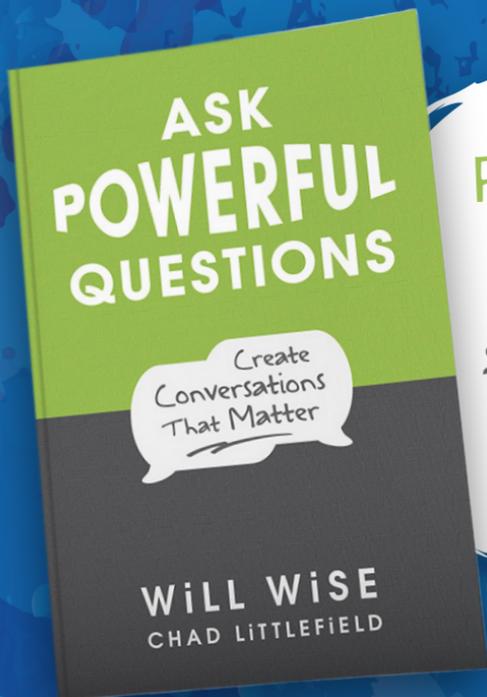




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# About the Authors

Will Wise and Chad Littlefield are also the creators of...



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## Praise for *Ask Powerful Questions*

From my experience of working with Will and Chad for many years, I know firsthand that they live what they teach. This book is an anthem to Will and Chad's potent teaching, waking people up to themselves and others—for the benefit of us all.

Dr. Laurie L. Mulvey, Executive Director  
World in Conversation, Center for Public Diplomacy

In a world where certainty is valued and judgment often replaces discernment, *Ask Powerful Questions* builds a compelling case for fostering curiosity, finding clarity, and creating connections. If you dare, follow the simple (but not easy) path that Will Wise provides to help you find self-awareness, empathy, and personal transformation.

Maren Showkeir, Coauthor  
*Authentic Conversations: Moving from Manipulation to Trust and Commitment*

Listening is our most fundamental tool for healing the world's wounds and I thought I was pretty good at it. But after reading Wise and Littlefield's book, I realize that I have a long way to go. At the same time, I am excited because now I have become aware of the basics of good listening—e.g., the traps to avoid, the dispositions to cultivate, the tools to hone. Wise provides all this and more through personal stories, compelling examples and effective practices. The result: A concise treatise on the fundamentals of transformative listening.

Dr. Christopher Uhl, Author  
*Teaching as if Life Matters: The Promise of a New Education Culture*

# ASK POWERFUL QUESTIONS



Create  
Conversations  
That Matter

**WILL WISE**  
CHAD LITTLEFIELD

**Ask Powerful Questions**

*Create Conversations That Matter*

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Cover design by Erik Tyler, Sunny DiMartino

Editing by Paula Hofmeister, Rebecca Thomas

Content editing by Kirstin Waldkoenig

Packaged by Round Table Companies

PO Box 1603, Deerfield, IL 60015

Printed in the United States of America

Second Edition

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017905930

North Charleston, SC

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*To my rock, whose ability  
to share so authentically and transparently  
makes asking questions fun—and sometimes  
a bit, just a bit, scary.  
Thanks for choosing to be my wife  
and life partner.*

—Will Wise

*To my son, Otto. I'm writing this sentence  
just days before you are even born.  
Yet, you have already ignited my curiosity.  
My intention is to channel that curiosity  
into our relationship, so that I get to meet  
you each and every day as if it is the  
first time our paths crossed.*

—Chad Littlefield

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# Introduction

Nothing shapes our lives so much as the questions we ask, refuse to ask, or never dream of asking. Our minds, bodies, feelings, and relationships are literally informed by our questions.

— Sam Keen<sup>1</sup> —

This book is a result of failure.

I had failed so many times in my life that in my youth I began to create a long list of reasons why I did not fit in. No matter where I landed, my list continued to grow and I continued to land in a lot of new places. There were some years when I worked in six different states. There were other years in which I travelled around the world, looking for a place to fit in. I didn't know then what I was looking for, but in hindsight I can see it more clearly.

I am socially awkward. Fitting in is not natural for me. It has always been this way. I can't even think of a time when I have truly fit in—even as a child, I was separated from my family. Later, as an adopted member of a new family, I tried so hard to fit in that I failed to understand who I was. I didn't even know how to hug until I was in college. It was my roommate's friends who were part of an InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club and who taught me how to hug and even what a real hug is. Then when it came time to enter the work force, I consistently landed jobs that placed me on the periphery of an experience, like when I was leading prisoners through the desert as part of a maximum

security wilderness program or when I traveled to Nepal for the Peace Corps. In each case I was participating with others, but as the lone outsider looking in.

Now, with time and practice, I might make fewer social faux pas, but I can still clearly see signs of the mistakes that I make. Perhaps these challenges are a gift because they have allowed me to connect with many people in many places. Failure is common and it offers data on what is working and what is not. The intent of this book is to add something to the experience of being human that I have seen as missing.

My own social backwardness was a result of not “being seen” for so long that I was afraid of someone actually “seeing” me. It was far safer for me to blend in, to be in the shadows. If someone did see me, it was shocking and I would run. Once I made a different choice and it made all the difference.

The first “new choice” moment I recall happened in high school when I was traveling around to check out college campuses.

*I was traveling north on a Greyhound bus heading to someplace that I can no longer remember, maybe to tour a college campus. I do clearly remember throwing on a cloak of invisibility, wanting to hide from the world. I peered from beneath it, watching the world go by, questioning who I was, questioning what I wanted to get from the world. Then quite suddenly, someone was shaking me out of my hiding. Not physically, though it might as well have been. It was with a simple question from one stranger to another. An Amish man said hello and asked me a question, “What’s your story?” Immediately I wondered,*

*“How did he see me? Is he talking to me?” When I looked up into his eyes, I could see his sincere, intense curiosity. He wanted to know. When I got on the bus, I was thinking about “me.” Now this man was seeing me as an equal and inviting me into his world. A world that was so much bigger than just me, and so different from my own. I chose to accept this invitation into his world and was rewarded with a fulfilling dialogue. We each learned things about the other’s life. Until he said, “I’m thinking of adopting.”*

