



Are You Asking The Right Questions?

The right questions lead to the right answers

Could this tip, borrowed from the human potential movement, hold the key to making your organization more energy-efficient? “The quality of your life will be greatly influenced by the quality of the questions you ask.”

Over the years I’ve worked with owners and managers representing more than 2 billion square feet of building space in the U.S.. In every case, our mutual goal was saving energy. Looking back on that broad range of engagements, I have to say that many of the successes we enjoyed were directly related to the quality of the questions we asked. Consider the following examples:

It’s amazing how many large real-estate portfolios have designed a process for paying utility bills that excludes the people whose actions determine the size of those bills. The CFO asks, “How can we make sure that we don’t incur late fees on utility bills that our property managers take too long to process?” The A/P department’s answer: “We’ll require the utility companies to send monthly bills directly to headquarters for prompt processing and payment.” Sure enough, no more late fees. There’s only one problem. If a building engineer wants to know last month’s energy use, he has to: a) wait for the quarterly financial report from headquarters (which includes only cost, not demand or usage); or, b) request a duplicate bill from his utility rep! What if the CFO had asked the following questions instead: “Could we hire someone to collect all of our utility bills, check them for accuracy, and make sure we pay them on time? And while they’re at it, could they extract the energy stats that we need to give the building operator feedback, cre-

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ate, and track energy-saving best practices, and help us prioritize capital spending going forward?”

Of course, the prospect of hiring someone new to create value leads us to another question that CFOs always ask: “How can we reduce our G&A costs?” To most organizations, this means: “Time to cut our head count!” Property managers are forced to handle multiple buildings. Building engineers are so busy addressing tenant issues and emergencies that they have little or no time for O&M, much less proactive energy management. Third-party managers are forced to be so cost-competitive that even though “energy management” is part of their proposal boilerplate, they have little or no money budgeted to deliver those services if they actually win the bid! And, if the CFO is focused on cutting G&A, the last thing he wants to hear is a proposal to hire an energy manager. Imagine if the CFO

had asked the following question instead: “Given that energy costs represent 30% of our operating expenses, what would the costs/benefits be of investing in a full-time energy manager whose first-year goal would be saving at least 5% of our annual energy spend by pursuing low- and no-cost energy fixes throughout our portfolio?”

Speaking of low- and no-cost energy-saving maneuvers, I wrote an article a while back recommending “team cleaning” as a way to save on after-hours lighting in multi-story buildings. Having a team of housekeepers pull the trash, dust, and vacuum on the same floor before moving to the next floor can reduce after-hours lighting use by 30% or more. It can reduce supervisory labor hours as well. I recently met with a client who told me that after reading that article, he had adopted the practice for his entire building portfolio. The very next week I met with someone else who said that he had heard of team cleaning but didn’t think it would work in his portfolio. His question: “If only one floor’s tenants actually see the housekeepers as they start their nightly floor-to-floor rotation at 5pm, wouldn’t the other tenants suspect that their spaces weren’t getting cleaned?” Holy mackerel! If the empty trash cans and clean surfaces weren’t enough of a clue that the housekeepers had come through the night before, why not switch to daytime cleaning and save even more energy? Imagine if this manager had asked the following question instead: “What’s the best medium for letting our tenants know that we can now deliver the same level of housekeeping while reducing two important components of tenant-reimbursed operating expenses: housekeeping labor and electricity?”

Need some more examples?



Don’t ask, “Have we benchmarked our buildings?” when what you should be asking is, “Do we have a plan in place for continuously improving our energy performance and for updating our building benchmarks monthly to track our progress toward that goal?” And don’t just ask, “Do we use T8 lamps and electronic ballasts in all tenant fit-outs?” A better question would suggest how to maximize efficiency: “Do our A&E folks combine the correct wattage T8 lamps, ballast factors, and luminaire spacing to deliver the specified lighting levels while using the lowest possible watts per square foot?”

What questions are you asking these days on the topic of saving energy? Will your organization use more or less energy this year? Which people are in the best position to help reduce that energy use? Do those folks understand and embrace their role in saving energy? If asked, would they say that saving ener-

gy is a high priority for them this year? What are their energy savings targets? How were those targets set? Do they feel they have all the tools and resources to reach them? Does your organization have a clear picture of what a good job looks like when it comes to saving energy? Perhaps most importantly, how do you know they couldn’t save even more? *e&pm*

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