



The Power of a Good Question

An employee walks into your office with a problem. He outlines the challenges and obstacles he is facing on his project and asks for your advice. If you are like most managers, your first impulse is to offer a solution.

While that may be an appropriate response in some instances, and perhaps the most expedient choice; it's not always the most beneficial reaction for the employee, the problem or for your business. Providing the employee with an answer to his problem may bring a short term win but neglects hidden opportunities to cultivate his potential as well as unearth fresh ideas.

One of the most effective ways to approach any problem is with inquiry. Not an inquisition mind you, but a question that adds value to the conversation. **Good questions trigger our imagination and our creative thinking.** They invite us to explore more, dig deeper and be more resourceful. Once a question is raised, our brains automatically start working on the answer – and continue to do so in the background, even when we are not conscious of it. **Good questions put people in the drivers' seat and generate optimal solutions.**

So what makes a question good?

It depends on the circumstances and desired outcomes. Certain types of questions help direct and focus our thinking for quick, practical and specific answers, such as, *"What are the steps we need to take?"* or *"Who will serve on the taskforce?"* For the purpose of this column, I want to focus on a different kind of question – the **open-ended or expanding questions** that are not seeking a specific answer. Open-ended questions are often preceded with *"What, How or Why"*. These questions are beneficial in eliciting new perspectives and opening up possibilities that would otherwise be untapped. Consider these examples, *"Based on your experience, what would you suggest here?"* and *"How do you think we should proceed?"*, or *"What might be the consequences of going this direction?"*

I also find that seemingly **naïve questions are often brilliant.** They are effective in their simplicity and are often the best for checking our assumptions as well as gaining clarity and alignment.

Develop Your Team

"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).

When you ask members of your team for their ideas, you are telling them you respect and value their opinions and that you expect them to **contribute their intellectual capital** to creating solutions. Your questions can serve to create **clarity about the situation, uncover assumptions, create agreement around issues** and **improve collaboration**.

Your employees will feel more empowered. You will likely witness amplification in their **sense of pride and ownership** for the results. Additionally, as you coach your team with open-ended questions, you are **building their creative problem-solving muscles** to resolve future similar issues independently.

Create Fresh Perspectives & Solutions

Businesses leaders are constantly seeking new ways to be competitive; to be lean, efficient and high-performing. As this imperative edict becomes more challenging to achieve, fresh perspectives are even more critical to opening up opportunities. Good questions can inspire people to see things in unpredictable ways. They can encourage breakthrough thinking, *"Can this be done in any other way?"*

I had a professional coach who would never let me get away with the answer, *"I don't know."* At one point when I responded with *"I don't know"*, he retorted, *"What would it look like if you did know?"* Now, as ridiculous as that sounds, it actually worked in getting me unstuck. He was reframing my self-imposed limited thinking. He was essentially demanding that I give up "not knowing" as an excuse to not go deeper for new insights.

Try it on for yourself. Try changing a problem statement into open-ended questions. For example, change "Ways to Improve Internal Communications" to: "In what ways can we improve internal communications?" or "Where are the opportunities to improve internal communications?" See how differently it feels and what ideas are generated. You can also pose the questions at your next team meeting and ask employees to come back with answers the following week.



Are there "Bad" Questions?

The wrong question, asked in the wrong way and at the wrong time, will undermine results. A disempowering question can undercut trust and confidence as well as sabotage performance. If you use questions when you have a hidden agenda, people can generally sense it and it triggers defense mechanisms.

Questions that are focused on why someone didn't succeed are counterproductive. They shut people down and strip them of their power. Now, that doesn't mean you don't address those issues, you most certainly need to, but your approach and intent are critically important. Additionally, asking leading questions where you are trying to force agreement or push your agenda only serve to inhibit candid answers and stifle honest dialogue. Here are some examples of questions that could backfire:

- 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?
- You wanted to do it by yourself, didn't you?
- Don't you agree that John is the problem here?

Additionally, you don't want to pummel your employees with a slew of questions as if you are interrogating them. The unintended consequence is often a feeling of one's judgment being questioned or a feeling of being micromanaged. In these instances, if you truly are questioning their decisions or direction, tell them so directly, do not hide it behind a series of probing questions as you will decrease the value of asking good questions.

"The idea is to purposefully use different kinds of questions at different times to consciously drive one's thinking process towards the most productive direction." Luciano Passuello, Litemind.

Establish a Culture of Initiative-Taking and Problem-Solving

Genuine, heartfelt questions are the foundation of **empathetic** communication. They energize and enliven conversations; they invite people to engage, to connect and to share insights and opinions. When people feel **included** and **listened to** they are much more likely to engage in meaningful and productive conversation. Don't be shy in asking; just remember to be present in listening.



To foster a culture in which value-added questions are the norm, start by demonstrating that you value your team's queries. Be careful not to be dismissive of questions. Rather, see them as mutual learning opportunities.

One of the best ways to create a culture that values good questions is to **role model** it. Practice asking questions to your team members – one-on-one and in meetings. This approach also serves to **acknowledge progress** and to **create company standards of best practices**. Consider the following questions:

- We've been working together for three hours today; what did we do best as a team?
- What enabled us to be successful in addressing our client's concerns?
- How can we apply what we are learning on this project to other project teams?

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."* Without consensus on the problem, you can't define a strategy to address it. *(Judith Ross, Harvard Business Review contributor).*

The Solution; in the Form of a Question

There is an art in asking the right kinds of questions, in the right way, and at the right time. It takes practice to integrate it into your conversations, your meetings and your culture. As you develop this leadership style, you'll find yourself segueing naturally into mentoring the kind of culture that fosters creative problem-solving and initiative-taking.

Take the K Challenge: How will you start using the power of good questions in your company? What kind of questions will you start asking?



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