*In that moment, the world stopped. All the cars zooming past us froze. This kid bouncing up and down in the seat behind us was suddenly still. “How did he know my secret?” The secret that I had been hiding from everyone was instantly exposed from its home in a dusty old banker’s box, covered with chains, locked, and buried deep within. Even when folks said, “You look like your mom,” I would smile and nod affably, but knew that she and I were not related.*

*Of course, when I paused, I realized that this man’s remark was just happenstance and that he didn’t actually know my secret. Still, in that moment, it felt like much more than pure coincidence.*

*He continued: “But I’m not sure if it’s the right thing to do. What do you think?”*

*Red Alert, lights flashing, abort! I wanted to run. Or at least the old me would have run. In this moment, however, the situation was different; the Amish man saw me and I knew I needed to do something differently. I needed to share my secret for the first time with a*

*stranger—for no other reason than that it could be helpful for him and some future child. I knew in that moment that I could have an impact on how he saw the world. So I made a new choice. I took out the banker's box, blew off the dust, and used his question like a key to open the lock.*

*I took a breath (more like a gasp) and said meekly, "Being adopted was the best thing that ever happened to me." Long pause, another loud breath, then I continued: "It might have even saved my life."*

*Our eyes connected, and I could see his fear wash away. Like magic, the banker's box became a treasure chest full of jewels. A gift for him, but also a gift for me.*

*I was no longer in a small isolated bubble. Now I was a part of something in which we were creating something new together, maybe a new life for a child in need, maybe a man who wanted to be a loving father. Maybe . . . More questions effortlessly as we explored this new space. He was full of curiosity. His world shifted and so did mine. Instead of getting something from the world, I suddenly had a desire to give. To give all I had.*

*As I got off the bus, I was floating and found myself saying, "Yes, Yes, YES!" I was seen, I was heard, someone understood me, and not only knew but valued my life experience, maybe for the first time in my life—and it felt like a weight had been lifted. I was accepted for who I was, and that was all that mattered.*

To this day, I would love to have the chance to say "THANK YOU!" to this man. I am deeply grateful for his choice to connect with

a random stranger while riding a bus . . . He taught me the value of connecting. Perhaps the most important lesson is that people want to be heard and understood. It may be the highest calling of our humanity.

Since that moment, I have dedicated myself to exploring ways to connect and invite “real” conversation to be a part of our normal lives. From my perspective, what is missing are questions. **POWERFUL** questions! Questions that allow for unscripted responses, leading us to places of the unknown. Conversations in which deep listening can happen almost effortlessly.

### **The Asking Powerful Questions Pyramid™**

After years of working with others to teach them the importance of real conversation, I experienced another pivotal moment in my life, one which propelled me to write this book. The catalyst moment happened during a ten-day silent retreat. I was reflecting on my life, my teaching, and suddenly connections between concepts clicked. I could see clearly how I would set about sharing this knowledge about powerful questions with a larger audience. The Asking Powerful Questions Pyramid appeared. Ever since that moment, I have been sharing these concepts with folks in many different professions, from CEOs of global corporations like Mead and GE to entrepreneurs at tech start-ups. My life has not been the same since.

As we move through the text, we will start from the bottom of the Pyramid with Intention and travel upwards. The foundational skills at the lower end of the Pyramid increase your ability to work on skills further up the Pyramid. Each skill builds upon its predecessor. As you ascend, you will strengthen your ability to



ask powerful questions in a variety of situations. Students excel when they practice a level before moving to the next level.

It is also useful to note that if you are practicing skills at a particular level and things are not working, you can diagnose the problem by stepping down the Pyramid, checking on your tools at each level and ensuring that you are fully implementing them. For example, if you are using skills on the Empathy level and are finding it difficult to connect, you revisit your Listening skills. If something still feels awry, readdress Openness. Still not working for you? Step down to Rapport. Finally, take another pass at exploring your Intention. Head backward down the Pyramid, stopping at each step and examining your tools. One exception to this procedure is the concept of intention. Intention and its tools are so foundational that you can return to this level at any time, from any other skill on the Pyramid. We will discuss this more in Chapter 1.

# The Science of Asking Powerful Questions

We wrote this book with your mind in mind. More specifically, we wrote this book with both the right and left sides of your brain in mind. Whether you tend to be a more analytical, rational, and logical thinker or you love to eat emotions and creative storytelling for breakfast, this book is for you.

Will has infused the book with personal stories and examples from his life to make the tools we share come alive as we unpack the art of asking powerful questions. Chad complements Will's personal stories and examples with fascinating facts and nuances in neuroscience that underpin the art of asking. In the pages to follow, the art and science of asking join together to create a simple and powerful framework. When we facilitate our interactive keynotes or workshops, we often invite people to “ruthlessly misinterpret everything we say and apply it to their own context.” The same invitation applies here as we dive into some of the research and data to set the stage for the book.

As humans, we are wired to connect. And we are trying to connect. On average, we spend about ten hours per day<sup>2</sup> “connected” through a screen. However, Sherry Turkle, researcher at MIT, reminds us of the reality that all these “sips” of online connection never actually add up to a “gulp” of human connection that can satisfy our thirst.<sup>3</sup>

With the rise of infinite amounts of always available information being just a click or tap away, answers have become cheap.

Cheap answers have contributed to a national curiosity deficit—as we call it. With a shortage of curiosity about each other and the world around us, our research is finding that great questions are becoming the new currency. One of our ongoing clients at a major university orientation program said it best: “Even student leaders are struggling with the question ‘What do we say?’ While waiting in line for food or walking between classes, ‘What do we say?’”

