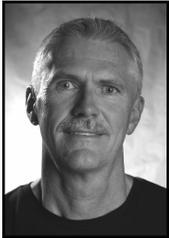


"Nothing is so well learned as that which is discovered." - Socrates

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The Art of Asking Questions - An Untapped Source for Effective Coaching

By Chris Musselwhite, Ed.D.

Effective leaders face the developmental challenge of transitioning from being the "go-to" person with the answers to modeling asking good questions so others can learn to think for themselves.

If you could develop a leadership skill that was simple, inexpensive and enabled you to get more done by doing less, would you be interested? Would the managers you work with be interested? You might be surprised to learn that the skill I'm referring to is the ability to ask good questions. In fact, I believe that the ability to ask good questions is quite possibly one of the most effective and under-utilized leadership competencies of managers and leaders today. This seemingly simple but surprisingly difficult skill is worth looking into. It will not only help you become more effective at managing and developing others, it can contribute to improved problem-solving, better decision-making and increased capacity for organizational learning—all of which can add to increased organizational agility.

"The ability to ask good questions . . . can add to increased organizational agility."

Asking questions has long been recognized as an effective teaching tool. Socrates believed that the best way to further learning was through discussion led by an instructor who only asked questions. This process of discovery through questioning is at the heart of the Socratic Method.

But like many leadership competencies, asking good questions is harder than it sounds. Why? It's likely that the problem-solving ability and business expertise of successful leaders have propelled them upward in their careers. They have been rewarded for providing answers

and scoring wins for their organizations. One of the toughest developmental challenges for someone advancing in an organization is to shift from being the "go-to person" to getting things done through others.

In fact, one of the most frequent complaints I encounter comes from managers who are frustrated by employees who constantly come to them for help with problems that they believe the employees should be able to handle on their own. A common refrain I hear is this: "I have no time to get my work done. He constantly comes to me with problems that he should be able to solve. That's why I gave him this job. What am I paying him for anyway?"

Generally, this happens for a fairly obvious reason. When managers always provide answers, they teach people to come to them for help. In addition, the manager's reputation as a problem-solver may be intimidating to others. So for the employee, the question becomes: "Do I take a chance and solve this problem myself, or do I go to the person with the proven track record?"

Other than the consideration of the manager's available time, a bigger reason should concern the manager. In a role with expanded responsibilities, a manager who is becoming a leader must learn to transition from star problem-solver into a coach and developer of others. Problem-solving is a management skill, while getting things done through others is a leadership skill.

When done with the right intention, asking questions is non-confrontational and often frees up people to see

(Continued on page 2)

(Continued from page 1)

things differently without feeling intimidated, attacked, or second-guessed. This creates space for new and better ideas while allowing proposed solutions to be tested. The result is increased confidence in that person's own problem-solving and decision-making abilities, and improved decision-making for the entire organization.

Asking good questions of others, giving them time to respond, and then listening to their responses are all very effective strategies for developing people and unlocking their potential. Not only will managers build others' confidence in their problem-solving abilities, the managers will discover where their employees need development.

Coaching for Problem-solving Capacity

Asking questions rather than expressing their opinions communicates that leaders believe employees have the ability to find their own answers. This demonstrates confidence in their ability and offers them an opportunity to take appropriate risks. While initially it may be faster simply to provide the answer, it does not send a positive message; and, if done repeatedly, always providing the answer may even result in people feeling undervalued or incapable.

Helping others learn to come to their own conclusions rather than guiding them to come to leader's own answers is a key quality of an effective coach. The wisdom of teaching people to fish versus providing them food is at the heart of asking good questions. Leaders can provide quick answers that seem obvious to them, or they can model their own problem-solving and decision-making processes by asking clarifying questions. Effective leaders help make each decision a

better one while giving others the skills they will need in the future to make better decisions on their own..

Developing managers who learn good decision-making skills and good coaching skills will help ensure for their organization a full pipeline of management talent. When leaders coach others in problem-solving and decision-making by asking good questions, others not only benefit from the leaders' coaching, they learn to coach others as well. Developing this leadership skill is more important than ever in light of the impending baby-boomer retirements and subsequent knowledge drain expected over the next few years.

Different Questions for Different Goals

Several categories of questions can be useful in coaching good problem-solving and decision-making skills. What questions leaders should ask depends on their goals at that time in the process.

“Problem solving is a management skill, while getting things done through others is a leadership skill.”

Problem Clarity – Uncovering the Real Problem

The first and most important category of questions includes those that are designed to determine problem clarity. Nothing is more frustrating or demoralizing than to put lots of energy and effort into a decision only to discover that one has been working on the wrong problem. The energy and effort are sincere but the outcome is ineffective and contributes to a lack of confidence. If leaders cannot clearly define the key

problem, they cannot make effective decisions. The coaching questions to ask at this point center on gaining a clear understanding of the problem at hand. How is the problem being framed and interpreted? Who has a different take on the problem and why? What is the scope of the problem, and are the consequences of appropriate and inappropriate action understood?

