations, and our collection of story-eliciting questions grew with each assignment.

Over the years, we discovered which questions really worked and which were duds. Some principles emerged too. We learned that questions that brought the listener to a point in time worked well. So did questions that conjured an emotion or a strong mental picture. And simple questions using plain language were much more effective than complex ones.



Our goal is a simple one. We want to help leaders become good storytellers, and for this to happen, leaders must find good stories to tell – they need to be story collectors.

One way you can do this is to start noticing your own experiences as they happen and then link those experiences to business points. This level of mindfulness requires practice, but if you can convert your flow of experience into relatable and relevant anecdotes, then you will never be short of a story to tell. There is, however, another natural resource that you can sustainably harvest: your personal history.

People want to know what their leaders stand for. What do they care about? What have they done? What are they capable of doing? And most importantly, what are they likely to do next? That's why people will listen when a leader tells stories that reveal their own character, stories that can then be shared. This happens all the time – naturally.

If a leader is not relating such stories, their colleagues can still observe their behaviour and then describe it in their own way, as best they can. Human beings have active minds; we love to create stories to explain the snippets of action we see. But the process of interpretation is a tricky one, and it can lead people astray.

So what stories could you share? This book should help you answer this question. It contains 34 categories of questions, each one providing a different perspective on your character and on your values as a leader. Use these questions to dig into your personal history and dust off valuable memories – memories that may prompt stories about lessons you've learned, or insights into what motivates you, or your experiences of innovation, diversity, courage or trust.



You could work through each question from the first to the last, hoping to make a Tutankhamun-like find. But a better approach is to explore a category that's relevant to something you need to speak about in the near future. Look around for a relevant story and at the first opportunity, tell it and see how it feels. You will know immediately if it's a keeper.

Don't write your story out in full. Just jot down some notes to help you remember the details when the time comes to tell it. Use such notes to compile your own personal story bank. We recommend the *Friends* approach to naming stories: 'The one where Joey eats a sandwich'. Sometimes you just need a one-liner to remember a story, especially if it's your own, and you can use the categories presented here to tag your stories.

The best way to recall a story, though, is to tell it a few times, then talk to people about what the story means. Remember that your stories will have the greatest power when you can tell them off the cuff to make a business point – don't ever just read them out.

We hope you enjoy these questions, and that you find new ones that open up other experiences for you to share. We would love to hear what you've discovered, and any favourite questions you have. Please send us an email at people@anecdote.com.

Mark Schenk and Shawn Callahan



Your character

—
Think of three things that have happened in your life which have shaped who you are today. Pick one of these and describe what happened.

—
What's the best piece of advice anyone has ever given you? Who gave it to you and what were the circumstances?

—
Think back over some of the happiest days of your life. Describe one of them and why it was so special.

—
How did you come to be doing what you do?

—
Describe one of the hardest choices you've ever had to make. What happened?



Leadership

Have you ever been in a situation where someone without formal power was the one who inspired people to take action? What happened?

When have you found yourself following someone when you didn't expect to?

We are defined by the challenges we take on. What challenges have you taken on that have defined you as a leader?

Think of an impressive leader you've worked with. What examples do you remember that show why they were so good?

When have you seen a leader make a gutsy move against the odds and come up trumps?



Principles before rules

Have you ever laid out your principles or values and used them to make an important decision? What happened?

Having lots of procedures can be frustrating for customers. When have you seen staff following the rulebook but creating bad customer experiences?

Have you ever been forced to follow rules even though you thought they were dumb? What happened?

Has upholding your principles ever landed you in trouble? What happened?

Rules are for the guidance of the wise and the blind obedience of fools. When have you bent the rules to get a job done?



Power

Leaders need to 'walk the talk'. Have you ever had a leader who demanded behaviour from others that they were not prepared to demonstrate themselves?

There is a saying that leaders should never demand as a right what they could ask as a favour. Have there ever been times when you have regretted asking nicely, when you should have just insisted the job be done?

Have you ever exercised your authority to ensure your view was adopted, but later regretted it? What happened?

Have you ever done something small for a staff member and later found it had a big impact? What were the circumstances?

We once saw a lady at an airline check-in counter shouting 'Do you know who I am?' at the check-in staff. Think of a time when you saw someone brandishing their status like a weapon.



