

LEADING WITH QUESTIONS

by Greg Bustin

Leaders are problem solvers.

It's okay to admit that you're better than most people at fixing things. I'm not talking about being handy around the house. I'm referring to your ability to fix business problems affecting your organization.

You're a potent combination of characteristics that have propelled you into the upper echelons of your organization, perhaps all the way to the top: technical ability, problem-solving acuity, seasoned judgment, a keen sense of urgency.

When you see that something's not as it should be, you move quickly to fix it. You assess the situation, formulate possible options, select the best one, then direct your colleagues to implement that option.

The result is that a potential problem is avoided or an actual problem is solved. You've achieved a positive outcome in the short run. But is it the best outcome? What effect is your behavior having in the long run on your organization and your colleagues?

Good leaders are problem solvers. Exceptional leaders are great questioners.

The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates popularized a form of inquiry and discussion between individuals that was based on asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking and to illuminate ideas.

So when you stop acting like Mr. Goodwrench and start leading like Socrates, you will find that occasionally setting aside your direct approach and adopting a more inquisitive one will change you and your organization for the better.

Exceptional leaders are great questioners.

The Power of Questions

Questions wield enormous power. And the most powerful questions are often simple ones, which don't always translate to easy answers.

Asking questions is a conversation—a journey to a new destination traveled together.

The opposite also is true. Consider the impact of leading a team or an organization where questions go unanswered or—worse—unasked.

First, a reluctance to ask a question diminishes confidence. If you fear embarrassment from asking a so-called dumb question, you'll reach a point at which you choose to remain silent. The flip side of this coin is a reluctance to admit you don't know the answer to a question. Either way, this kind of fear imprisons you and eventually puts a major dent in your self-esteem. This kind of fear also likely places a ceiling on your career.

Second, a reluctance to ask a question hinders individual and organizational performance. How many times have you left a meeting where the purpose of the meeting, the decisions made in the meeting, and the next steps coming out of the meeting were fuzzy? Asking questions brings clarity to purpose, decisions, and tasks. *Are we addressing the right opportunity? What do we want to accomplish? Who will do what by when?* If those issues are not clear, the chances of achieving the outcome we say we want are reduced.

Third, a reluctance to ask a question hinders intellectual growth. Life is not a multiple choice exam, so those in the workplace are well advised to learn that the way

a question is asked often determines the quality and practical application of the answer. What's more, when questions are asked, those on the receiving end of the question learn just as much—about a situation, themselves, and the person posing the question—as the questioner. Asking questions improves listening skills, strengthens problem-solving abilities and fosters innovation.

Fourth, a reluctance to ask questions hinders teamwork. High-performing teams are built on a foundation of trust. It's easier to ask the tough, necessary question if you're confident the people around the table have each other's best interests and the best interests of the organization in mind. Questions promote self-awareness and create a professional framework for resolving conflicts. Are the questions being asked in your organization posed to learn or to judge?

Fifth, a reluctance to ask questions hinders organizational growth. A so-called dumb question can unlock an organization's potential or fix a problem that adds hundreds of thousands of dollars of profitability. Asking questions allows a problem or opportunity to be considered from a fresh perspective. It's staggering to think where some organizations would be today if the obvious question—*Why do we do this that way?*—had not been asked. A questioning organization is a growing organization: It encourages questions, challenges assumptions, learns from experiences, and embraces the type of positive change that allows it to achieve and sustain high performance.

Let's examine three scenarios where leading with questions can deliver powerful outcomes.

Life is not a multiple choice exam.

Unlocking Organizational Performance

Scenario 1: Leading with questions to unlock organizational potential

When Peter Drucker died in 2005, Jack Welch, former chairman of General Electric Co. and regarded as one of the most successful business leaders of his time, called Drucker “the greatest management thinker of the last century.”

Drucker was a master at posing the deceptively simple question that could unlock potential in people and, ultimately, in organizations.

Early in Welch’s new role as CEO of GE, he invited Drucker to the company’s headquarters. Drucker posed two questions to Welch that shaped the CEO’s long-term strategy: “If you weren’t already in a business, would you enter it today?” “And if the answer is ‘No,’ what are you going to do about it?”