Information Gathering – Determining What One Needs To Know To Solve the Problem

The second category of questions focuses on gathering the information one needs to solve that problem. These include questions about what one knows and does not know, and what others know and do not know. Does the leader know what to ask for and whom to ask? Does the leader have the relationships necessary to secure the information needed?

Commitment – Understanding Whose Support Is Needed To Implement the Decision.

The third category of questions focuses on an understanding of the commitment needed from others to implement the solution. Whose buy-in is needed and what level of commitment will be necessary? Who should be included, to what degree and at what stage in the process? Who wants to be involved and who has other priorities?

Goal Alignment – Acknowledging Pockets of Support and Resistance.

The fourth category of questions can help employees explore issues around goal alignment. These questions can help to uncover possible points for agreement as well as conflict in the implementation of the decision. These conflicts may be among the stakeholders themselves, or between stakeholders and the

organization. How will this decision be impacted by organizational silos? What are the office politics that might impact implementation? Who will be threatened by the decision?

Time – Understanding How Much You Have

The fifth category of questions should help leaders assess how critical a factor time is in each situation. These are questions that explore the urgency of the problem at hand as well as the opportunity cost of including people in problem-solving and decision-making processes. Time will dictate both how the problem is approached and how the solution will be implemented. How critical is time? Does the organization have an hour, a day or a month? What is the consequence of taking too much time? Of deciding too quickly? What will people not be doing if they are participating in problem-solving meetings?

The Bigger Goal: Fostering a Learning Organization

In some organizational cultures, a mistaken perception exists that only certain people have the right answers, for example, consultants, the person with the right credentials, or certain positions of authority. This misperception limits the capacity of people and their organizations to learn and to adjust to changing circumstances. If problems are viewed as bad and something to be avoided, people in that organization are more likely to avoid, deny, or cover up problems in an attempt to protect themselves from blame.

Looking at it from the opposite perspective one can easily see that it is far more beneficial (and less expensive in the long run) to cultivate a culture of empowerment and responsibility focused on solving problems as they surface. Such a culture is characteristic of an organization that is constantly

learning and is at the heart of what noted learning theorist Chris Argyris calls “double-loop learning.”

Argyris postulates that learning involves the “detection and correction of error.” Where something goes wrong, most people look for a way to respond to the problem within the established paradigm of the organization. In Argyris’ words, “goals, values, plans and rules are

“One’s intention is the difference between coaching and coercing.”

operationalized rather than questioned.” He calls this single-loop learning.

An alternative response is to subject the accepted goals, values, plans and rules to critical scrutiny in the attempt to correct error. This is called double-loop learning. Argyris notes that this learning may lead to changes in the established paradigm, creating a shift in the way problems and solutions are framed. In addition to expanding the possible solutions, this method provides a better chance of ensuring that the problem will not reoccur, because the system in which it occurred is now changed.

Coach, Don’t Coerce

Knowing that one needs to ask questions and what questions to ask is just the beginning. How a leader asks questions is crucial. If the way leaders ask questions makes others feel confronted rather than supported, the leaders will not get the desired end result. One’s intention is the difference between coaching and coercing. Behind the coaching process is the simple but essential belief that while individual leaders have an inner wisdom that can give them the guidance and understanding

they need, it is often obscured by inner and outer interference.

Good coaching helps individuals work through this interference. To become an effective coach, leaders have to make sure their intentions are not coercive. Effective coaches should:

- Remember they are trying to help the person being coached to understand the situation, not fix it for them.
 - Make sure they are not just trying to make themselves look good. Good coaches never forget the goal is for the team (the organization) to win, not to be the star player.
 - Make sure they are not trying to make the person being coached understand the leader’s perception of the problem. Coaches must keep in mind that their job is to ask the questions; the job of the one being coached is to come up with the answers.
- Be open to questioning one’s own assumptions and beliefs. Recognize when a question is not a question but rather just advice or suggestions disguised as a question. Ask clarifying questions, not leading ones.

Conclusion

While it may be difficult, learning the art of asking good questions is definitely worth the effort required. Mastering this highly under-utilized leadership skill will not only help leaders become more effective at managing and developing others, it will contribute to improved problem solving, better decision making and increased capacity for learning throughout an organization — all of which add to increased organizational agility. And at the end of the day, the biggest personal payoff for leaders may be the increased time they realize in their day after their employees start solving problems and making decisions without them. •

What's happening at DLI?

Train the Trainer Scheduled:

We will be holding a Train the Trainer session on March 13 & 14, 2007 in our office in Greensboro, NC. The session is the first step in the certification process for our popular *PressTime*® simulation. Participants completing this session and fulfilling other requirement will be listed as certified *PressTime* trainers on the Discovery Learning website.



New online article:

Chris Musselwhite's article "Building a High-Performance Culture" was posted in October on Inc.com's website. The article discusses how building corporate culture correlates to the level of performance you want your company to achieve. To see the article visit www.inc.com and go to their Leadership section or go directly to <http://www.inc.com/resources/leadership/articles/20060901/musselwhite.html> to view the article.

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