Respect

Think of a leader you admire greatly. Share an example, a moment, that illustrates why you admire them.

Respect, like trust, takes time to build and can be lost in an instant. Has someone ever lost your respect in an instant? What happened?

Have you ever walked away from a situation knowing you've handled it badly and the other person's respect for you has lessened? What happened? Did you try to fix the situation?

Sometimes people we don't respect can demonstrate qualities that surprise us. Have you ever found yourself starting to respect someone you didn't like?

Small things can make a big difference. Has there been a time when an otherwise innocuous act made you feel valued and respected? What happened?



Perspective

When have you glimpsed a situation from a totally new perspective and been surprised at what you've seen?

It can be hard to follow the mantra 'strong opinions, lightly held'. Have you ever been embarrassed when an opinion you've held and strongly espoused has been found to be wrong?

Have you ever changed someone's opinion?
Has someone changed yours? What happened?

We judge ourselves on our intentions but we judge others on their actions. Have you ever been surprised by a mismatch between what you intended and how it was received?

Have you ever met someone from another walk of life who really helped you to see things differently?



Coaching and feedback

Has your staff ever given you feedback that caused you to change your behaviour? What happened?

Describe a recent coaching situation that didn't go well. Were you helping them grow or ensuring they knew they'd made a mistake?

Have you ever been given a really valuable insight or piece of advice? What was it and what were the circumstances?

When have you seen someone do something and thought 'Wow, I should do that too'?

In recent years, has anything happened to you, or others, that has inspired you to leave or to stay?



Collaboration

—
Is there someone you really love working with who brings out the best in you and vice versa? Share a recent example.

—
There is a saying: 'If you want something done, do it yourself'. Have you ever collaborated on something but known you could have done it better or faster on your own?

—
Have you ever been part of a team that achieved something exceptional, something against the odds? What happened?

—
Isaac Newton said, 'If I have seen further [than others] it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants'. When have you built on the work of others, or felt like you were reinventing the wheel?

—
Think about a difficult time when everyone knew what needed to be done and pulled together to get a great result. What happened?



Delegation

Think of a time when someone trusted you with a job that you thought was way out of your league. How did it turn out?

When have you known, in your gut, that you should delegate a task but were unable to let it go, and suffered as a result? What happened?

Have you ever delegated a task to someone and they totally screwed it up? What happened?

Have you ever delegated a job, with some reservation, and then watched them shine?

Have there been times when you've known you should not delegate a job? Give an example.



Efficiency

Good enough or perfect – have you ever had to make this choice? What happened?

Have you ever made a change which really saved time and effort?

It's been said that it's better to do the right things rather than just doing something right. Have you ever done this?

When have you seen efficiency (repeatability, automation, etc.) make a real business difference?

When have you seen performance compromised by too many changes of direction?



Customer service

When was the last time you had a great customer service experience?

When you talk with others about customer service, is there a particular story you find yourself telling?

Think of a recent experience where you were angered or upset by a customer service representative. What happened?

Little things can make a big difference. Think of a time when a nice touch has really improved your sales experience.

Have you ever gone out of your way to highlight exceptional customer service? What were the circumstances and what did you do?



Quality

When have you felt that the quality of your work has been compromised? What happened? Alternatively, are you always encouraged to do your very best?

Lexus spent months designing its car doors to sound just right when they closed. When have you worked hard to achieve perfection?

Have you ever had a project where managers are pushing you to stay on schedule and you are pushing for a quality product? How was this resolved?

When have you felt embarrassed and wished you could turn the clock back and do something again?

Have you ever ensured things were done right even though no-one would ever know if you'd taken a shortcut?



Rewards

When have you felt really appreciated for your work?
When have you felt your organisation, or your boss,
couldn't care less?

When have you rewarded someone and it had more
of an impact than you expected?

Have you ever been embarrassed by public recognition
of your achievements?

Some people prefer public recognition. Others prefer
a personal thank-you. When have you got this right?
When have you got it wrong?

Have you ever tried to reward someone and it backfired?
What happened?



Sales and selling

Have you ever started out thinking 'I don't want to buy this/donate/participate' and been surprised at a salesperson's ability to change your mind?