Forget about “saying” and telling for a moment. What about asking? With the sounding board of social media, it seems we speak more in declarative or exclamatory statements and less in questions. This national curiosity deficit fuels division and separation and prevents us from building trusting, healthy connections. Let’s use our mental muscles to bend our exclamation points into question marks. Right! I mean . . . right? Questions are like keys that unlock the lifetime of ungoogleable experience we walk around with each day. Asking powerful questions opens a window into these experiences, commonalities, differences, and possible contributions or collaborations that we each carry in our minds. For example, think of a colleague that may be difficult to get along with. What might happen if you were to ask, “What brings you joy?” If we let go of assumptions just for a moment, what might we learn? After sharing this specific question in an article on our website on the power of simple questions, a reader named Claire responded with this story:

*I was recently cofacilitating a session with some colleagues who I hadn’t worked with before. I suggested starting our workshop with the “What brings you joy?” question.*

*My cofacilitators were reluctant.*

*They thought it might be too hard or too personal of a question for some to answer.*

*So I walked over to the CEO who had hired us, and said, “Would you mind? What is one thing that brought you joy today?”*

*He looked surprised and told a very touching story about seeing his daughter walking into school.*

*Then he looked at me and said, “Thank you for asking me that. It feels so good to talk about it.”*

*Needless to say, my colleagues were convinced, and we started the workshop with the “joy” question.*

*It put the audience at ease, set a positive tone, allowed participants to be vulnerable with one another without feeling as much risk. And it ignited the trust process.*

*I find this question also primes our brains for openness, learning, and creativity.*

David Whyte, a renowned English poet, once said that “no self . . . will survive a real conversation.”<sup>4</sup> Data about how our brains respond to curiosity and questions would tend to agree. The purpose of this section of the book is to unpack a bit of that science and research.

What is the downside to *creating conversations that matter* offline and in person? There is no backspace, no “undo send,” and no ability to draft a communication and consider the ramifications for a couple hours. Face-to-face, live conversation introduces us to social and emotional risk. Our brains are wired to avoid social and emotional risk in the same way we used to avoid

sabertooth tigers. Neuroscientists have even found that “social pain” and physical pain activate the same regions in the brain!<sup>5</sup> It’s easier to avoid social pain or risk than it is to take the chance of connection.

But data suggests that the *reward* sitting on the other side of the social *risk* required to ask powerful questions is massive.

For the leaders and learners reading this book who want to know about the science behind the “art” of asking powerful questions, we have inserted gray conversation bubbles (like the one below), where you will find fascinating facts and nuances of neuroscience that have been researched with rigor and packaged in a digestible way.

Woven throughout the text, each conversation bubble will unpack a bit of the research that makes the Asking Powerful Questions Pyramid™ such a robust, evidence-based framework for building relationships of trust, boosting engagement, reducing prejudice, and improving performance. Now, more than ever, the world needs brain-based skills that lead to more effective communication to amplify a culture of connection, belonging, and trust. For readability, you’ll find full citations for all the research at the end of the book in case you want to dive deeper.

### Did you know?

Research published in the *Harvard Business Review* from the Center for Talent Innovation found that when people feel like they belong at work, they are more productive, motivated, engaged and 3.5 times more likely to contribute to their fullest potential.<sup>6</sup> However, only 49 percent of full-time workers<sup>7</sup> say that they had “a great deal of trust” in those working above and alongside them. That said . . .

1. Companies with highly effective communication practices enjoy 47 percent higher total returns<sup>8</sup> to shareholders compared with the firms that are least effective at communicating.

#### —AND—

2. Connected and engaged employees are 87 percent less likely to leave an organization.<sup>9</sup> This is huge when turnover costs can be as high as 100–300 percent of an employee’s base salary.

As we’ll continue to discover throughout the book, the impact of effective brain-based communication has far reach across companies, universities, nonprofits, schools, and community groups. How we connect matters.

One of our favorite findings comes from Google—the nearly 100,000-employee company, not just the search engine we ask to find out how far Kathmandu is from Timbuktu (5,594 miles by the way—as the crow flies).

Google internally launched a massive research study called Project Aristotle<sup>10</sup> in a quest to find the characteristics of the highest-performing teams. It uncovered that the number one indicator of a high-performing, innovative team is the degree of psychological safety felt within that team. This is the academic way of saying “interpersonal trust.” That trust and sense of safety develops largely through social and personal connections. The tools and framework

in this book were specifically designed and created to establish those social and personal connections at work—and at home.

This also aligns with eight decades of landmark research from the Harvard Study of Adult Development<sup>11</sup> and the role of human connection to our overall well-being. The director of this ongoing study, Dr. Waldinger, says that “people who are more socially connected to family, friends, and community are happier, healthier and live longer than people who are less well connected.” Happy and healthy employees also tend to be loyal and productive employees.

The Association for Psychological Science published a study on more than 20,000 audio recordings that found that people who had more authentic, substantive conversations also tended to be happier.<sup>12</sup>

---

*Creating conversations that matter isn't just fun;  
it's actually essential to our health and well-being.*

---

There is a decade of research in education and learning theory that says knowledge of personal backgrounds of others leads to shortcuts for effective communication.<sup>13</sup> How can we access information about people's personal backgrounds? By asking. Conveniently, the rest of the book is all about asking intentional, empathetic questions that are rooted in our natural, genuine curiosity and followed up with deep listening.

To break down communication barriers and increase connection, engagement, and trust in your teams and communities, *what if we started speaking less in periods and more in question marks?*



## Chapter 1

# Intention

Every journey begins with the first step of articulating the intention, and then becoming the intention.

— Bryant McGill, *Voice of Reason*<sup>14</sup> —

# The Power of Clear Intention

Let's begin with Intention.

In training thousands of people how to ask powerful questions, together we learned some simple truths. To consistently ask powerful questions, which open up new possibilities and new ways of thinking, requires a meaningful connection between the one asking and the one receiving the question. For a long time, I thought that connection was enough. Then I discovered the power of intent, a force that can propel a question directly to the heart of what matters most. Intent has become so important that it is now the foundation of asking powerful questions. You can only unlock the true potential of your questions by first being clear about the intentions you're setting forth both for yourself and in your sharing with others.

To illustrate the power of intention, here are four lines of a simple story:

A woman is lying in bed.

A man comes in the room wearing a mask.

The man cuts the woman's chest with a knife.

The woman dies.

Reread the four lines and make sure you've got the story before reading further.

Now let me ask you a simple question. What color was the man's mask? When I have asked this in a roomful of people, I've usually gotten two answers. Do you have yours?

The two colors I most often get are white (sometimes light

blue) and black. The color matters because it points to something deeper—intention.

Consider the man wearing a white mask. Who is he and what is he trying to achieve? Or if you thought of a black mask, who is he and what is he trying to achieve?

Now we have two men. One wearing a white mask, another wearing a black one. I say two because, though their actions might be the same, they are different people, and what separates them is not only the color of the mask, but also their intent. The white-masked man is a doctor who is attempting open-heart surgery, and in this case the patient dies. The black-masked man could be a “Jack the Ripper” whose intention is to kill. For both men, the actions are the same: entering the room and inserting a blade into a woman’s chest. One wants life for the woman, the other wants death. Same action, different intent. Different worlds.

