

Submitted to Michelle Payne
Beyond Point B, LLC
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words

Should Leaders Ask Questions or Have Answers? A different approach to Leadership

by Larry Mandelberg

When most people think of leadership, they think of strength, character and knowledge. Interestingly when I think back on the people in my past that I saw as true leaders, I don't remember them as strong or knowledgeable - I do remember them as being wise, which is not the same thing. There is much more than a subtle difference in these two words we use so often.

According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary <http://www.britannica.com/>, knowledge points toward 'knowing something with familiarity gained through experience or association.' In other words, been there, done that. Knowledge can be gained from books and studying. Knowledge can be memorized and repeated. What knowledge cannot do is give you experience.

The primary characteristics of wisdom, again according to Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, are "marked by a deep understanding, keen discernment, and a capacity for sound judgment." In my mind, that is what I want from a leader. Someone who is comfortable being someplace new, uncharted territory, unfamiliar waters, yet still has the wisdom to know when and how to proceed. Isn't that what leadership is all about?

The style of wise leadership as opposed to knowledgeable or informed leadership has a common denominator; the inclination and ability of the leader to ask a lot of questions, wise questions that help lead to wise answers. Questions

like 'What would your ideal outcome be?' and 'How will you know when you are finished and if you were successful?' One of the most common mistakes unseasoned leaders make is to tell people what to do rather than asking if their is any help they can offer. When you give a task to someone and tell them exactly what to do, you are making an assumption that they can do the assigned task in the same manner you would. People are not clones, and the efforts of one person will never quite match the efforts of another.

While this can be frustrating to some, in reality it is a beautiful thing. It gives the leader and the listener the opportunity to approach a new unfamiliar task with only the goal in mind. This is how new ways of doing old things are discovered. This is how creativity is surfaced and encouraged. When a leader tells his or her direct report exactly what to do rather than the goal that needs to be accomplished, they are taking away all of the experience and wisdom of that individual and losing a huge amount of value.

By giving people the freedom to think for themselves, you take away boundaries and remove the proverbial 'box' we are always being told to get ourselves out of (stop thinking inside the box, think outside the box for a change!). By asking people to think for themselves, a leader inspires confidence and trust, two critical characteristics of followers, and we all know, without followers, leaders have no one to lead.

Asking questions has another benefit, it engages people's minds. If someone is not engaged and thinking while they are working or while you are talking with them, you only have a fraction of their attention. Their ability to

contribute effectively is diminished, and the value of their knowledge and experience is devalued as well.

Asking questions can be frustrating and difficult. To be sure, it is an art few have mastered. But the best leaders, as in all cases of excellence, don't shy away from those things that are difficult because they are difficult, they shy away only when it is clear their efforts are not working. When struggling with the difficult and convoluted, remember this - if it was easy, everyone would do it.

Some examples of other good questions leaders ask include:

- What do you need to know?
- What questions do you have?
- What specific information do you need?
- What can I do to help you?
- What are your next steps?
- What is the result you are looking for?
- What can you accomplish in the next 30, 60 90 days?
- What do you need to stop, start and continue?

If you take away just one thing from this article, remember this. The more talking the leader does, the more dependent others are on his or her participation. The less talking a leader does, the more space his direct reports have for using their intellect for the benefit of the organization. The next time you have a meeting, see how little you can talk and still get your points across. Be careful. You'll be surprised at how effective you can be.

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