These two simple yet pointed questions prompted Welch to insist that every GE business had to be either number one or number two in its class. If one was not, the business was fixed, sold, or closed. The strategy that transformed GE into one of the most successful American corporations of the past twenty-five years started with two questions posed by Drucker.

One of Drucker’s guiding principles was the belief that “what everybody knows is frequently wrong.”

Whether or not you agree with this premise, consider posing one or two of the following questions to your team of leaders the next time you’re together at one of your regular meetings:

- Do we really know how we make money? Are we crystal clear on why our customers buy from us instead of our competition?
- What are the barriers customers and prospects must overcome to do business with us? What can we do to make it easier for them to become major users?
- What are the barriers we can remove to make it easier for our employees to give us their best?

High-performing teams are built on a foundation of trust.

- How do we encourage the best ideas from the most people?

You likely already know the answers to these questions. How would those with whom you work answer them?

The lesson: *Encourage questions to build trust and teamwork and you’ll ultimately discover new solutions to old problems.*

Developing Talent

Scenario 2: Leading with questions to develop talent

Exceptional leaders may be the first to identify that something needs fixing, but they resist the urge to jump in and solve the problem themselves.

Rushing to rescue a colleague who’s pursuing a course of action that may not produce the desired result limits that colleague’s independent problem-solving ability. Your colleague thinks, “Well, I guess that’s what my boss really wants me to do. . . .”

Such behavior by any leader short-circuits a colleague’s ability to assess the issue, develop questions, and select a solution. You may have solved the problem quicker or better if you’d done it yourself, but in the long run, you’re hijacking the ability of those who work for you to perform at a higher level and grow to their full potential. In essence, you’re allowing them to rent your solution versus developing, owning, and being accountable for a solution—and outcome—that is theirs.

Leaders who are frustrated with the apparent inability of their direct reports to solve problems should ask themselves:

- What role do I play that's preventing my colleagues from thinking for themselves?
- Am I prepared to let them learn by allowing them to fail?

The next time one of your leaders brings you a problem they expect you to solve, ask:

1. What's the problem you're trying to solve?
2. What are three options for solving it?
3. Which of those three options is the best solution?
4. What decision would you make if you were me?
5. What's keeping you from making that decision on your own?

Until you hold yourself accountable for requiring your leaders to bring you solutions and not problems, the ability of your organization to grow and flourish will be directly proportional to the amount of work you can personally oversee.

Old Habits Die Hard

Learning new behaviors takes time. It takes time for you to accept that you don't have to be the smartest person in the room. It takes time for you to develop the patience and skill of asking questions to help people develop their problem-solving abilities. And it takes time for those who have been bringing you their problems to become convinced you're serious about making them think for themselves.

I travel a lot and recently found myself in the Qantas lounge in Sydney a couple of hours before my flight. I couldn't help but overhear one side of a conversation between a leader and a colleague that went something like this:

"Bring me up to speed. What's going on?" the leader asked his colleague. He listened to the answer.

"What did you do?" the leader wanted to know, and then listened.

"What did you say?" Pause.

"What did he say?" Pause.

"Okay," said the leader to his colleague, "here's what you're going to have to do. . . ."

This leader felt compelled to solve the problem. He'd heard enough, sorted through possible solutions, picked one he thought was best, and told his colleague what to do. His questions were not designed to coach his colleague. He simply wanted a briefing so he could tell his colleague what to do.

Great leaders help those they work with explore and discover their own paths to professional success and personal fulfillment. They accomplish this not by blurting out advice or jumping to conclusions but by asking probing questions that challenge assumptions and lead people to reach their own conclusions. And then they wait for the person with the problem to figure out the best possible solution.

The lesson: Develop the patience and discipline to require those who work for you to develop their own solutions so when they come to you it's to confirm their answers and not answer their questions.

Addressing Underperformance

Scenario 3: Leading with questions to address underperformance

Knowing to ask questions is not enough. Asking the right question is essential. General questions ("How's it going?") yield general responses ("Fine").