The world we want to create gives birth to our intent. In this story, the man’s intent presented a limited number of options for why he would be in that room. The doctor was doing everything in his power to create life, and the murderer was doing everything he could to end it. What is interesting is that if the original story had included the words “doctor” or “murderer,” you would have made some instant assumptions about the intent of the man. We know that a doctor’s intent is to help (unless they are mentally disturbed) and that a murderer’s intent is to kill. How do the “tools” in your life help you achieve what you are aiming for? How might your intent be influencing what you see around you as possible? Your situation might not be as extreme as the example above—or it might be. Regardless, your intent is the key to unlocking your potential for asking powerful questions.

*The phrase “unlocking potential” became clear to me one evening as I taught others some transformative material I was learning about, which had already had a profound effect on the relationships in my own life. Through some very personal work, I’d come to discover I’d been treating people in my life in a less-than-stellar way solely for my own gain. This had been a tough reality check for me and I wanted to share with my students the tools I’d used to reach this epiphany. I walked into the room, fully prepared and excited to share this new material. I had read all the materials several times, did long intensive trainings in how to share it, had practiced delivery, and had gathered stories that would be relevant. I did everything right. That is why I was so confused when the looks on my listeners’ faces were so blank. I thought, “They are not getting it.” So, I got up out of my seat, spoke louder, became more animated with my appendages going in all kinds of different directions, and pushed harder on the chalkboard so that the chalk shattered. Still more blank faces. What can I do now? I asked if they were getting it. All I got in return were more blank faces. It felt like I had entered a room of empty chairs—and I was tasked with teaching to those lifeless pieces of furniture.*

*When the class was over, I was exhausted, and I reviewed in my head what had happened. I had the enthusiasm, the material, the sequencing—everything in my lesson plan was flawless. What did I miss? No quick answers showed up, so I went to my favorite place—the Blame Box. I blamed the students for not being prepared*

*(that is why they were confused), not sleeping the night before (that is why they were tired and blank), not caring about their own lives (chumps). I proceeded to stick them all inside a box and placed it up on the shelf, punctuating my actions with a “Too bad for them.” As I was packing up my materials, one of my co-teachers asked me some simple questions during our debrief that shifted and unlocked my own potential.*

*She asked, “Where was your focus?”*

*“On this material, it’s great, looking at this graphic, and . . .”*

*She cut me off: “And when you walked in the room, who were you focused on?”*

*“I was making sure I had the right materials.”*

*Again, she was quick: “And do you see any connections?”*

*“Ummm.” Big pause. I found myself fighting to focus on what she was asking. I was about to pull down the Blame Box and start allotting everyone a fair share. Then I turned toward her, and she was looking deeply into my eyes, inviting me to be real.*

*“Umm . . . Connection . . . Focus. I guess I was focused on the material and wanting to get it right . . . It is hard to teach . . . Oh! I see what you are getting at. I was focused on me.”*

*She brightened up: “Only you know! You get to measure the results yourself.”*

*I had lots to think about that evening and spent many hours tossing in bed. I had focused on the delivery*

*of great material, and it did not matter to me who was in the room or what they wanted in their own lives. I walked in as the expert. My intent in sharing material, no matter how impactful it was, created the very dynamic I did not want.*

*The following day I got a chance to live it all over again. Same room, same material, similar population of students, and a very different focus. My intent this time was to create an experience where people could have a transformative experience with the material like I did. I walked out of the room that evening with an extra skip in my step. This time around, the room had not been full of blank faces, but fully engaged ones. There were lots of good questions—questions rooted in experiences from my students' lives.*

*The only shift was within me. With my intent.*

*As a teacher, as soon as I walk into a room, my intent has a direct impact on what happens. When my intent is to share knowledge, I become the expert, and everyone else becomes objects or faces with numbers associated with them. When I walk in with the intent to create an experience in which people realize what is possible for themselves, then magic happens.*

### Did you know?

Intention impacts the brain. In 2006, Scott Frey, a psychologist at the University of Oregon, published a study in the *Journal of Neuroscience*. He scanned the brains of participants as they watched videos of someone putting together and taking apart a toy made of several parts. One group of subjects simply watched the demonstration. Another group was aware that they would be asked to reproduce the actions they viewed on the video.

Although members of both groups were lying completely still inside an fMRI machine, the brains of the second group showed activation in a region involved in motor learning. Simply knowing that we will be expected to carry out the motions we observe seems to prime the brain to learn better.<sup>15</sup>

The study states that “there was general consensus that the intention to perform a given behavior is one of the immediate determinants of that behavior. The stronger the intention to perform a given behavior, the greater the likelihood that the person will, in fact, perform that behavior.”<sup>16</sup>

When we make our intentions clear, our brains are more likely to move our bodies toward making that intention come to life.

Let's get clear about intention. Intention is key to connecting and asking powerful questions, for it brings clarity to others about “where” you are coming from. Sharing your intention allows for full transparency rather than opaqueness that leaves others guessing.

What is intention?

**intention** | in-'ten(t)-shən | noun

1: a determination to act in a certain way

2: the healing process of a wound

*From the Merriam-Webster Dictionary*

Clarity of intention is about examining the story you are telling yourself and how you are communicating that story to others. Sharing your honest intention means fully understanding the following:

- ▶ what you are aiming for
- ▶ what your purpose is
- ▶ what you plan to achieve

If we can keep to our intention and share it openly and honestly, we are more likely to arrive at our destination with fewer bumps in the road.

In relationship to our work here, we should consider the second definition of “intention,” the healing process of a wound, as well as the first, even though it relates to physical wounds. Many times, the emotional wounds in our relationships are based in being unclear about our intentions, and we feel torn apart in the same way skin is lacerated when we are injured. For example, you both assume you want the same thing (love) when, in reality, you want two very different things (freedom and support). As soon as we offer a clear intention, healing is possible, and the relationship moves toward a connection of trust. Restating the intention when things get tough will bring focus back to your intention (or a shared intention). The other person may not have gotten it clearly the first time, so saying it differently might be useful.

