

MARILEE ADAMS, PHD

FOREWORD BY MARSHALL GOLDSMITH

SECOND  
EDITION  
Revised and  
Expanded

change  
your  
questions  
change  
your life

10 POWERFUL TOOLS  
FOR LIFE AND WORK

DISCOVER THE POWER OF QUESTION THINKING™

An Excerpt From

***Change Your Questions, Change Your Life:  
10 Powerful Tools for Life and Work  
Second Edition***

by Marilee Adams, Ph.D.

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# Foreword

**Marshall Goldsmith**

*“How can reading *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life* help you and the people who are important to you have better lives?”* This is the key question I urge you to keep in mind as you read this valuable book. The great ideas presented here, in a system of tools Marilee Adams calls *Question Thinking*, provide a solid new way of thinking that can make a positive difference in all our lives.

There are many ideas in this book that helped me. You’re sure to find some that will help you, too. *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life* provides methods, skills,

and tools for easily implementing Question Thinking both at home and at work. To begin with, Marilee shows how we can become more effective and efficient by focusing on learning rather than judging. As a Buddhist, I know this is key to having a happier, more productive life.

Marilee shows us the power of questions to direct our thinking, and therefore our actions and results. This means that we can intentionally affect the future by designing the most powerful questions for getting us there. That's what great coaching is all about. It's also what great leaders do—they provide us with visions of new futures. Marilee offers question tools for both coaches and leaders to optimize and fulfill their missions.

It's no surprise that *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life* became a bestseller. It made so much of a real difference in people's lives that they shared the book with their teams and their companies and also with their families and friends. The story in the Introduction says it all—a reader wrote Marilee that he used the methods in the book so successfully that his company got a mention in *Inc. Magazine*. That's also why so many coaches use the Question Thinking methods and also give the book to their coachees.

In my mission as an executive coach, I help successful leaders get better measurable results. This includes teaching a process called *feedforward*. Leaders learn to ask for ideas to move the future. They refine their ability to listen without judgment and to say “thank you” for suggestions. Marilee

would call this “Learner listening.” This is invaluable for all coaches, leaders, and managers.

Racecar drivers are taught to “focus on the road — not the wall.” As you read this book, focus on the road that represents your highest potential by asking questions that lead to a better future, such as “What are the greatest positive possibilities I can imagine?”

The second edition delivers even more than the first. The new chapters and tools make the material even more accessible and practical. *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life* has great wisdom for us all. Take it very seriously. Roll up your sleeves and get to work. The best way to get the most *out* of this book is to practice everything *in* it!

Life is good!

Marshall Goldsmith

Author, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*

Winner of the Harold Longman Award  
as the Best Business Book of 2007

Named by the American Management Association  
as one of 50 great thinkers and leaders influencing  
the field of management over the past 80 years



# Introduction

*One summer afternoon*, shortly after the first edition of this book was published, I answered my office phone to hear a man's booming voice announce, "You don't know me, but I'm Ben." He laughed, and I laughed along with him because I knew exactly what he was referring to. Ben is the main character in *Change Your Questions*, *Change Your Life*, and this caller identified with him so much that he thought I could also help him and his organization.

By now, Ben is almost legendary for many of my readers. Proud of being the "Answer Man," he believes he must always have the answers and must always be right. In the

story — a business fable through which readers experience the practical power of *Question Thinking* — Ben is floundering in his new leadership position. But that isn't all. He's also having trouble at home. His relationship with Grace, his wife of less than a year, is growing increasingly tense. When we first meet him, Ben is one unhappy guy.

Since that first telephone call from a “Ben,” I've received many similar messages from both men and women. One reader, David, wrote me that like Ben, he'd been in trouble at work, especially with his team. After reading *Change Your Questions* he changed his own questions and, in the process, changed his leadership style. He was ultimately so successful that the results were included in an article in *Inc. Magazine*. You'll find the reference for that article in the notes at the end of this book.

