

Reading Between the Lines

**Ask vs. Guess**

**Culture at Work**

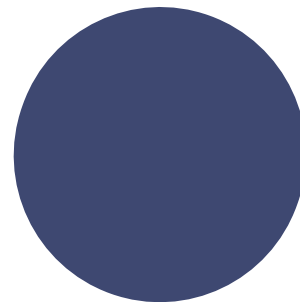
# Are you a Guesser or an Asker?

**It's still a conversation topic over a decade after the question was first posed back in 2007 by writer, Andrea Donderi. Since then, this somewhat polarising cultural observation has found some legitimising status as a theory or model.**

The rules are simple. If you're an Asker, you can ask for anything (within reason) as long as you're ready to happily accept 'no' as an answer. Can I stay at your house for a few days? Will you be my guarantor on a loan? Can I have a pay rise? To some, these may seem like bold requests that should be couched in more nuanced ways, or not asked directly at all, but for an Asker it's quite a straightforward process – say "no" if you're not okay with it, and "yes" if you are.

If you're a Guesser, however, you operate with a completely different communication system. Guessers look for non-verbal cues and use a set of implicit social cues to know when to ask for things people will most likely say "yes" to. Guessers assume that everyone else is operating under the same expectations and can find Askers to be very confronting.

The clash of these two “cultures” can have complex repercussions in a business context. Askers - those used to directly voicing their needs and wants - will often find Guessers confusing, duplicitous, or unfathomable. On the flipside, Guessers may feel that Askers lack tact, or EQ, or at worst find them rude. This may bias them against the question even before they consider their answer.



Think about your team at work. What is the composition of Askers and Guessers, and where do you fit within that spectrum? What possible tensions might be occurring because of these different approaches on a daily basis?

Once you've identified any pinch points in communication, you can begin to build awareness. As a leader, if you're an Asker, is it possible that the Guessers in your team are intimidated by your style? Or in contrast, if you're a Guesser, are they constantly trying to read your mind?

## Clear Path

## Communication

A clear path between an ask vs guess culture can be paved through curiosity, reflection, and the desire for a shared understanding. But first must come the realisation that we are not all acting from the same script. An acknowledgement of our differences will more likely emerge in a psychologically safe environment. And once team members feel safe, they are more likely to agree to work together on how they communicate.

Here are some guidelines leaders can follow to maximise the benefits of their style and minimise the downsides:

### Asker-inclined leader

- **Equip to Ask** – upskill your team in the power of asking curious questions, then test it live. Compare the effects of framing questions in a number of different ways, and take a pulse check on how individuals feel and respond.
- **Be Explicit** – sometimes leaders have to reverse decisions or even contradict previous mandates. This can confuse guessers if they aren't given enough context and feel too “enculturated” to ask why.
- **Offer Real Choice and Time** – don't offer the option for an employee to say no, and then withdraw it. A Guesser will lose confidence to say what's on their mind next time. Also, exercise patience. A Guesser will likely take longer to formulate and ask their questions.

### Guesser-inclined leader

- **Be Transparent** – Guesser leaders tend to avoid being open with their team, expecting them to use their intuition.
- **Resist Assumptions** – Guesser leaders are practised mind-readers, which is an uncertain landscape in which to exist, and a breeding ground for misunderstandings.
- **Interrogate our Sense of Obligations** – our obligations stem from assumptions that we all serve the same social codes. In diverse and inclusive workplaces this belief can derail us.

Ultimately, our team members deserve our respect, which can mean being open and direct so as not to waste our colleagues' time, but also not so direct as to offend. Awareness of how we communicate, and its pros and cons, will enhance the empathy and flow of our workplace.



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STUDIO 1, 4 Lambert Road,  
Indooroopilly, QLD. Australia. 4068

[P] +61 7 3870 8433

[E] [info@performancefrontiers.com](mailto:info@performancefrontiers.com)

[performancefrontiers.com](http://performancefrontiers.com)



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