Intention is connected to purpose, and yet it is so much more than that. The root *intendere*, from Latin, suggests “to stretch,” so when you make an intention, you are inviting yourself (and others) to stretch, grow and evolve toward something greater, to something purposeful.

I was introduced to the power of intention in 2010 when being trained in Authentic Conversation by Jamie and Maren Showkeir<sup>17</sup>. I have a habit of holding my cards close to my chest and I do not openly share what is on my mind nor what my intent is. It is a habit that has repeatedly blocked connection and has created distance between me and those I lead and work with.

Through my work with a number of companies, I have observed that in most cases, leaders are the keepers of information, knowledge is power, and that when it comes to getting ahead in the workplace, you should only share whatever knowledge is relevant to advancing your own position within the ranks. I now know that is a bunch of poppycock. The most successful leaders and facilitators are generous with their knowledge, are open, and allow others to know what motivates them.

The act of asking powerful questions needs support that will come from intention. Working on intention first allows you to begin to focus on *who you are* rather than what you do. The astounding thing is, the clearer you are about your intention, the easier it is to accomplish what you are up to.

By being clear about your intention, you allow others the choice of which game to participate in. Reflect back to LuuLuu. She shared her story with me because she could see that the game she was playing was not the one she really wanted to play. She knew that the misery she felt was something she wanted to change, and yet she could not see how that could be possible. She felt bound to her situation and did not see her choices clearly, until my intent created a different game—a game worth playing.

We spend so much time at work and with our families trying to guess what others are thinking, as if we are all getting a PhD in

extrasensory perception (ESP). Imagine a world in which people are clear about the reasons for coming together during a meeting. I'm not merely suggesting agenda items, but something much deeper—being honest about what you are aiming to achieve. Consider how much time and mental effort could be placed on the task at hand and developing the relationship, rather than having to guess what another person is trying to achieve.

Intention is at the bottom of the Pyramid, for it influences every other part of the Pyramid. When you are clear about your intention with others, you are saying, "I am willing to know you."

#### **Did you know?**

The intention of being willing to know someone can save lives. A 2001 Johns Hopkins study found that when the nurses, doctors, and anesthesiologists simply shared their names, introduced themselves, and voiced concerns before an operation, the likelihood of complications and deaths fell by 35 percent.<sup>18</sup> Just like us, many surgeons feel they are living in a culture of "time famine," where there is too much to do in too little time.

We are suggesting that spending a brief moment to get clear on your intention can save the lives of your meetings, gatherings, and conversations.

This willingness invites others to engage honestly about what they want and what they are working toward. When the conversation has gotten nonfunctional, confusing, or people are being irrational, chances are the intention is not clear. You cannot ask a powerful question of people and expect great and fresh

answers if they are mired down by trying to guess your ulterior motives. Especially if the question renders someone vulnerable, chances are that a person will be reluctant to answer without your expressed intent. The scripts playing in the background of your drama will jump up for people and will have a direct impact on the conversation, even when no one is aware of them. Possible scripts are things like, “Am I in trouble?” or “Will I get found out?”

► **Tool: Be clear about your intention and share it**

One way to deal with the scripts playing in the background is to be meticulous in expressing your intent. Reflect upon what it is that you are truly aiming for. Once, I was working with an HR professional, Kirsten, who was frustrated with the unhealthy relationship between two people for whom she was responsible. The employees were at odds with each other, finding ways to sabotage each other’s work, and creating disturbances that were affecting others on the team. Meetings were rough affairs in which one of these people would storm out of the room rather than face the truth. When I asked Kirsten what her intent was in dealing with the employees, she responded, “We are now starting formal HR procedures because I want the problem to go away.” Her intent, as far as I could tell, was not even clear to her. She was looking for a short-term solution and using policy as a way to fix the problem. The bottom line was she wanted the people to go away.

By asking a few questions of Kirsten, both she and I were able to see that she was missing something. I asked questions like, “What is one step that would begin to make this problem go away?” and “What is missing in the relationship, which, if it were present, would profoundly impact the situation in a positive way?” She

realized that she was starting the formal HR process because she was out of tools, frustrated, and did not know what else to do. She did not really want the people to leave the organization (they were great assets), though she knew that was the most likely outcome of the process. When her intent became more clear, she felt empowered to create a new option that was not available to her before. She decided that the best course of action was to initiate a new type of conversation and asked if I could help. The four of us walked into a room and had a conversation that uncovered “ugly stuff” between the employees, some of which was more than twelve years old. Long-ago actions chock full of unclear intent had carved a rift so vast and deep that each could no longer see the contributions the other was making to the organization. Once they understood each other, they each created new intentions, and they were able to form a healthier and productive working relationship.

Being clear also means digging deeper, never settling for the first answer you get. Digging deeper means exploring what truth lies beneath the surface, beyond the rush of the present moment. Often, going deeper means zooming out and seeing the big and overall vision. Some of us need to write our intention down in order to have it well defined. For others, discovering intention is asking ourselves a question that allows for an internal dialogue that leads to a sharp and focused vision, such as, “What am I aiming to achieve here, and what about that is important?” After posing a question to yourself, simply sit with your answer in silence and ask, “What else is there?” Often, there is something else—another buried answer or motivation—and then something deeper still. This exercise is especially useful for me if my first response is all about me or about a *need* to be right. That is fear in

disguise. Often a clear (and useful) intention statement contains the needs of the other person, as well as my own needs.

Getting clear about intent is not always easy, and when the pressure is on, I can feel lost about where to begin. Sometimes, it is useful to have more direction when it comes to gaining clarity. I have found that intention can be focused in three ways (though I'm sure there are more than three, these have been the most useful):

*Future-Focused:* Your intention is about how you want the world to exist. (“I want to work in a place in which we all get along and can still challenge each other to do our best work.”)

*Outcome-Focused:* Your intention is dictated by the intended results. (“When this meeting is over, I want to understand the challenges you have been facing with this project and what we can do to make it work for all of us.”)

*Commitment-Focused:* Your intention is about promises you are making now or have made in the past. (“I love you; I want you to know that and want to understand what is getting in the way of us having a loving relationship.”)

When I cannot pinpoint my intention, or I need to do so quickly (i.e., I'm in a room filled with folks who expect an immediate response from me), I use one of these three lenses to get moving in a direction. In the end, I might come up with an intent that does not clearly fit into one of these lenses, and that is okay.

