

Leadership in the 21st Century – The Power of Questions Rather Than Answers

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Asking rather than telling, questions rather than answers, has become the key to leadership excellence. Peter Drucker noted that the leader of the past may have been a person who knew how to tell, but certainly the leader of the future will be a person who knows how to ask. With the growing complexity and speed of change, the traditional hierarchical model of leadership that worked yesterday will not work tomorrow. The leader simply won't know enough to adequately tell people what to do. No one person can master all the data needed to address the complex issues.

Over 2000 years ago, Socrates realized that leading was much more a matter of asking the right questions than of giving answers, and developed what he called the *dialectic* – a method of questioning in order to get at the truth. Leading with questions is a modern version of the dialectic, and will soon become a leader's most critical tool for integrating individuals, teams and the organization. Questions will become the essential means for leaders to enhance communications and improve the corporation's capability to think and act critically and successfully.

John Kotter, perhaps one of the most noted experts on the subject of leadership, writes that the primary difference between leaders and managers is that leaders are those who ask the right questions whereas managers are those tasked to answer those questions. Asking the right questions enables leader to discover what is the right thing to do; answering them allows managers to do the right thing.

Over the past decade, a growing number of leading organizational theorists such as Vail, Senge, Goleman and Sashkin as well as leading CEOs such as Jorge Ollila of Nokia, Bill Gates of Microsoft and Jack Welch of GE have also emphasized that the ability to ask questions has become the *key* competence of the leader of the 21st century.

Growing Recognition of the Importance of Questions

Today's leaders face the tremendous challenge of leading in an answer-oriented, fix-it-quick world where more people around them clamor for fast answers—sometimes any answer. Ironically, responding to such pressures will cast them adrift as they will be moving from impactful, long-term solutions to real problems.

More and more leaders are beginning to recognize that asking rather than telling, questions rather than answers, has become the key to success. The growing complexity and change negates what worked for leaders in traditional, stable environments. Solving today's problems requires creativity, energy, teamwork, and, most importantly, questioning skills

Leaders need to realize that statements alone do not lead to deep thinking; rather questions ultimately lead to breakthroughs in productivity or innovation. Leaders who lead with questions know that the quiet distinctions and fresh perspectives gained by questions reveal new possibilities.

Too few leaders lead with questions; rather they tend to dictate or debate rather than inquire and dialogue. Most leaders are unaware of amazing power of questions, and how they can generate short-term results and long-term learning and success. Leaders who do not ask questions tend to experience dire consequences. Most disasters share a common thread—the inability or unwillingness of the participants and leaders to raise questions about their concerns. Some group members may fear that they are the only one who has a particular concern (when, in fact, many people have similar concerns). Others feel that their question has already been answered in the minds of the other group members, and if they ask the question, it would be considered a dumb question—and they would be “put down” as being stupid or not going along with the group.

Why We Do Not Lead with Questions

Why do so few leaders ask questions. There are three primary reasons:

1. Negative psychological experience with asking or answering questions that has generated a fear and discomfort with questions
2. Lack of skills in asking or answering questions
 - Lack of experience or opportunities
 - Lack of training
 - Lack of modeling or mentoring
3. Corporate cultures and working environments which discourage questions, especially those that challenge existing assumptions and policies

Several years ago, Michael Hammer chronicled several corporate successes and failures. He examined why Wal-mart overcame Sears, why Pan Am became extinct, and why Howard Johnson was beaten by McDonald's, Burger King and KFC. All these failures, he concluded, shared one underlying cause—leadership did not ask the probing questions that might have led them to challenge their basic assumptions, to refresh their strategies, and to change their ways of operating. Such questions may have prevented the death or demise of these companies.

Power of Questions

Why are questions so important? What can questions do that statements cannot do?

Questions can elicit information, of course, but they can do much more. Great leaders use questions to encourage full participation and teamwork, to spur innovation and out-of-the box thinking, to empower others, to build relationships with customers, to solve problems, and to change culture. Questions wake people up. They prompt new

ideas. They show people new places, new ways of doing things. They help us become more confident communicators.

Let's explore in a little more depth how questions can do so many things much better than statements.

Decision-Making

Questions can help us to reframe the problem/task so we that identify the correct and most critical problem and systemically examine it. Questions generate open and productive dialogue around the issue and potential strategies; they enable creative, systems-thinking, and generate actionable strategies and commitments.

