

How to make 'Jeopardy!' work for you at the office

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Showing strength and confidence is often touted as the way to get things done at work, but a new [study](#) from the University of Iowa's Tippie College of Business suggests that people might have more success if they

were less assertive.

The study was co-authored by Chak Fu Lam of the City University of Hong Kong, Alexander Romney of Utah State University, and Wen Wu of Beijing Jiaotong University. It was published in the journal *Personnel Psychology*.

The study found that voice inquiry—or phrasing a work-related suggestion as a question—tends to get better results with [managers](#) than voice directness—or making a direct statement or assertion. The more dominant leadership style displayed by the manager, the more success the tactic can have.

This means that like on "Jeopardy!" you're more apt to have success by phrasing something in the form of a question.

"Instead of saying 'We need to have fewer meetings to increase productivity,' you'll have more success if you ask 'Have we thought about having fewer meetings to increase [productivity](#)?' " said study co-author Daniel Newton, assistant professor of management and entrepreneurship.

Newton and his research team used a series of surveys to ask hundreds of workers and managers in the U.S., U.K., and China about how workers suggested changes in their organizations. The research team found that managers were more likely to take employee comments seriously and more likely to agree when the suggestions were phrased in the form of a question. So those who said, "We need a new client management software" were taken less seriously than someone who said, "Should we look into a new client management software?"

Newton said that using such a voice elicited a higher sense of power in leaders and may have even led them to believe they played a part in

coming up with the idea.

"The effect is especially strong for dominant leaders—the kind of people who want to be right—because receiving indirect [questions](#) makes them feel more powerful but also more likely to green-light the employee's idea," he said.

He said it's also a way for an employee to show respect for the manager. Rather than drawing a line in the sand and coming across as pushy, he said it's a way to defer to a manager's experience and expertise. He said it's also a way to present information in a manner that leads to a more honest or thoughtful answer.

Newton said employees can use the study's findings to initiate change in their organization with less risk of alienating management. At the same time, managers should be aware both of how their employees voice suggestions and the content of their suggestions.

More information: Chak Fu Lam et al, Challenging the status quo in a non-challenging way: A dominance complementarity view of voice inquiry, *Personnel Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/peps.12625](https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12625)

Provided by University of Iowa Tippie College of Business

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