I might ask myself one of these guiding questions, based on the focus I choose:

- ▶ *Future*: How do I want the world to exist?
- ▶ *Outcome*: What result am I expecting from this meeting that would be useful for everyone involved?
- ▶ *Commitment*: What promise have I made that I want to live fully in this moment?

Use these questions and others specific to your circumstance to discover what your true intent is. Once you determine what your intention is (and maybe even the motivation behind it) and can state it in a sentence (or maybe two), then you need to share it. And how do you know when to share? At the beginning of each endeavor—at the start of a meeting, for example. Did you notice that I shared my intention for this book in the very first line of the overview?

Another instance in which it's useful to state (or restate) your intention is anytime things are tough, ugly, or sensitive. When things get tough, it's easy for emotional wounds to form and for people to assume what the other's intent is. By restating your intention, it often acts as a dialogue “reset.” For a moment, people can zoom out and see the big picture or the grander vision and connect the current tension that created the “tough” spot to the overall intention.

The tension doesn't go away, but its context gets shifted enough that the conversation is able to move forward in a productive way.

#### ▶ **Trap: Intention based on fear**

A common place where people get stuck while attempting to get clear about their intention is when they name an intention based on fear (or an intention that is focused on oneself). If your intention is to find a way to feel safe because you feel threatened or finding a way to make yourself look good, I invite you to examine

this closely. Is your intention based on fear? Do you catch yourself thinking there's not enough love or opportunities or like some force will come and slap you down if you attempt to stray from your path of safety? If that is the case, your intention isn't useful to you or those around you. In order to make meaningful connections and ask powerful questions, your desire must be to *thrive* rather than *survive*. Fear-based intentions might be perfect if you actually are in survival mode; however, if you have time to read this book, that's probably a good indication that most of your survival needs are taken care of. Choose to thrive rather than merely survive, and create an intention that is uplifting, an intention that inspires you and those around you. Intentions that move the world are intentions that enliven, rejuvenate, and exhilarate.

**What is one thing you want to accomplish in your lifetime?**

**What is one thing you expect from a friendship?**

► **Antidote: Intention based on love**

Be honest about what your intention is. Get to the core of it. What is it that you are aiming to achieve *for the whole*? “The whole” includes everyone and everything that you are connected to. Even if fear is present, there is usually something deeper motivating

you—though hidden by fear, it is likely coming from a place of love. Like Grandma yanking the youngster away from the hot stove, both fear and love are present.

▶ **Tool: Ask clarifying “we” questions**

Answering some of the following questions might help you find the love in your intention:

- ▶ What is it we are trying to understand that we’re unable to grasp?
- ▶ What are we trying to create?
- ▶ What will it look like if we achieve our purpose?

Answering these types of questions honestly before (and sometimes while) working with people gives us the possibility to create something worthwhile that everyone can be invested in. Did you notice the words “we” in the questions above? Often great intentions that enliven, rejuvenate, and exhilarate those around you include “we” language. Using inclusive language will encourage you to be accountable for the whole (not just your needs, but also include the needs of those around you). In this way, you will discourage yourself from holding an intention based upon your own fear.

For example, a fear-based intention might be: “I want to fix my financial situation at work.” Flipping it into “we” language might be: “I intend to create a workplace that is supportive of all *our* needs, be it related to finances, health, or wellbeing.”

“I intend to find a partner because I don’t want to be alone” might become “I intend to create moments worth remembering in which everyone belongs.”

## Did you know?

Even one word can completely shift your intention to include the needs of the whole. Founders of The World Café and expert questioners, Juniata Brown and David Isaacs articulate the power of a shift in intention beautifully in their book.<sup>19</sup> They describe a dialogue between leaders:

The head of Hewlett-Packard Labs was working on a global effort to realize the vision behind this question: how can we be the best industrial research lab in the world?

While productivity was improving rapidly, something was missing. During an informal conversation, one of the lab engineers spoke up. She said, “What would get me out of bed in the morning would be to become the best for the world.”

Suddenly a really big question had emerged.<sup>20</sup>

Best *in* the world. Competition. Best *for* the world. Contribution. One *word* completely changed their *world*.

In writing the book, we actually tracked down and called one of these senior engineers to discover the impact that this had on the company. He shared with us that he took the “for the world” intention and created an image of what that meant to him. It was a well-known picture of the founders of HP looking into the backyard garage where the company began. He added a beautiful photo of Earth placed inside. This picture became the symbol of “HP for the World.” The “HP for the World” image spread throughout the company—appearing in lobbies, featured in recruiting brochures, and offered as executive gifts. More than 90,000 posters were purchased by HP employees and others around the world, stimulating a growing network of conversations about the big question: how can we be the best industrial research lab *for* the world?

What made this question so powerful? We would argue that it was the *intention* underlying the question.

### ► Trap: Manipulation

Sometimes when we first try to be clear about our intentions we fake it or decide not to share an intention at all. This leaves us in a place of manipulation. Manipulation is making someone do something without ever telling them what it is you want them to do. You ask questions with a secretly expected outcome that only you are aware of. The manipulative intent is to get something from that person without directly telling them what you want. Here is an example of manipulation from one of my workshops:

*I say: “When we are done at six p.m. there is a group of old ladies who need to come in to use this space. I don’t know how I will get the room set up in time for their meeting.” Almost without fail someone says, “I can stay and help,” and then others jump in, offering to help as well.*

*I have gotten people to set up the room without explicitly asking them to do so. Score one for me—or so I used to think. I was never aware that I had just manipulated a group of people to do my bidding. Even adding “old ladies” and other language for the perfect “effect” contributed to the manipulation.*

*Now that I have a better understanding of intention, I can offer a clear request. “Folks, I intend to maximize the time we have together. Another group is scheduled to use this room at six p.m. I have agreed that the room would be reset to their liking. Who would be willing to help me do that at 5:50 so we can be done by six p.m. and they can start their meeting? The other option is we finish earlier and I reset the room.” Looking around the room,*

*if I see a number of hands I can say, “Great, that looks like enough people, so we won’t have to end any earlier than 5:50. Thank you.”*

*If, on the other hand, I look around the room and see no hands, I need to be okay with that. In that case, I might say, “Looks like we will need to end at 5:40 so I will have time to move the tables.”*

► **Antidote: Be clear, true, and complete**

The antidote to a world of manipulation is to have a clear intention and share it. When everyone understands your intent, manipulation no longer exists. In order for others to understand your intention, though, you must avoid faking it by making something up that you think they would like to hear and omitting the truth, in part or in whole. A hidden agenda will only create more space between you and others. On some level, they will know you’re holding back. Being clear opens up the possibility for the relationship to be transparent rather than opaque. Opaqueness continues the cycle of the “guessing game” and does not lead to connection.