Energize People and Improve Interpersonal Relationships

Questions encourage and enable others to share and to "shine." They open people whereas statements cause resistance and fear. Questions allow us to show our interest, concern, caring, and support for others; they tend to unite whereas statements tend to create divisions. Questions focus our attention and cause us to listen more fully to each other.

Generate Learning

Questions cause the brain synapses to open and they remain open until we get the answer. Let's examine how we learn. Are any of you able to learn without reflecting? Are any of you able to reflect without a question addressed to you by someone else or yourself? Questions allow us to internalize and tailor the learning so that it is more permanent and relevant. Questions generate learning even beyond the intention of the questioner.

Build High Performing Teams

Questions help to develop teams that get results, get smarter, and enjoy working together. Questions build trust, collaboration and cohesion among team members. They help in clarifying and reaching consensus on goals and actions. Questions can enable members at different levels of authority and expertise to provide valuable contributions.

Develop Ourselves as Leaders

Through questions that leaders ask themselves, they:

- Become a better listener and communicator
- Build greater self-awareness and humility
- Become a better team member and leader
- Show courage and authenticity
- Engage in continuous learning and improvement

- Improve their systems-thinking and creativity
- Build and share visions

Judging versus Learning Types of Questions

There are two types of potential mindsets that may reside in the questioner: the learner and the judge. In the *learner* mindset, the questioner seeks to be responsive to circumstances. Thus, she is more likely to think objectively and strategically. The learner mindset seeks and creates solutions, and relates to others in a win-win manner. Leaders with a learning mindset tend to be more optimistic and presuppose new possibilities, a hopeful future, and sufficient resources. They exude optimism, possibilities and hope. They are thoughtful, flexible and accepting. Their relationships operate in a collaborative and innovative mode. They encourage workers to be more flexible, more open to new possibilities, and less attached to their opinions and the need to be right. Such leaders seek to strengthen people's ability to be conscious of their choices and responsible for their thoughts, feelings, behaviors and outcomes.

The *judge* mindset is reactive. It leads to over-emotional thinking and behavior. Leaders with the judging mindset tend to be more automatic and absolute in their actions; they emphasize negativity, pessimism, stress, and limited possibilities. The focus is more on problems than on solutions. Judging questions are inflexible and judgmental. For the judge, questions are more likely to be reactive to the situation, and thereby lead to automatic reactions, limitations, and negativity. Judging questions result in win-lose relating as they all too often operate in an "attack or defend" paradigm. Such questioners often deny self-responsibility and search for other people or circumstances for blame. Leaders with the judging mentality believe they know the answers already anyway.

Purpose of Questions

A key for leaders in asking questions is contextual. What do I want my questions to accomplish? Empowering questions get people to think and allow them to discover answers, thus developing responsibility and transference of ownership for results. So instead of asking what went wrong, the leader will tend to ask questions that focus on what has gone well, what could be done, how it could be improved. The focus remains on improvement and continuous learning rather than complaining and venting. By being open-minded and not negative, the leader encourages broader ranges of responses.

Powerful Questions

Ask powerful questions, questions which are open-ended rather than questions which are looking for a specific answer. Powerful questions often begin with "Why," "How," or "What do you think about...?" They get people to think and discover their own answers, thus developing responsibility and capability. Examples of open-ended questions include:

- Affective: encouraging sharing of feelings

- Reflective: encouraging more elaboration
- Probing: challenging basic assumptions
- Creating connections: creating systems perspectives
- Clarifying: improving the clarity of a message or statement
- Exploratory: opening up new avenues and insights that lead to new explorations
- Analytical: examining cause and effect, not just symptoms

Disempowering Questions

It is important to avoid using disempowering questions – ones that are negative, put people into a defensive mode, and drain energy. The “what’s wrong” questions tend to threaten self-esteem and discourage honesty, creativity, and collaboration.

Examples of such questions are the following:

- Leading Questions – “Isn’t it true...?”
- Multiple-Choice Questions – When the team doesn’t make the proper connection desired by the coach. Feels like an interrogation.
- Judgmental Questions –
 - What did the team do wrong here?
 - What mistakes were made regarding this issue?
 - Can someone help Andrew understand this point?
 - Why is the team taking so long to come up with a solution?

Art of Asking Questions

When asking questions, keep your focus on the questioner and the question, not on the million other concerns you may have. You can’t listen and think of the next thing that you are going to ask or say at the same time. Ask questions that help to open new possibilities, explore perceptions and assumptions, and provide new ways of evaluating the same data. The key to this skill is that you must be genuinely curious and not make the employee feel as though he or she is being judged, interrogated, or manipulated.