When have you thought a sale was lost but you were able to turn it around?

It's normal to ask questions when buying something. Have you ever walked away from a purchase because a salesperson's answers did not ring true?

Do you remember your first major sale?
What happened?

When have you tried to sell something and the prospect has fled?



Strategy

When has a strategic move really paid off?

When have the strategic choices a group of you have made together contributed directly to the group's success? What happened?

Have you ever had the realisation that the leadership team is pursuing a different strategy to yours?

Did you ever create a strategy that looked good on paper but was impossible to execute? What did you do?

When have you had to abandon a strategy?



Success

When have you been on the brink of failure and managed to turn it around?

Have you ever redefined your view of success?
What happened?

Have you ever had something that was successful and it suddenly stopped working?

Who do you regard as a success? What example can you give that best illustrates this?

When have you screwed something up but recovered so well it turned out to be a success?



Diversity and inclusion

At one of our workshops, a participant looked around and said, 'No wonder nothing changes. Every one of us is male, pale and stale'. Have you ever been part of a team that has little diversity? What was it like?

Research indicates that diversity (in gender, ethnicity, age, etc.) leads to better outcomes, such as more innovation and better decisions. Have you seen this? What happened?

Have you ever explicitly excluded someone from something? How did it work out?

In what practical ways have you injected diversity into work, and what happened?

Have you ever been part of a team where there was so much diversity that no-one could agree? What happened?



Connecting

The old saying goes, 'It's not what you know, it's who you know that counts'. What example would you give to someone to demonstrate the truth of this saying?

Dr Fiona Woods is the inventor of 'spray-on skin', which has helped many burns victims recover. She says it was finding people working in the field and sharing each other's work that led to this important invention. When have you shared openly and received great benefits?

When have you met someone and connected with them immediately? What happened to create the connection?

Have you ever gone to meet someone reluctantly – knowing you should but not expecting to get much from the meeting – and been totally surprised at the strength of the connection or its value?

Have you ever stood up to a superior you didn't agree with and forged a much stronger connection with them as a result?



Purpose

When has your purpose been clear and strong?
What happened?

Have you ever seen a group whose purpose is unclear and weak? What was the situation?

A compelling purpose can inspire groups to achieve great things. Have you ever been part of a group that went beyond expectations because they believed so strongly in what they were doing? What happened?

“It is not enough to be industrious; so are the ants. What are you industrious about?”

– Henry David Thoreau

Have you ever walked away from something when you found too big a gap between your purpose and values, and those of an organisation or group?



Innovation

When have you seen a small innovation make a big difference?

When have you seen a group fail to innovate?

Did you ever try too hard to innovate?

Experts are often those most vested in the status quo. Have you ever forged a new path while the 'experts' criticised what you were doing?

Have you ever resisted a new idea only to find out, once implemented, that it was of great value?



Learning

Think back to a recent time when you thought, 'I'll never do that again'. What happened?

What is one of the most important lessons you've ever learned? What happened?

Sometimes we receive lessons we never want to forget. What's one of yours?

Sometimes we need to have new experiences in order to learn new ways. What new experiences have taught you something valuable?

When was the last time you did something for the first time?



Values

Have you ever laid out your values and used them to guide an important decision? What happened?

What is the most important value to you? What happened that made this so important to you?

A value isn't a value until it's tested. When have your values been tested and you stuck to them?

We all face times when we are under pressure to get the job done. When have you stuck to your guns and done the right thing rather than the easy thing?

Have you seen situations where values have been ignored in pursuit of a sale, a short-term goal or a quick victory? How did you feel when this happened?



Individuality

When have you faced barriers that arose because of who you are?

What do you love doing? How did you come to love it?

What story do you tell when trying to communicate the sort of person you are?

When have you stood outside the crowd, alone?

When have you found yourself in a difficult situation and realised you have the perfect combination of skills and experience to fix it?



Caring

—
Have you ever sacrificed your own reputation in the service of an important principle?
—

Are you compassionate? When have you put people before results?
—

Have you ever felt like giving up but you just kept going? What happened?
—

When have you been surprised by what you truly care about?
—

There is a saying that 'People don't care what you know till they know that you care'. What have you done recently that shows you care?
—



Courage

When have you put your reputation on the line for a greater cause?

