

Leadership is Great Questions

By Bruce Meyers

Why should great questions matter?

Great questions matter to encourage reflection and trigger better thinking. As we look ahead to what it takes to lead effectively in our workplaces, it becomes increasingly apparent that most of us are *knowledge workers* looking to accomplish great things at work and in the community. Many of our co-workers have acquired independence as well as education and experience. They are more willing and able to answer tough questions. In fact, they feel more valued, challenged and respected when asked a question. Many staff are trained in information systems, communications, research, education, health care, child care, various levels of counseling or social work and a host of other functions. With the abundance of knowledgeable people surrounding them and the expectation that knowledge workers are paid to think, what is it that causes many leaders to invest so much time telling these same people what, when and how to think?

Today's leader could shift further to help develop tomorrow's leader. One way of doing this is by asking great questions rather than prescribing "right" solutions and processes.

"To take committed action, people need to think things through for themselves. The act of having an 'aha' moment gives off the kind of energy people need to become motivated and willing to take action." – D. Rock, *Quiet Leadership*, Harper Collins

According to Rock, "thinking questions ask about the nature of people's thinking, in ways that have them become more self-aware and accountable." Nobody said developing and using great questions are easy leadership skills. There is art in crafting great questions and science in where and when they will have greatest positive impact. Some examples of thinking questions:

- *How long have you been thinking about this?*
- *How important is this issue to you on a scale of 1-10?*
- *How committed are you to resolving this issue?*
- *How do you feel about the resources you've put into this so far?*
- *What is your plan for addressing this issue?*
- *How clear is your thinking about this plan?*
- *What are you noticing about your thinking?*
- *What insights are you having?*
- *How could you deepen this insight?*
- *Are you clear about what to do next?*
- *How can I help you further?*

Without great inquiries and a safe environment for asking questions, less thinking will occur. Workplaces without a questioning culture can eventually result in mentally exhausted leaders and 'Dilbertian' cynicism on the part of staff as they adopt a, 'Relax, get a coffee... she'll tell us what to do soon enough' approach.

In a book review for the *Globe and Mail*, Harvey Schachter writes about ***The Power of Good Questions***. The following article is reprinted below for your convenience and consideration.

The Power of Good Questions

By Harvey Schachter

Re; Leading with Questions
M. Marquardt – Jossey Bass

By now, most leaders know they should be leading gently, asking questions rather than giving directions. But that's hard for many managers because the mythology of leadership is that they are bold and directive people. Even when we transcend that mindset we're not quite sure what questions to ask, and often fumble and stumble, until we revert in frustration to giving directions, which feels more comfortable.

That's a shame, because when the Center for Creative Leadership studied 191 successful executives, it discovered that the key to their success was creating opportunities to ask – and then asking – questions. The most successful leaders lead with questions.

They use those questions to elicit information, of course, but also much more – encouraging full participation and teamwork, spurring innovation and outside-the-box thinking, empowering others, solving questions.

Questions have an energizing and motivating power. Chad Holliday, DuPont's CEO, says, "I find that when someone engages me in a question, it wakes me up. I'm in a different place. Throughout the day, I try to do the same thing. I ask questions. I rarely make statements until I have sized up the person's energy and focus, and whether they are open-minded – only then can I move. If I don't ask questions, I could

be underrating the situation and problem, and missing key issues."

Michael Marquardt, a professor at George Washington University, set out to illuminate this murky area by interviewing 22 leaders identified as adept at leading with questions. He found their practices led to a questioning culture, in which information was exchanged rather than hoarded, accountability was established, responsibility shared, and mistakes avoided. "Every question can be a learning opportunity," he says.

When leaders don't ask questions, mistakes are more likely to occur. Analyze any management failure or notable disaster and you will find leaders who weren't sufficiently inquiring – from slipshod journalism at The New York Times to the Titanic, the explosion of the Challenger Spacecraft, the Bay of Pigs fiasco, or your own worst moment.