Try to ask one question at a time. Too often we overwhelm or confuse people by asking several questions simultaneously. Allow for a response before asking the next question. Many of us tend to ask questions one after another for three reasons: 1) to maintain “control of floor,” 2) because we may not be sure if and when we may get the next opportunity to ask a question, 3) because they have not thought through the question, and/or they want to control/manipulate the response to the first question. Such a questioning approach leads to responses of poor quality. People may resist multiple questions as they may feel like they are at an interrogation. Inexperienced or impatient questioners ask flurries of questions with more a desire to control than to seek the truth.

Leaders should not rush the responses to their questions. Allow for reflecting time when formulating questions. Not all questions need to be answered immediately. Give people time to mull over your request for information and develop some ideas. Putting

them under a tight deadline inhibits open-minded thinking. Time permitting, it's better to say, "Let's get together in a few days and bounce this around. In the meantime, give it some thought. I would like to have a few suggestions to check out."

The quality of the response is affected not only by the content of the question, but also by its manner of delivery, especially its pace and timing. Try to maintain a steady pace. Do not let your eye contact waiver and don't be afraid of silence. Silence tells the other person that you expect her to respond and to continue. Providing time and silence allows the other person to dig deeper into her thought process to answer the question.

Leaders may feel compelled to give "constructive" feedback rather than ask positive questions. If constructive feedback is needed, the best approach is to ask people what they think should be worked on. In most situations, people are aware of their shortcomings. When those areas are enumerated by them, you can suggest working on the one or two you think would be most beneficial. This makes you a coach, not a judge.

You don't need to shout or use high volume when asking questions. Often the softer the question is asked, the more powerful it is—unlike statements that may be more effective and have greater impact when delivered loud and strong. Use encouragers such as "I didn't know that, tell me more; what else happened."

Say "thank you" when you get a response. You'll likely get more and deeper answers the next time you ask. When your questions respect people's thought process, you support their questioning of long-held assumptions. It is much harder to ask skillful questions than to give advice. And, for years, managers have received positive feedback for having the answers and giving advice. But our answers work for us. The goal is for the employee to find the answer that works best for him or her.

The Benefits of Great Questions

Great questions empower people, and instill in them a sense of their own strength and efficacy. When you are truly asking, you are sending the message that the subordinate's ideas are good, maybe even better than your own. In addition to conveying respect, questions encourage the other person to become a thinker and problem-solver.

Effective and empowering questions benefit the organization in a number of ways:

1. Creating clarity through such a question as: "Can you explain what happened?"
2. Building better working and personal relations: "How has your workplace learning strategy been working?"
3. Helping people think analytically and critically: "What are the consequences of this action?"
4. Inspiring people to view things in fresh, unpredictable ways: "Why does this strategy always work?"
5. Encouraging breakthrough thinking: "Can this process be improved?"
6. Challenging assumptions: "Why do we always choose this training method?"

7. Generating ownership of solutions: “What actions do you suggest we take?”

Skills of a Questioning Leader

In summary, there are 7 key skills for a leader in asking questions:

1. Ability to ask questions
2. Courage and authenticity
3. Timing in questions
4. Careful listening
5. Strong commitment to learning
6. Positive, supportive attitude toward others
7. Self-awareness and self-confidence

Developing the Ability to Ask Great Questions

Albert Einstein, one of the greatest thinkers of all time, was once asked why he spent his valuable time tutoring a 4-year old boy in mathematics. His reply, “Because he asks such great questions!” We all have the ability to ask great questions. We are born with it. Every child in the world asks great questions when they are 2-3 years of age. And then the parents, and the teachers, and the bosses tell us to stop asking questions. We lose our most valuable attribute and skill. And now organizations are expecting leaders and workers to all ask better questions – to enable the organization to better survive and succeed in the global business world.

How can we re-capture this innate ability? The simple answer is through “practice.” We need to focus on coming up with “great questions.” Continuous practicing and application of questioning will improve our skill of asking better and better questions. And we should regularly ask ourselves:

- What is the quality of our questions?
- What is preventing us from asking better questions?
- How could we ask better questions?

Conclusion

Leaders who are unaware of the potential of questions needlessly engage in a fractious, pressure-filled existence. Leaders who lead with questions will create a more humane workplace as well as a more successful business. Leaders who use questions truly empower people and change organizations.