

WHY SHOULD LEADERS ASK QUESTIONS?

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Imagine you're at a weekend "strategic" planning retreat with your fellow managers. Now imagine how the meeting would go if it starts in one of two ways:

1. *Making a statement:* "I think we should increase revenue 25% next year."
2. *Asking a question:* "What should our sales goals be for next year?"

The first approach, making a statement, *shuts down* discussion, particularly if it's the boss speaking. But asking a question *opens* discussion: a question about sales can be answered in terms of revenue *or* unit volume *or* percentages of repeat sales *or* of new sales—any number of ways. If you've shut down discussion, you've shut down ideas and commitment.

Why asking questions is so powerful

Our common sense tells us asking questions is better for leadership and planning because it:

1. Stimulates new ideas from different perspectives
2. Reveals hidden assumptions
3. Reveals how people think and what they know
4. Shows respect for others' ideas
5. Conveys humility, that we don't know everything
6. Gives people time to think
7. Promotes shared understanding

On this last point: Shared understanding frees the leader to delegate. If they're confident managers understand how all the pieces fit together, they'll be confident the managers will make good decisions as similar issues pop up. The leader who can't delegate, can't grow past their own abilities.

Have a little faith, like Jack Welch

We forget to ask questions because we're taught logic and reason can solve anything. But that's not true: creativity, judgment, and courage are equally important, if subconscious processes. Asking good questions taps this power. Remember what happens if you don't "listen to our gut."

Get system

Having a system for asking questions prevents the ego from overriding common sense and making us more argumentative than inquisitive. 3GoodQuestions.com is 1-page framework for asking, organized around the basic management disciplines: business structure, marketing and sales, operation, IT, human resources, and finance.

A good facilitator can use this tool to engage all the managers and make sure they leave the meeting confident they've covered all the bases. (Who hasn't been on a retreat where one guy blows the whole meeting on one topic?)

Another reminder about good questions

Good questions are open-ended, objective, and interesting. A good reminder is Kipling's poem:

I keep six honest working men,
They taught me all I knew:
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.

Einstein's mother used to ask him after school each day, "What's the best question you asked today?"