A questioning culture has six hallmarks. People in it:

- Are willing to admit, "I don't know."
- Go beyond asking questions; they encourage questions.
- Are helped to develop the skills needed to ask questions in a positive way.
- Focus on asking empowering questions and avoid disempowering questions.

- Emphasize the process of asking questions and searching for answers rather than finding the 'right' answers.
- Accept and reward risk taking.

To achieve a questioning culture, we have to overcome four barriers that keep us from asking questions. The first is our desire to protect ourselves – our self-image and our image in the eyes of others, as well as guarding ourselves from uncomfortable feelings such as fear. This traces back to childhood admonishments and ridicule for asking 'stupid' questions or 'too many' questions. But it also stems from dread that we might get an answer we don't like, painting us as part of the problem or forcing us into actions we dislike. The questions are threatening – to us. Mike Coleman, vice-president of Alcoa's Rigid Packaging business unit, says, "those who have the inability to ask questions have problems with their ego."

A second reason for not asking questions is that we are too often in a rush. We build track records as problem solvers and being able to get results, and become impatient to achieve those results. "It requires self-discipline to keep questioning," says DuPont's Holliday. "There is a great temptation to make statements, especially when you are in a hurry and want to do things quickly."

Third, we lack skill in asking questions, because we haven't practised this since our parents told us to stop asking so many questions when we were three years old. How to ask great questions isn't on course curricula or performance appraisals. "We have never gotten feedback on the quality of our questions. And rarely have we had a boss who was a model of an inquiring leader, someone who could demonstrate the skill, power, and benefit of questions," says Marquardt.

As with any skill, we have to be willing to flounder if we are going to learn it. Mark Harper, president of wholesale marketing for ConocoPhillips Petroleum, says that when he started using questions as a management tool "it was uncomfortable and frustrating. I didn't know how to ask good questions. I had a tendency to ask too many leading questions, or I only asked questions when I knew I had to make a decision."

Finally, some organizational cultures can discourage questions. In some workplaces and with some bosses, it would be taboo and dangerous to ask too many questions – especially questions that might rock the boat or cause someone to lose face. Asking questions entails risk, occasional conflict, and instability because addressing the issues underlying problems may upend entrenched norms.

If you want to start leading with questions, you have to learn to ask empowering questions rather than disempowering questions. Questions that disempower people focus on reasons why the person did not or cannot succeed. They prompt a defensive reaction because they cast blame on the other party. They drain energy from an encounter rather than stimulate others. Here are some examples, no doubt quite familiar to you as a recipient or even as a questioner:

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

Instead, try the following questions, courtesy of Marilee Goldberg-Adams, of The Institute for Inquiring Leadership:

- How do you feel about the project so far?
- What have you accomplished so far that you are most pleased with?

- How would you describe the way you want this project to turn out?
- Which of these objectives do you think will be the easiest to accomplish; the most difficult?
- What will be the benefits for our customers if we can meet all these objectives? What will be the benefits for our company, our team, and for you personally?
- What key things need to happen to achieve this objective? What kinds of support do you need to achieve success?

“Great questions are selfless, not asked to illustrate the cleverness of the questioner or to generate information or an interesting response for the questioner,” observes Marquardt. “They are generally supportive, insightful and challenging. They are often unpretentious and offered in a sharing spirit. Great questions are asked at the time when it generates the strongest amount of reflection and learning.”

You want to avoid closed questions, which seek a short, specific response

(even if that isn't necessarily your intention as you blurt out the question), and instead ask open-ended questions, which encourage people to expand ideas and explore what's important for them. Open-ended questions help people to think analytically and critically, stirring discussion and debate.

They often begin with words such as 'what' and 'how', or phrases such as:

- What do you think about ...?
- Could you say more about ...?
- What possibilities come to mind? What might happen if you ...?
- What do you think you will lose if you give up [the point under discussion]?
- What have you tried before?
- What do you want to do next?

Leading with questions makes sense, particularly in government with its highly knowledgeable staff and sensitive, complex interests to satisfy. If you want to improve your abilities in this area, Leading With Questions is a good place to start.

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