*Change Your Questions* has struck a chord with so many readers that it has become a bestseller. The first inkling I had of its impact occurred when the senior manager at a large pharmaceutical company called me with an invitation to a discussion group featuring my book. She had sent copies to the 50 members of her globally dispersed team with just one instruction: “Come to the book discussion with one example of *something you've done differently* as a result of reading this book.” On the day of the meeting I was ushered into a conference room with about thirty people seated around a large table. Others joined us by speakerphone. I listened in amazement as person after person described the



results they'd achieved. One man told us he was leading his team more successfully, a woman shared that her relationship with a direct report had improved significantly, and a plant manager in Brazil explained how reading the book helped him recognize and correct a problem in his plant.

Since then, I've given results-focused Question Thinking presentations at some of the world's largest corporations, at major federal agencies, at nonprofits, and in communities. Largely through word of mouth, *Change Your Questions* has become required reading in leadership development programs, executive coach trainings, and college courses. It is used by teams in companies and government agencies, by health care professionals in major hospitals, and by Human Resource professionals as well as those in sales. It's used in church-sponsored marriage enrichment workshops, in decision-making programs in prisons, and as part of creativity and innovation initiatives in organizations large and small. Community leaders have used it to find constructive responses to tough challenges in inner cities. Coaches and mediators give it to their clients. People share it with their partners, their adult and teenage children, and their friends and colleagues.

One might wonder why *Change Your Questions* has gained such widespread traction. Question Thinking (QT), the heart of the book, takes on an age-old issue—our ability to be in charge of our own thinking, moment by moment by moment. QT provides skills for observing and assessing our

present thinking—including the questions we’re asking ourselves—and then guides us in designing new questions for getting better results. In other words, QT helps us think productively rather than reactively, and to choose wisely rather than simply react. Building such a reliable capacity for thinking is central to the skills required for intentional and sustainable change, whether that change is sought in our professional or personal lives. Without these skills, our goals for change may be only wistful slogans that will never come to fruition.

Question Thinking began with an important moment of discovery in my own life. I was a determined young graduate student working away on my Ph.D. dissertation. Not only did I endure a ruthless inner critic, but criticisms from others often left me in tears. One fateful day, expecting high praise from my advisor for some work I felt great about, I instead heard from him, “Marilee, this is just not acceptable.” At that moment something new happened. Instead of tearfully wondering what was wrong with me, I took a deep breath, and becoming calm and curious, simply asked him, “OK, how do I fix it?” That simple shift took me from feeling powerless to being confident enough to take constructive action. Afterward I wondered, *Could this seeming miracle be turned into a reliable method for myself and others?* And so I began.

In spite of its power for bringing about genuine, sustainable change, the tools and skills of Question Thinking are both simple and practical. Readers say that QT provides a natural “how to” they find missing in many books on

business and personal development. Again and again, readers like David tell me that Ben's story succeeds in showing them how to make real changes so that their own lives are distinctly different and better. Nothing could be more satisfying to an author!

The material in this book aligns well with other philosophies and systems for change such as Appreciative Inquiry, Positive Psychology, and Emotional Intelligence (EQ). I've given Question Thinking workshops for groups that employ Action Learning programs and in companies committed to becoming better learning organizations. I've talked about it on radio and television. I've also presented this work to my peers in many professional associations, including the American Society for Training and Development, the International Coach Federation, the Organizational Development Network, and the Society for Human Resource Managers.

Readers and people in those audiences resonate with the core message of Question Thinking—that *real change always begins with a change in thinking*—and most specifically in the questions we ask ourselves. Stories like this one about Susan help them understand how practical and specific this can be. Susan was a participant in one of my corporate Inquiry Workshops and asked for help with a dilemma at work. She loved her work, but conflicts with her boss left her wondering if she should quit her job. When I asked what questions she was asking herself about him, she

replied, with an edge to her voice, “What’s he going to do wrong *now*?” and “How’s he going to make *me* look bad?” Clearly, whatever the source of the conflict, Susan’s current thinking would render any satisfying resolution nearly impossible.