► **Tool: Take the risk and share**

Being clear about your intention forces you to be vulnerable, as you are now placing all your cards on the table. This may feel like a significant risk. This is scary for some of us.

*In the room setup anecdote I shared above, I needed to ask for help. Asking for help does not come naturally for me; it is hard and still can be scary, even after years of practice. It is much easier to go about my business and*

*“hope” that others will follow my lead. However, the payoff for vulnerability is always worth the risk. It is real and it creates more realness. I’m not saying it is easy. I’m saying that it pays a dividend that, with reflection, makes me say, “That was worth it.” When I ask for help to get the room set up, it can happen so much faster than by doing it myself or by manipulating a few into the process. People actually want to help when given the choice; they just need to be asked or given clear directions.*

When being clear about your intention you may find yourself being vulnerable because you are stating your purpose, your aim, and your plan with such rawness that you might be concerned about how people could judge it (and therefore judge you). It is a risk. I have found that it is worth the risk because now I have people around me who are agreeing to play the same game or make a difference in a similar enough way that we are on the same team. The intention unites us. Those who choose not to play are free to go and find another game that is more worthwhile for them. As a result, I don’t spend my time trying to convince, sell, or defend the game I say is worthy. When you are vulnerable, you invite others to be vulnerable.

How does intention relate to asking questions? When you need to ask a tough question, it can be helpful to restate your intention so you can remind people of the game that’s being played and the ultimate shared goal. The assumption that you hold a hidden agenda by posing the question is now addressed directly and with clarity.

Let’s say you’re in a meeting and Abby says, “I’m confused,

what is the purpose of this additional project? Our clients have not asked for this.” Can you see that if someone says this, they might be unclear about the intention or purpose of the meeting or project? Restating your intention at this moment can create clearness for everyone in the room. “Abby, I would like to ask you a question. My intention in asking is to bring some clarity to everyone about the purpose of this project. Can you tell us more about what might be contributing to your confusion? I think it might give us all an opportunity to see a gap we might be missing.”

If instead you say, “Why are you confused, Abby?” you will be going back in time and she will need to defend her statement. If you ask, “What has our client asked for then, Abby?” everyone will listen to Abby’s view, which may not contribute to the dialogue. However, by kindly asking a question to understand her perspective, while expressing your own intention, you allow her to share in a way that is not simply her defending her views or those of the client. It allows for the possibility that she can share from a perspective beneficial to all the stakeholders and permit others to do the same. Not only have you sought to understand and express your own intention clearly, but you have also focused on the whole—the group’s intention—by seeking to understand what Abby’s motivation is for asking her question.

Another coaching scenario where clear intention comes in handy is when I work with executives. Inevitably, there’s a place we get stuck and it usually happens right after a question is posed that they don’t have an immediate answer for. The question forces them to think *newly* about a problem that has existed for years. This new thinking can be scary, so a common response is to tell stories about why the problem exists. This is a moment in which

I can pause the story and say, “My intention here is to invite you to think about this in a new and fresh way, leaving behind this stuck place we are in right now. We agreed earlier that this would require some work and maybe discomfort. This is one of those moments. Take time to think about my question in silence before responding. Would you like me to repeat the question?” Repeating my intention brings clarity to the present moment and gets us right back on track. It also allows me to work powerfully with people who have lots of power. It’s clear I’m not trying to “take” or “use” their power, just have them maximize their own.

► **Tool: Create an initial intent**

One last tool before we leave intention. It is helpful if you can create an Initial Intent that can give you direction in your life when the unexpected moments show up. I was working with a new CEO of a large organization, Chris, who was feeling lost. He was getting overwhelmed with all that he had to do, and his ability to build relationships was suffering.

Chris was a “doer” and his task list was long, causing him to work twelve- to fourteen-hour days, seven days a week. In fact, he was so task-oriented that it was difficult for people to approach him out of fear they’d be “interrupting” him. After striking up a conversation with an employee in the hallway on the way to the restroom one day, Chris realized how little he actually knew about the people he was leading and realized he wanted to make more of an effort to get to know them. He wanted to change that. Together we created an Initial Intent statement that he could lean on in moments like this. His intention was: “Empowering those I lead, by knowing those I lead.” Now, every time he has a surprise

encounter, he has a reason to learn about what motivates those he serves. Over time, Chris got better at turning those little surprise moments into moments of connection, even though that was not his natural inclination.

Your Initial Intent could be something as simple as, “I’m curious to know what makes people tick.” It does not need to be complicated. It does need to be something that you can lean on regardless of the situation. Here are a few examples:

- ▶ I intend to shift my conversations so that I’m not listening to win, to interject, or to prove something but to listen to understand.
- ▶ I intend to create a peaceful community.
- ▶ I intend to live in a world where everyone belongs.

Your statement should reflect what drives you, no matter what you are doing. Create a statement that you can lean on even when you are surprised at what shows up. You’ll be able to cultivate more serendipitous moments that benefit everyone.

## **How Intention Can Be Applied in Groups**

Being clear about your intent is valuable whether you’re in a group or one-on-one. In a large group, it is more likely someone will not understand your intent or think you have alternative motives. I have found that it is useful to restate my intent several times in different ways. It is also useful to restate your intent before you ask the group to do something.

A second important quality is to have alignment with your

actions and your intent. Merely stating your intent might not be enough for people to get it. You will need to show them as well.

*I was one of several leaders in a group recently meeting in a room where we have met a half a dozen times. One of the leaders made it clear that she wanted folks to be comfortable in the space. She noticed that one of the participants was rubbing her eyes. She asked about it and the participant responded, "It is nothing, my eyes hurt from working too hard and staring at a screen all day." Without missing a beat, the leader got up and dimmed the fluorescent lights in the room and asked, "Does this help?" The participant responded, "Wow, I did not know you could do that. Thank you." Her actions matched her stated intent and as a result she built trust with everyone in the room.*

Examples of group intentions:

- ▶ I intend to create a space in which all of us can find meaning in our work and make a make a difference by contributing to the whole.
- ▶ I intend that while we are working together we can support each other in such a way that lifts each of us up to be the best we can be.

