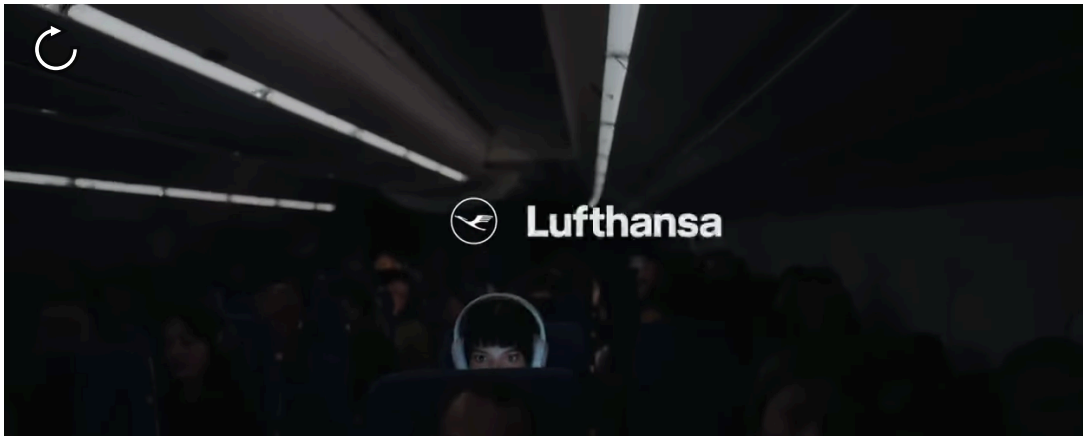

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Leading Is Hard. Just Ask Fourth Graders No, really.

Ask them. You'll be surprised what you learn.

EXPERT OPINION BY LARRY ROBERTSON, FOUNDER, LIGHTHOUSE CONSULTING @LRSPEAKS

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Photo: Getty Images

When senior leaders talk about the best practices vital to success, they rarely give a nod to the importance of asking questions. Why? Perhaps the reason is time. We never seem to have enough of it, right? Especially among the upper echelon. And yet we know, as leaders, as people, that when we take the time to engage in thoughtful questioning, both the asking and the listening, we are inevitably rewarded for doing so — with a new perspective, a new idea, or just getting ourselves unstuck. We know it's true, but outside of crisis mode, few leaders take the time to honor questioning or make it a habit. We need to be reminded that we should. A good story helps. We just don't tend to hear stories about those in the highest levels of leadership in the free world looking to fourth graders for the reminder.

Enter John Hunter and his World Peace Game. Hunter's popular TED Talk gives the best description, but the short version goes like this: An elementary school teacher in Charlottesville, Virginia, Hunter created the game for his students more than four decades ago. It's since been played by thousands and in dozens of countries. The World Peace Game is not just any game. It's played on a three-dimensional, four-

level physical layout of the world: sea, land, air, and space. Third and fourth graders play the game several hours each day over the course of a week. Critical thinking, compromise, self-awareness, and collaboration are all among the lessons. They also happen to be among the skills most vital to leaders of any age.

But in the World Peace Game, it's 8- to 10-year-olds who wrestle with and hone these skills. To do so, they're asked to take on adult roles — leaders of countries both poor and rich, arms dealers, financiers, diplomats … all manner of consequential leadership. They're then asked to tackle nearly 80 real-world, interlocking challenges — not made-up ones, but challenges actual global leaders face every day. That's tough enough, but their charge from Hunter goes further: Solve every single one of these believed-to-be-too-deeply-entrenched-to-solve problems, and do it in a way in which every player ends up better off than they were at the start.

It's daunting. Too much to expect, even. And yet, every year for over 40 years, always in different ways, that is exactly what the players routinely do. They achieve world peace. How? That's exactly what the Pentagon wanted to know. Yup. The Pentagon.

As Hunter recounts the story, one day he got a call. "Mr. Hunter? Could you bring your students to the Pentagon so we can ask them directly how they do what they do?" The top brass of the U.S. military wanted to hear what fourth graders did that they might learn from. At a minimum, Hunter thought, it could be a good field trip and a nice photo op. "Pizza with the generals," Hunter mused. "But, no!" Hunter then shares. "They grilled my students for three hours!"

Four-foot-tall visitors from way down the age and education ladder, "engaging peer to peer with some of the most powerful leaders in the world who were taking them seriously," he says.

The Pentagon brass asked many questions. More surprisingly, they were asked many questions in return — not questions scripted in advance by their teacher for the occasion, but in-the-moment questions spilling out like a mighty arsenal from their young minds. Indeed, the adult leaders learned, that constant questioning was central to the students' ability to play the game successfully, including three questions that served as inflection points throughout the game — three questions, it so happens, that any leader of any organization in any challenging decision-making time can appreciate, but also easily forget: *Can we pay for it? Can we deal with the consequences? Does it make sense?*

As the morning rolled on, a colonel appeared at the door of the conference room. "We're ready for your delegation, Mr. Hunter." The group was ushered into another room where they found Leon Panetta, the U.S. secretary of Defense at the time. "Welcome," he said, taking off his jacket and rolling up his sleeves. "I've got 10 minutes. Then I've got to go see the president," an announcement he followed up immediately with a question: "What's your toughest problem?" he asked the grade schoolers. "He was dead serious," Hunter said. So were his guests. "Climate change," they said unhesitant and almost in unison. "Why?" Panetta asked. "Because it ripples into everything else," he was told point blank. "What did you do about it?" Panetta continued … and for the next half-hour, on they went. Questions and answers, back and forth, peer to peer. If you're doing the math,

Panetta's calculation was clear: The president would have to wait. It was a leadership call, and a sound one. And no one in the room needed to wonder why. It was already everyone's practice.

Questions, and the habit of asking them and listening carefully to the answers, are ultimately the difference makers in good leadership. Panetta knew it. He didn't change that strategy because of the age of his guests. The rule stayed constant: Ask. You just might learn something important. And yet it is so easy to let the daily schedule and demands of leadership convince us otherwise.

Kids, we often say, are natural question-askers. But that's not quite right. People are. It's been key not only to our survival, but our advancement. Leaders, take note. Ask. And listen up. World peace may not be what you're after day to day, but whatever is, the habit of questions is still the key.

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