I realized that Susan needed to change her questions if she wanted a better result. When I suggested a new one for her to ask herself—“What can *I* do to make my boss look *good*?” — she looked completely startled. This question was clearly outside the mindset with which Susan had been viewing her boss! Even so, she agreed to give it a try.

When I ran into Susan and her husband months later, she gave me a huge smile and asked if I wanted to hear about the “miracles” that had occurred at work since we had talked. “I kept my job *and* got a promotion and a raise,” she reported proudly. “But the most amazing thing is that my boss and I volunteered to work on a committee together, even though we used to avoid being in the same room. And it turned out great.” Then Susan’s husband commented that the positive changes had not all been at work. Smiling at his wife he explained, “My life is easier since Susan stopped complaining about her boss every night!”

While *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life* is a business fable, its impact is much broader than the world of work. You will find, just as Ben — and Susan — did, that the same principles that are so successful in business situations can also help us greatly improve relationships in our personal lives.

Ted, a senior engineer attending an Inquiring Leadership workshop at a Fortune 100 company, took seriously my assignment to practice switching from being judgmental to taking a creative learning attitude. The result? That night at dinner he and his 16-year-old son had their best conversation in over a year. The next morning Ted told us, “My son has an uncanny ability to ‘push my buttons,’ and usually my reaction is like what you call a Judger hijacking. But last night was totally different. I didn’t take the bait, didn’t yell at him and we didn’t end up in a fight like we usually do.” Ted looked quite pleased with himself as he mentioned that his son had smiled, rolled his eyes, and quipped, “What happened to *you*?!”

When my publisher asked me to write a second edition of *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life*, I saw it as a wonderful opportunity to add new material that my clients and workshop participants have found particularly helpful. Some chapters have new titles and there are also some new chapters: “We’re All Recovering Judgers” (You can laugh at this truth — others do, too!), “Learner Teams and Judger Teams,” and “Q-Storming to the Rescue.” In addition, there are new tools in the Question Thinking Tools Section following Ben’s story.

In my first book, *The Art of the Question*, I wrote that “questions are like treasures hidden in broad daylight.” My goal with *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life* is to provide an easy-to-follow map so you can quickly find

that treasure and make it your own. I also use storytelling to make it possible for readers to experience what Question Thinking can bring to their lives. Questions open our minds, our eyes, and our hearts. With them, we learn, connect, and create. And with them, we can create better futures and better results. I hope that Ben's story shows you, in a practical way, how a world of questions really can lead to those kinds of possibilities.

There are many important implications in exploring the territory I've termed Question Thinking. For example, imagine the difference these perspectives and tools could make in education, in parenting, and in health care. We might even wonder, "What might taking a Question Thinking perspective make possible for us as human beings who yearn to create positive futures for ourselves as individuals, families, organizations, and our world?"

I have a vision of workplaces and a society — of individuals, families, institutions, and communities — that are vibrant with the spirit of inquiry. Our orientation would shift from one of fixed opinions and easy answers to one of curiosity and thoughtful questions. This is the path that lights the way for open-minded and successful collaboration, for exploration, discovery, and innovation — and for the real possibility of a desirable future for us all.

Now it's time to meet Ben and discover, along with him, how changing your questions really can change your life.

# 1

## *Moment of Truth*

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*A rosewood paperweight* on my desk bears a sterling silver plaque declaring: *Great results begin with great questions.* It was a gift from a very special person in my life—Joseph S. Edwards—who introduced me to Question Thinking, or QT, as he called the skills he taught me. QT opened up a part of my mind that otherwise I might never have discovered. Like everyone else, I believed the way to fix a problem was to look for the right answers. Instead, Joseph showed me that the best way to solve a problem is to *first* come up with better questions. The skills he taught me rescued my career and saved my marriage as well. Both were definitely in trouble at the time.

It all started when I was invited to take a position at QTec. The company was in the midst of a major overhaul at the time, and the word on the street was that, barring a miracle, they would fold before the year was out. A friend warned me that accepting a position with QTec would be like signing up on a sinking ship. What convinced me to take the risk? It was my trust in Alexa Harte, the recently appointed CEO at QTec, who'd offered me the position. I'd worked with her for years at KB Corp, my previous employer, where she'd won my respect as a gifted leader. Her confidence about turning QTec around was infectious. Besides, she promised me a great promotion: hefty pay raise, impressive title, and a chance to act as lead in developing an innovative new product. If everything went well the risk would pay off in aces. If not... well, I tried not to think about that.