You may find it useful to revisit your intention from time to time while working with a group. You'll be able to evaluate whether you are achieving your goal or are communicating

your motivation adequately. Ask yourself, “What am I doing to contribute to the group’s dynamic?” The group’s actions and interactions will reveal whether or not you have expressed your intention well enough.

This question will also be useful for you to ask as you journey through the tools in this book. You will discover more and more ways you can positively contribute to your group’s dynamic (and diagnose places where you may have contributed in unwanted ways).

You can also communicate intention to the group you’re working with by addressing their experience while they’re in the room with you. Ask yourself before you arrive: “What can I do to make people feel comfortable?” Food and water are simple elements that can help you create a comfortable atmosphere. Generally speaking, for most events lasting longer than two hours, participants have an expectation that beverages will be



available (at least water). If you are running a program lasting more than four hours, it helps if people have access to food. Take care of whatever participant needs you can. Giving them good food is an easy way to show you care.

You might take a few minutes to center yourself before participants arrive, so that you have a moment to rejuvenate and refocus on the intention—yours and the group’s—for the meeting or event. Take a few minutes to relax and do something that energizes you.

*If I can, I take that time outside and do a little wandering and moving around without purpose. I look for beautiful things and walk toward them: a leaf that moves to its own drum during the slightest breeze, sunlight glimmering on a drop of water, a tree standing alone amongst the craziness of the human world of movement. The beauty helps me define my purpose and reminds me of the good in the world. This is a little booster shot, especially if I will be doing some intense work (e.g., conflict resolution).*

Stay in the present moment. Greet each person as if they matter, because they do. These small details will show people that you are willing to know them and allow them into your intention. To follow through, finish your session by letting participants know what you’ve learned from them. Aim to create a positive experience with a group in which they feel safe enough to be themselves. You’ll be able to witness how your actions contribute to the way the group functions together.

## Summary of Intention

Being clear about what you intend, and sharing it, is a simple yet powerful way to be fully present in the relationships in your life. Be clear, true, whole, complete, and based in love. The result will be fewer guessing games, and you will get more done and make deeper connections.

### Did you know?

Long before the neuroscience research or HP Labs case study referenced earlier in the chapter, ancient Sanskrit texts known as the Upanishads, which were written between 500 and 800 BCE, read, "You are what your deepest desire is. As is your desire, so is your intention. As is your intention, so is your will. As is your will, so is your deed. As is your deed, so is your destiny."<sup>21</sup>

Bringing us to the present moment, Oprah recently said this in an interview: "Intention is the principle by which I rule every action in my life." Later in the interview, she shared that "[she] used to have the disease to please and *intention* cured [her]."<sup>22</sup>

The power of intention is not a novel concept, but its far-reaching impacts have certainly stood the test of time.

*You can access more free resources and a behind-the-scenes video from us on the power of clear intention at [www.weand.me/intention](http://www.weand.me/intention).*



## Self-Work for Intention

Before your next meeting or conversation, spend some time discovering what your intention is: your personal intention *and* your group's intention. You might ask yourself:

- ▶ What are we aiming to achieve and what about that is important for everyone?
- ▶ What is the overall picture that needs to be clear for us to fully leverage our time in this meeting?
- ▶ How can I be accountable for the whole?

When you arrive at the meeting or start the conversation, state what your intention is. Destroy the assumption that they know what your intention is by simply saying it. If the focus becomes unclear, or if things get heated at any point during the meeting, pause the conversation and return to stating the intention (maybe try using different words this time). After applying these tactics in three separate meetings, reflect upon those meetings and conversations—see if you notice a difference in how they went compared to how they usually go.

# Will Wise, MEd

*Cofounder and Chief Weologist at We and Me Inc.*



Photo credit to Trish Hummer

Will Wise has been asking powerful questions for over two decades as a corporate development consultant, nontraditional school principal, university instructor, and team development thought leader. Will is also the cofounder of We and Me Inc. ([www.weand.me](http://www.weand.me)), a company who partners with leaders and organizations to transform workplaces by establishing a culture of connection to save them time, increase productivity, and boost job satisfaction. He works with leaders to develop *who they are*—not just what they do. Will's clients have included JetBlue, TEDx, Typeform, NBC Universal, Penn State, and many others. He lives in Central Pennsylvania with his wife and three children.

# CHAD LITTLEFIELD, MEd

*Cofounder and Chief Experience Officer at We and Me Inc.*



Photo credit to Erica Mueller

As a global keynote speaker and expert facilitator, Chad designs experiences and tools that build trust, strengthen connections, and unify your team. He helps break down communication barriers to make teams more cohesive, effective, and higher performing. He is a TEDx speaker and is also the author of the *Pocket Guide to Facilitating Human Connections*. He and Will are the cocreators of *We! Connect Cards™*, which are now being used to create conversations that matter within companies in over eighty countries around the world and on six of the seven continents. (Free deck if you live in Antarctica.) Chad lives in Pittsburgh, PA, with his wife and son, Kate and Otto, though they travel often for business and adventure.

**Follow Will and Chad to receive actionable insights through their free interactive learning letter read by thousands of top leaders right here:**

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# About *We and Me Inc.*<sup>™</sup>

Hi!

Will Wise and Chad Littlefield here to share a bit about our company, *We and Me Inc.*<sup>™</sup> Our mission and passion is to *create conversations that matter.*

We are mildly obsessed with relationships, group dynamics, learning and development, connection, and team performance. We design and deliver trainings, programs, and keynotes that actually work. And we've got the data to prove it. We'd be happy to share our success stories, whether helping tech startups like Typeform.com or Fortune 500 companies like JetBlue.

We believe . . .

- ▶ Leaders accomplish more by asking powerful questions than by commanding and controlling.
- ▶ Deeper human connection fosters more engagement and better performance.
- ▶ People, purpose, and planet are just as important as profit.
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Not only do we believe these things, but we are genuinely excited about making them a reality for each organization we work with.

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