Nelson Mandela said, 'Courage is not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it'. When have you faced your fears and succeeded?

Have you ever risked your life to help someone else?

When have you stood up and tackled an injustice when it would have been easier to just ignore it?

Have you ever looked back on an event and realised you'd shown courage you didn't know you had? What happened?



Inspiration

Milton Berle said, 'If opportunity doesn't knock, build a door'. When have you been inspired to 'build a door'?

Have you seen people become inspired to come from behind to win, or turn around a bad situation? Who or what inspired them?

When has someone's passion and belief inspired you?

What's your favourite comeback story?

When you are looking for inspiration, what moments do you reflect on?



Trust

What events demonstrate that you are trustworthy?

Has someone ever refused to let you help because they didn't trust you?

Trust is generally hard-won and easily lost. When has someone done something that caused you to lose trust in them?

Have you ever been in a situation where you had to trust a stranger with something important, perhaps even your life? What happened?

Mark's wallet dropped from his pocket in a crowded market and a stranger picked it up and handed it to him – a stranger who Mark thought didn't look like someone he'd normally trust. When have you been surprised by how trustworthy someone is?



Responsibility

When was the first time you realised you had to take responsibility for your actions? What were the circumstances?

Have you ever put your hand up to take responsibility for a difficult task? How did it turn out?

There are times when someone just needs to step up and take responsibility for something to make it happen. When have you seen something fail because the right person didn't step up?

When have you been disappointed by someone making excuses rather than taking responsibility for a poor outcome or decision?

Have you seen people sidestepping their responsibilities and trying to blame others? What happened and how did you feel about it?



Caution

When have you been overly cautious?

Sometimes it's better to be safe than sorry. When have you been very glad you were cautious?

When should you have been cautious but you just went in like a bull in a china shop?

A new broom sweeps clean, as the saying goes. When leaders take over, they often make significant changes. Have you ever made changes and then regretted them later?

Have you ever been pressured to take risks you disagreed with? What happened?



Action

Think of a time when you decided to take action and later realised it was not a moment too soon. What happened?

We are defined by our actions. What actions have had the biggest influence in defining you?

Describe a time when you were really frustrated by people complaining about what needed to be done rather than just getting on and doing it.

Have you ever known you should take action but hesitated? What happened?

A clear vision and positive action can take on even the biggest challenges. When have you seen this happen?



Communication

When have you seen someone tell it straight when it would have been much easier to pussyfoot around?

When have you seen someone deliver a message and the recipients just got it?

What's the worst attempt at communication you've seen?

Have you ever seen an attempt at communication backfire?

It's great to see a leader make progress with a tough crowd. Have you ever seen that happen?



Loyalty

Has someone ever betrayed you? What happened?

Think of a time when someone stood by you when it wasn't easy for them to do so. What happened?

Leaders often need to be accountable for their people's mistakes. What stories could your people tell about times when you 'took the heat' and protected them?

Loyalty doesn't always last forever. People can do things that cause you to question your loyalty to them. When have you experienced this?

Think of a time when you stood by someone and it cost you. Do you have regrets about this, or was loyalty worth the price?



Mistakes

Have you ever experienced a near miss, a time when you made a big mistake but got away with it?

Sometimes new ideas don't work. When have you tried something and it flopped? What happened?

Life's lessons can be harsh. When have you learned a painful lesson?

Have you ever let someone make a mistake so they could learn an important lesson? What happened?

Have you ever taken responsibility for someone else's mistake? What happened?



Helping

Everyone has ups and downs. When have you gone out of your way to help someone who needed it?

When you help someone they will often reciprocate disproportionately. When have you seen this happen?

Who has helped your career along? What events have really made a difference for you?

When has someone stood by you when it really counted?

What's the greatest gift anyone has ever given you?



FINAL THOUGHTS

Our first hope is that these questions help you find lots of stories about yourself and the people you spend time with.

Telling these stories will help you understand what you really stand for. In fact, any story you tell reveals something about your character. We are what we do, and who we think we are is based on the stories we tell ourselves and others. Alignment of the two equals self-awareness.

Our second hope is that you will be inspired to create and share your own story-eliciting questions. We would love to hear what you come up with. Please send us an email at people@anecdote.com.