At first I was riding high, convinced I had the job wired. Alexa had hired me for my engineering smarts and I knew I could deliver on that count. The new product really intrigued me and the technical challenges were right up my alley. At KB — where Alexa said she'd seen me work miracles — I'd won accolades as the Answer Guy. I'd faced down the toughest technical problems, one right after the other. However, at QTec I was also facing a different kind of challenge — leading a team. I was sure that would be simple even though Alexa let me know I'd have to put effort into developing my people and management skills.

My team seemed an enthusiastic and talented bunch



and for a while everything went great. Then life at work started unraveling. It was as if suddenly a glaring spotlight was focused on my shortcomings. I didn't dare say it, but secretly I decided I'd been stuck with a bunch of losers.

To make matters worse, there was Charles. Before I came aboard at QTec he'd been passed over for the job I'd been offered. I could understand why he might resent me. And, just as I expected, he was a real troublemaker from the word go, questioning everything I said and did.

Things went from bad to worse. Our ship was sinking and I couldn't figure out how to plug up the leaks. Team meetings were a farce — no discussions, no solutions. And nobody had to remind me that if we couldn't get our product to market before the competition, we would prove the naysayers right.

Life wasn't much better at home. Tension was growing with Grace, my wonderful wife of less than eight months. She constantly asked me about what was going on at work. Finally, one day I just told her she was asking too many questions and she should keep her nose out of my business. She was hurt, I was miserable, and I hadn't the vaguest idea what to do about it.

I didn't want Grace to know how much difficulty I was having. I'd always taken great pride in solving problems that baffled everyone else. This time, with any luck, the right answers would turn up before Grace, Alexa, and the people on my team found out the job was way over my head.

Meanwhile I kept more and more to myself and did my best to just get through each day.

I was mystified and overwhelmed. It seemed like everything in my life was falling apart. Then came the awful turning point. Grace and I had an argument in the morning and only hours later there was a major crisis at work. Nobody said it, but I could see it in their eyes: We were cooked. It was my moment of truth.

I needed to be alone and face facts. I called Grace and left a message that I'd be putting in an all-nighter to finish an important report. Then I spent the whole long night in my office, staring at the walls, still searching desperately for the right answers, and reliving the most disastrous weeks of my life. I told myself I had to face the truth; I had failed. Just after six that morning I went out for coffee and then started drafting my resignation. I finished three hours later, called Alexa, and made arrangements to see her immediately.

The walk to Alexa's suite was less than a hundred yards. That morning it felt like a hundred miles. When I got to the big double doors of her office I stopped and took a deep breath to regain my composure. I stood there for some long moments, working up the nerve to knock. Just as I was raising my arm, I heard a voice behind me.

"Ben Knight, you're here. Good, good!"

It was Alexa. There was no mistaking that voice, always cheerful, exuding a sense of optimism even when things were going badly. An attractive, athletic-looking woman in

her early fifties, she radiated confidence. I told Grace that I'd never met anyone quite like Alexa. She approached her responsibilities at QTec with boundless enthusiasm. It wasn't that she didn't take her job seriously. She did that in spades! But she did it with such pleasure and self-assurance that she made it look easy.

At that moment, her mere presence made me acutely aware of my own deficiencies. I felt numb, barely mumbling a subdued good morning as she touched my shoulder and ushered me into her office.

The room was expansive, the size of a large living room in the best executive home. I crossed deep green carpeting, soft underfoot, and walked over to the large bay window where the meeting area was set up. There, two overstuffed sofas faced one another across a large walnut coffee table.

"Sit!" Alexa said, gesturing in a welcoming way to one of the couches. "Betty said your lights were on when she left her office at seven-thirty last night, and you were here when she came in early this morning."