Avoid accepting the pat answer. They may be telling you what they think you want to hear.

In 1901, American scientist Charles Sanders Peirce reasoned that twenty questions held the mathematical potential to single out one subject from among thousands of possible subjects. "Twenty skillful hypotheses," Peirce wrote, "will ascertain what two hundred thousand stupid ones might fail to do."

Twenty Questions became a radio program in the 1930s, and on November 2, 1949, the first episode of the television version was broadcast.

Avoid accepting the pat answer.

In each case, a premium was placed on asking the right questions, as this story—perhaps apocryphal—illustrates.

In a bygone era, when freight trains and passenger liners shared the rails, simple signals were established to warn conductors of impending danger. A common hazard involved two trains arriving at a station within minutes of one another with one train stopped on the track as a second train approached the station.

Once, following a nighttime collision of two trains in which, remarkably, no people were injured, the ensuing investigation centered on whether or not the crew of the stopped freight train had flagged, or warned, the approaching passenger train sufficiently.

Appearing under oath, the freight train's rear brakeman was asked a series of questions about his method of signaling the oncoming train. In each case the brakeman provided truthful replies.

Yet because assumptions were made by those asking the questions, the brakeman was not asked the obvious and most essential question—"Was the lantern you were using to signal the train lit?"—the investigation was closed because no clear determination of cause, neglect, or fault could be found.

When resolving thorny issues, strained relationships, and difficult decisions, smart leaders ask questions about things others may take for granted.

The Iceberg Conversation

Less than 20 percent of an iceberg is above the water's surface and visible.

To address underperformance, you must figure out what's happening below the surface, the part you

may not be able to see. What is the underperformer thinking? Feeling? Have that person's beliefs changed? How aware is the person that his or her performance is falling short?

When you see material changes in someone's performance, whether it's a top performer or an average performer, you will need to figure out what's happening in their life to account for the drop-off in their performance.

Sit down with an underperforming colleague and bring your curiosity to this conversation to understand what's causing the problem. Questions are less likely to put the person on the defensive, and questions help you avoid making incorrect assumptions about a person and a particular behavior. Learn what's going on beneath the surface. Determine whether the person is able and willing to improve. You cannot want success for them more than they want it for themselves.

To help determine your next course of action, ask the person who is underperforming to answer questions such as these:

- How would you describe the situation?
- What am I—your supervisor—missing?
- Are the expectations clear?
- What does high performance look like?
- If you could do it again, what would you do differently?
- What's *your* plan for getting your performance back on track?
- What's the first step you plan to take?
- If you were me, what action would you take?
- What can I do to help you achieve the expected result?

The outcome of your iceberg conversation with an underperformer should help you answer this question, which can be the most difficult of all: "How much more of my time am I willing to invest in this underperformer to allow him or her to get performance back on track?"

The lesson: *Ask open-ended questions to determine whether the performance issues are related to an ability to do the work (skill) or a willingness to do the work (will).*

Learning from Children

We can learn from children.

They ask questions all the time. Unexpected questions. Tough questions. Perplexing questions.

Children seem to have an unlimited source of questions.

Children are relentless questioners. Their curiosity is compelling. And they're fearless. They'll ask anything, including the awkward question. Yet they ask their questions with a pureness of heart and a desire to understand and learn that leaders would do well to emulate.

Because somewhere along their way to adulthood—typically in the early years of school—children learn to ask fewer questions and, instead, begin to memorize the answers that have been handed to them. Children learn that asking questions can get you laughed at. “What a stupid question!” Children learn that asking questions reveals a lack of understanding. “He doesn't get it!” Children learn that asking questions slows everyone down in our fast, faster, fastest get-it-done-now world.

So by the time kids grow up to become adults and enter the workforce, the curiosity that was so compelling a few years earlier has been stifled. Caution has replaced fearlessness. Memorization has replaced thinking. And the ability to master the science and art of asking questions is rarely exercised.

Answers are important. The right answers propel people, businesses, schools, churches, and governments to new levels of success.

Yet more often than not, the best answers come from great questions.

Want to be a better leader? Unleash your inner kid and start leading with questions.



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