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BEST PRACTICES

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How to Ask Better Questions

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by Judith Ross

One of your direct reports walks into your office looking for help: the rollout of the new line of Web-based products she is managing is falling behind schedule. All the prototypes have been created and beta tested, but she is having trouble getting final sign-off from the VP of IT. Deadlines have come and gone, and no amount of reminding or cajoling will get him to focus on her project.

As her manager, what should you do? If your first instinct is to suggest a solution, think again.

Although providing employees with answers to their problems often may be the most efficient way to get things done, the short-term gain is overshadowed by long-term costs. By taking the expedient route, you impede direct reports' development, cheat yourself of access to some potentially fresh and powerful ideas, and place an undue burden on your own shoulders. When faced with an employee's problem, you can respond in a much more value-adding way: by asking the right questions, help her find the best solution herself. We aren't talking about asking just any questions but, rather, employing questions that inspire people to think in new ways, expand their range of vision, and enable them to contribute more to the organization.

Questions packing this kind of punch are usually open-ended — they're not looking for a specific answer. Often beginning with "Why," "How," or "What do you think about...," they are questions that set the stage for subordinates to discover their own solutions, increasing their competence, their confidence, and their ownership of results.

Here is a framework for asking the right questions at the right time to create clarity and agreement around issues and to empower your direct reports.

Ask the right kind of questions

The word "empower" gets bandied about so much that one could be forgiven for overlooking what it actually means: to imbue someone with power, to instill in the individual a sense of his own strength and efficacy. "When the boss asks for a subordinate's ideas, he sends the message that they are good — perhaps better than his. The individual gains confidence and becomes more competent," says Michael J. Marquardt, a professor of human resources and international affairs at George Washington University (Washington, D.C.) and author of *Leading with Questions: How Leaders Find the Right Solutions by Knowing What to Ask* (John Wiley & Sons, 2005).

But an empowering question does more than convey respect for the person to whom it's posed. It actually encourages that person's development as a thinker and problem solver, thereby delivering both short-term and long-term value: the short-term value of generating a solution to the issue at hand and the long-term value of giving subordinates the tools to handle similar issues in the future independently.

A disempowering question, on the other hand, undercuts the confidence of the person to whom it's asked and sabotages her performance. Often, these types of questions focus on failure or betray that the questioner has an agenda.

The most effective and empowering questions create value in one or more of the following ways:

1. **They create clarity:** "Can you explain more about this situation?"
2. **They construct better working relations:** Instead of "Did you make your sales goal?" ask, "How have sales been going?"
3. **They help people think analytically and critically:** "What are the consequences of going this route?"
4. **They inspire people to reflect and see things in fresh, unpredictable ways:** "Why did this work?"
5. **They encourage breakthrough thinking:** "Can that be done in any other way?"
6. **They challenge assumptions:** "What do you think you will lose if you start sharing responsibility for the implementation process?"
7. **They create ownership of solutions:** "Based on your experience, what do you suggest we do here?"

Create a culture that embraces questions

To foster a culture in which questions are widely used to create value, begin by letting direct reports know that you value their queries. "For example, tell them to bring their best questions into their performance appraisal," Marquardt says. These might be questions they posed in the past year that led to new ideas and solutions for the company or questions they would like to ask you during the review to boost their own effectiveness and that of the unit or team.

Just as important, it is up to you as the leader to model the question-asking approach so that your team, in turn, will employ it with their own reports. For example, you can track how well the team is working together by asking questions like:

- We've been working together for three hours today; what did we do best as a team?
- What enabled us to be successful in coming up with an innovative strategy?
- How can we ask better questions?
- How can we apply what we are learning to other parts of our work?
- What leadership skills helped us succeed today?

What you get by asking

While going into your team or one-on-one meetings with a list of questions rather than points to be made takes some thoughtful planning, the payoff can be huge. Marquardt experienced this himself when he was executive director of the former Arlington, Va.-based World Center for Development and Training.

He asked each of his direct reports, "What one idea and/or strategy that we are not currently implementing do you believe would best contribute to the success of our company?" The responses this question generated were amazing, he says. "We came up with a marketing strategy that I had never

considered before and added a couple of new services for our customers," including a short-term certificate program and courses that blended classroom and online learning. As a result of his query, the group also examined new markets in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia and developed local partners in those regions. And because these were their ideas, Marquardt's direct reports were committed to putting them into action. "They accepted responsibility in designing, marketing, and implementing the new programs," he says.

By leading your team meetings with questions, you will also help eliminate ambiguity and create alignment around issues. "Most groups are not aligned when they come together," Marquardt says. "When a leader goes into a group and states a problem, everyone assumes that they understand the problem in the same way. In reality, that is false." If, for example, a product isn't selling, you may assume that it's because of a flawed marketing program. But what if others think it's a flawed product? You won't learn that without asking, "What do you think the issue is?" Without consensus on the problem, you can't define a strategy to address it. Asking such questions enables team members to understand one another's perspectives and agree on what they are dealing with.

What not to ask

Marquardt points out that, contrary to the business truism "There are no bad questions," several types of questions can have a negative effect on subordinates.

Questions focused on why a person did not or cannot succeed force subordinates to take a defensive or reactive stance and strip them of their power. Such questions shut down opportunities for success and do not allow people to clarify misunderstandings or achieve goals. These questions include:

- Why are you behind schedule?
- What's the problem with this project?
- Who isn't keeping up?
- Don't you know any better than that?

Leading questions seek a specific answer, one that puts the person being asked the question in a negative light, pushes through the questioner's agenda, or exerts social pressure to force agreement. Among their many downsides, leading questions such as the following inhibit direct reports from answering candidly and stifle honest discussion:

- You wanted to do it by yourself, didn't you?
- Don't you agree that John is the problem here?
- Everyone else on the team thinks John is the problem. What about you?

While closed questions, which require specific answers, can be a good way to open and close a conversation, a whole string of them in a row, such as the following, will make subordinates feel they are being interrogated:

- Is this a good time to talk?
- What time is the meeting?
- How many people are coming?
- Who else will be there?

- When will the report be ready?

Their success is your success

As you strive to lead by asking rather than telling, remember that leaders are only as successful as the people who report to them. By asking your direct reports the right questions, you can help them develop their ability to solve problems, their creativity, and their resourcefulness. Not only will their greater strength in these areas reflect well on you, but it also will enable them to better help you and the whole unit when fresh challenges arise.

"You don't have to have the answer to ask a great question," says Marquardt. "A great question will ultimately get an answer."