She sat down across from me on the other couch.

"I presume that's for me?" Alexa asked, pointing to the green folder containing my resignation that I'd placed on the coffee table.

I nodded, waiting for her to pick it up. Instead, she leaned back, looking as if she had all the time in the world.

"Tell me what's going on with you," she said.

I pointed to the green folder. “It’s my resignation. I’m sorry, Alexa.”

The next sound I heard stopped me cold. It was not a gasp, not a word of reproach, but laughter! It was not cruel laughter, either. What had I missed? I didn’t understand. How could Alexa still sound sympathetic in the face of all I’d screwed up?

“Ben,” she said, “you’re not going to quit on me.” She slid the folder in my direction. “Take this back. I know more about your situation than you realize. I want you to give me at least six more weeks. But for that period of time, you’ve got to commit to making changes.”

“Are you sure about this?” I asked, dumbfounded.

“Let me answer you this way,” she continued. “Many years ago, I was in a situation similar to yours. I had to face facts. If I wanted to be successful I’d need to make some fundamental changes. I was pretty desperate. A man by the name of Joseph sat me down and asked some straightforward questions, simple ones on the surface. But those questions opened doors I never even knew existed. He asked, ‘Are you willing to take responsibility for your mistakes — and for the attitudes and actions that led to them?’ Then he said, ‘Are you willing — however begrudgingly — to forgive yourself, and even laugh at yourself?’ And finally, ‘Will you look for value in your experiences, especially the most difficult ones?’ Bottom line, ‘Are you willing to learn from what happened and make changes accordingly?’ ”

She went on to tell me how Joseph's work changed not only her life but her husband Stan's as well. "Stan has tripled his income in the past few years. He attributes the success he and his company enjoy today to what Joseph taught him. Joseph would tell you all about it. He loves to tell stories, especially ones about how people's lives were changed by changing their questions."

I must have looked perplexed because she added, "Don't worry about what I mean by *questions that change people's lives*. You'll learn about that soon enough." She paused. Then, in carefully measured words, she said, "I want you to work with my friend Joseph, starting immediately. I'm sure he'll want to meet with you a number of times. Figure out the schedule with him. This is top priority now."

"What is he, a therapist?" The idea of seeing a shrink made me nervous.

Alexa smiled. "No, he's an executive coach. I call him an *inquiring coach*."

*Inquiring coach!* If I knew anything at all, it was that I needed answers, not more questions. What good could more questions possibly be to me?

As I left, Alexa jotted something down and sealed it in an envelope. "Inside this envelope is a prediction I've made," she said mysteriously, handing it to me. "Put it in that green folder of yours and don't open it until you've completed your work with Joseph." Then she gave me his business card. I turned it over. There was a big question mark on

the other side. It really irritated me. The idea that I'd be spending valuable time with a man whose logo was a question mark went against everything I believed.

Back in my own office, I collapsed in the chair behind my desk. My eyes fell on a small gilded frame on the wall. It held a saying, just two words long: *Question everything!* It was a quote attributed to Albert Einstein. Many rooms at QTEC contained a framed placard exactly like this one. As much as I respected and appreciated Alexa's leadership, this had always been a point of contention for me. Leaders should have *answers*, not questions.

I was still holding Joseph's card with the question mark on the back. What had I gotten myself into? Only time would tell. At least I could put off my decision to resign. My attention shifted to Grace. How was I ever going to smooth things over with her? At that moment there was only one thing to be grateful for — Alexa hadn't asked about Grace and me. I think that would have been the last straw. I knew Alexa was fond of my wife — she'd even come to our wedding. She wouldn't have been happy to find out we were having trouble.

I sat there for a long time just staring at Joseph's card. The fact that Alexa had refused to accept my resignation offered a little hope. I was encouraged that she would refer me to her own mentor. Even though the jury was still out on whether her trust in me was deserved, I had nothing to lose by keeping an appointment with this inquiring coach

guy. Besides, even though I was skeptical, I was also curious. If this Joseph had helped Alexa and Stan so much, maybe he had answers that would help me too.

Question everything!

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