We would like to leave you with one last question that should result in a few more good stories to tell to really help people understand what you stand for: **What is the greatest gift anyone has ever given you?**



THANKS

We first learned about collecting stories at IBM and were taught how to run anecdote circles by a colleague, Sharon Darwent. Sharon taught us to be comfortable with silence and to ask for examples. Over time we also learned that the questions we asked made a big difference. In that same group was Cynthia Kurtz, who has since become a leader in the field of narrative inquiry and an expert in story-eliciting questions. We have worked together on numerous projects over the years and we thank her for her creativity and openness. We would also like to thank all of our clients, whose varied and interesting projects have pushed us to craft a wide range of story-eliciting questions and made us marvel at the magnificent stories we have been privileged to hear.

A big thanks to Paul Smitz, who tightens up our words and makes them sparkle. Thanks also to our long-term friend and designer extraordinaire Kerenza Smith, who crafted the look of this book. Finally, we are blessed to coordinate a network of practitioners who deliver our Storytelling for Leaders program around the world, and who keep us thinking and creating because they are helping leaders in the world's most interesting companies.

The title phrase 'Character Trumps Credentials' is already well-used in the business storytelling world, including by Anecdote. We don't claim any ownership of this phrase and acknowledge that others, most notably Michael Margolis, have made a big contribution in bringing it to the world.



THE AUTHORS

Shawn Callahan lives in Melbourne, Australia in a household of women. Even his pets are female. Back in 2004 he kicked off Anecdote so that he could use stories to return humanity to corporations, including those he'd once inhabited.



Mark Schenk also calls Melbourne his home town. 'Managing Director' doesn't sufficiently sum up his role at Anecdote. You could also say he is its chief motivator, sagacious advisor, community cajoler and business magician.



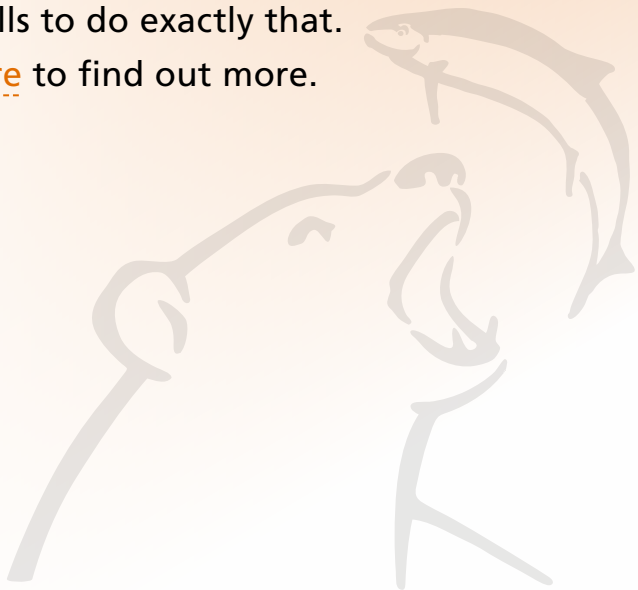


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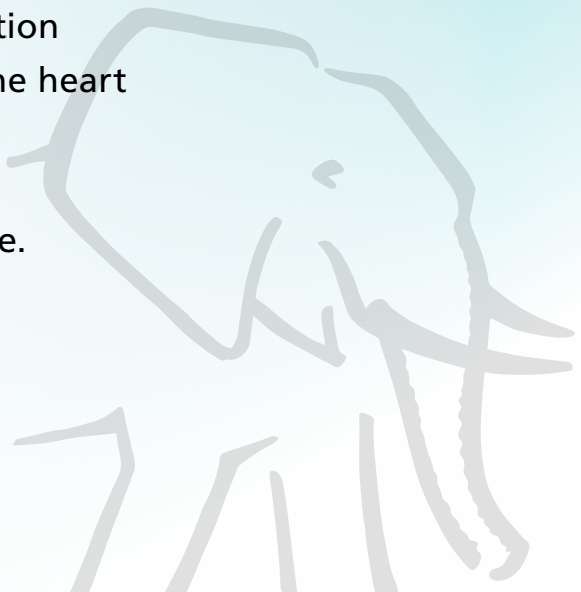




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