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Asking the Right Questions

[By Chris Musselwhite, MA, MSIE, EdD]

As a middle to senior-level manager, you know that you're supposed to keep the big picture of your company's business objectives and goals in mind. But with the daily chores of problem solving and hands-on management, you just don't have the time. It's not happening the way it should, and you don't know how to fix it.

What makes it even more frustrating is that you've seen other managers who do seem to have the time for that high-level focus. They don't stagger under the weight of daily operations and of problems that should have been solved lower on the organizational chart. How do they do it? Do they struggle too, but hide it better? Are their employees more competent?

You can develop your ability to manage and grow a team that can work efficiently and effectively without constant supervision. You can do this with the staff you already have. And the path to get there may be simpler than you imagined.

In my work with managers of companies ranging from start-ups to multi-nationals, and even in my own experience as a business owner, I've found that the most underused, undervalued, and effective technique for encouraging initiative and independent decision making is the skill of asking effective questions.

My company is typical of many small businesses in that everyone on the staff must be confident and capable of acting with minimal supervision. We use questions to encourage our employees to stretch themselves and take ownership of their responsibilities — whether they're high-level managers or entry-level assistants. We find that if an employee doesn't respond with an expanded sense of confidence and responsibility, then the way he or she does respond exposes bigger issues that need to be addressed, and this gives us

the information we need to make smart decisions about the employee's future development.

You're thinking it's got to be more complicated than just saying, "Good question — what do you think?" Well, yes, you do need to ask the right questions at the right time with the right intent, but let's start with the simple fact that asking questions of people inspires them to think and act independently.

Let's look at a couple of factors that are important for success. The first step is to make sure that you're in the right frame of mind to make it work. You'll want to remember that this technique will not only help you become a better manager, it'll also help you discover things you didn't know about your department and your employees. It may change the way you view situations and give you a new vantage point from which to make decisions.

You also need to be sure that you're really ready to delegate downward. If you aren't quite ready to take that step, your questions will probably take the form of leading questions that have an assumed right answer. Your employees may see your questioning as a waste of their time and perhaps a threatening exercise, and they'll continue chasing you down the halls for your opinion about everything from new business development to which brand of printer paper to order.

Next, diagnose where you stand when it comes to your own questioning style. The

next time an employee comes to you with a question or problem, count the number of questions you ask them and the number of opinions you voice.

Note the style of questions you tend to ask. Are they challenging questions ("Have you even thought about this particular solution?"), your opinion disguised as questions ("Don't you think that this approach is best?"), or truly clarifying questions ("What have you considered so far?")?

Your goal is to ask just the clarifying questions and forget about the rest. They're unproductive and will only create stress for your employees.

With this baseline, you can start applying this skill. But wait! One more thing.

Because any change in your behavior can be confusing or frightening to your staff, it's important to sit down with them and explain what you're doing and why. If they simply see a change in you that they don't understand, they may view it as a negative experience or something to resist.

After all that set-up, the next step will sound anticlimactic. It's incredibly simple, but does require focus and commitment.

Each time an employee asks you a question that is a request to problem-solve or take on unwelcome responsibility, ask at least three questions before venturing an opinion. That's it. Just ask three productive questions to



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find out what information the employee has already gathered and if he knows enough to make a recommendation. If he can, reinforce the behavior with a positive response and encourage him to go ahead and make the decision on his own.

If he can't, suggest that he collect the information he'll need, and then come back to you when he feels he can make a recommendation.

In the back of your mind, you'll want to remember that change is going to take a little time — it won't happen overnight — but the pay-off will be there in the end. After just a few rounds of this, your employees should begin to work through problems on their own, only bringing you problems that really do need your attention, along with recommendations for a solution.

A culture will begin to develop where individuals are expected to actively take responsibility, seek solutions, and take action. You'll gain the freedom to lead and to focus on strategy and development.

What if you don't see results right away? If your employees don't quickly start to rise to the occasion, one of three things is happening:

1. It's just the initial stumbling block you'll encounter if your employees are cemented into their behaviors.

They'll push back, trying to get you to act in the way they've come to expect. Assume that it will be awkward at first as everyone gets used to it. Explain again the purpose of the questions, and then give it a little more time.

2. You have some gaps in training and skills that are stopping your employees from reaching their potential. You should be able to identify those areas through your questioning and address them with hard skills and subject matter training, or perhaps a program of organizational development and coaching.
3. After addressing 1 and 2, if a single employee isn't responding while the rest of the team is improving, that particular employee may not be a good fit for your organization. The questioning technique sometimes reveals an inability to take on the responsibility necessary to get the job done. In that case, you have to face a decision that's made easier by the clarifying questioning you've been asking.

If you think this technique of asking the right questions at the right time with the right intent sounds simple, then you probably haven't tried it. It may sound simple, but it's certainly not

easy. I've worked with managers who literally cannot ask questions before offering solutions and advice. They — like you — have reached a level of success because they are so good at problem solving and giving hands-on direction. But as your organization grows and you're looking to the future, the time has come to switch gears from "managing" to "leading." To get to the next level, you'll need to step outside of your comfortable position as head problem solver and start developing your people to pick up where you left off.

Excellent leadership isn't about having all the answers. That's just ego and habit. It's about building an organization where people — yourself included — are able to confidently take ownership of their responsibilities. And there's no better way than asking questions to help them gain the confidence they'll need to ensure their success, and yours.

About the Author

Chris Musselwhite, MA, MSIE, EdD, is the author of *Dangerous Opportunity: Making Change Work* and the CEO and founder of Discovery Learning, Inc., a leadership development products and consulting company. He can be reached at cmusselwhite@discoverylearning.com.

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