

# The Magic of a Question

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Communication is a skill. It requires an ability to both talk and listen.

Communication is an art. It requires an ability to create a connection with people in all walks of life.

Communication is a talent. It requires an ability to adjust to share information in a hallway discussion, a staff meeting, a group presentation, and a host of other situations.

Communication is a minimum requirement for a workplace leader. You cannot succeed as a lead worker, supervisor, manager or executive until you master the skill, art, and talent of communication.

But there is a detour on the road to effective communication as a workplace leader. Think about it this way:

Who gets promoted to an open first line supervisor position? Is it the good employee who is always quiet, keeps their head down, and rarely says anything? Is it the loud mouth who blurts out answers or opinions in response to every comment? Or is it the talented, knowledgeable employee who usually has the answers to technical questions and sound logical information to share?

Most often it is the talented, knowledgeable employee who has answers. They hear a question and provide an answer. They hear an incorrect statement and interject to correct it. They offer their opinions, when asked, based on sound logic and reasoning.

The ability of this talented employee to share information is a great foundation for a leadership role. But the job of a leader involves more than just having answers and sharing sound opinions. It involves hiring, training, coaching people to succeed in their role as a member of a team. Those people expect their supervisor to listen, understand, and consider their thoughts, experiences, opinions, emotions. You cannot do that if your main communication skill is giving answers and expressing opinions – no matter how sound or valid they may be.

Put another way, a famous industrialist once said, "The problem with hiring people is that you get more than the strength of their muscles and the dexterity of

their hands." In other words, people need more than an answer or an opinion to be successful.

If you pay close attention in the workplace, you will see a clear difference between a supervisor who struggles to get people to get things done and one who seems to be a master at motivating people to reach insurmountable heights. If you study the two supervisors long enough, you will often find that the one who succeeds has a unique ability to:

## ASK QUESTIONS AND LISTEN TO ANSWERS.

The ability to ask a question is one of the most underrated responsibilities of a workplace leader. The ability to listen to the answer to a question is right behind it.

A question does three things for you in your role as a supervisor including:

1. It provides a **break** in a conversation. In other words, it allows you to stop talking, take a breath, and not worry for a second about what to say.
2. It invites the other person to share **more** of their thoughts, experiences, and perspectives. When you are talking, you are not learning. When you are listening, you are collecting useful data to help you make a decision.
3. It creates an **"ah-hah"** moment that enables you to see what the other person really wants or why he or she does not understand or is not accepting your message.

A question cannot stand all by itself. The listener has to understand why you are asking it. For example:

- You know Jacky, I think we both want the same thing here, but we are seeing this issue differently. I think you see this issue as a higher priority than I do. Can you help me understand why it is so important to you?

It is not enough to ask a question. Your question must be presented in a way that says, "I am really

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interested in your answer.” That message is not delivered with words. It is delivered with eye contact, body posture, tone, and inflection. In a sense, you have to look in the mirror and put your headset on to see and hear yourself asking your question, not through your eyes and ears, but through the eyes and ears of the other person in the conversation.

Asking a question is only the beginning. You must also hear the answer. We often hear only a small part of an answer. As soon as we get enough of a sense of what we think the other person is saying, we begin to frame our answer. In other words, we stop listening and start writing our rebuttal speech! The techniques of **effective listening** help you to push back against this natural instinct. They include:

- Listening with your full attention by forcing yourself to set aside other thoughts and distractions (including your Blackberry).
- Sending confirming signals (i.e., eye contact, nodding, “I see,” etc.) to the speaker to indicate that they have your full attention. (This does not usually include completing sentences for the speaker.)
- Waiting for the speaker to finish before responding and confirming that they have said everything that they have to say.
- Restating the message you received (i.e., I think that I am hearing you say that...) and asking the speaker to confirm that you received the correct message (i.e., “Is that what you are saying?”)
- Asking for permission to share your perspective on the issue (i.e., May I share my thoughts on this issue with you?)

The techniques of effective listening may do not apply to every conversation, but they do apply to important conversations.

So what are those important conversations? They are the conversations that are important to the person on the other side of your desk. A few examples include:

- **Work Assignments:** Darlene, this is an important assignment. I want to be sure you understand what I am expecting from you. Let me ask you to summarize the end-result

you are expected to produce and the steps you are going to take to accomplish it.

- **Corrective Action:** Lee, this is a formal written reminder about tardiness. It is very important for you to be at work on time each day that you are scheduled to work. Do you understand that it is very important for you to immediately start meeting this expectation? (Wait for answer.) Do you have any questions for me?
- **Frustration:** Theotus, I can see that you are very upset. I want to understand your concerns. I would like to ask you to slow down a little bit and start from the beginning. You know a lot more about this than I do. Walk me through the steps that led to this situation?
- **Excuses (aka explanations):** Lynne, I understand that you think the new database is difficult because it is very different from the old one. You have attended the class. Maria has been working with you to help you adapt to the new system. Is there anything that I can do to help you adjust to the new system?

The ability to ask a question and listen to an answer is an important tool in your leadership tool box. It is a skill that you need to rehearse, practice, and perfect throughout your career as a workplace leader.

Before we close, we need to look at one other situation where asking a question and listening to the answer is critical to your success as a workplace leader. It is:

How am I doing as your supervisor?

You can ask it in your own words, but you should ask it on a regular basis. You should use effective listening to be sure you hear the answer.

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