

Productive Leaders

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Is Your Leadership Team Asking Stupid Questions?



Are your leaders asking stupid questions? If they are, they will likely get stupid answers when they do get answers, and they will believe the answers.

Leaders like the illusion that if they walk around and ask employees questions that generate single syllable answers, they are being a good leader. For many managers, this satisfies what they perceive as doing what they need to do to find out what is really going on in the organization. They are wrong.

Most organizational leaders ask questions that don't elicit any real information. These are common exchanges. Note, no real information is exchanged.

Leader: "Good morning. How are you?"
Employee: "Good!"

Leader: "How are things?"
Employee: "Great!"

Leader: "How is your day?"
Employee: "Fine."

The leader then returns to his or her office, satisfied that they have done their due diligence of MBWA (Management By Walking Around), self-assured that they have assessed the pulse of their workforce. Thus reassured, they determine that Everything is Fine.

"Fine" is not fine. Fine does not mean "good." Fine is lukewarm. Fine is noncommittal. Fine is what we say when we don't want to elaborate. Go ahead – ask someone how they feel after

a major surgery. They say, "Fine. I'm fine."

If leaders really want to find out what is going on with their people, they need to ask questions that produce actual information, such as:

1. What is the most interesting part of this project for you?
2. Are there any parts of your boss's job that you think you'd like?
3. What are you working on that makes you want to advance?
4. How can this organization do to help you achieve your professional goals?
5. What do you think we do around here that we should stop doing?
6. From your perspective, what do we do that is wasting our employees' time?

If leaders want to improve the productivity, they need to ask questions that deal with the obstacles that get in the way of employees' productivity at work:

- What can your team and I do to help you do your job better?
- If we gave you a \$200 gift certificate at an office supply store, and you had to use it for things for work, what would you buy?
This is one of my favorite questions because it often tells you what people are buying on their own and bringing to work, or things that they wish they had that cost you relatively little. Answers range from telephone headsets to copier paper to folders to a good coffee machine to software. When people answer this question, make a list and get them these items.
- If you could make one change to a policy here, what would it be?
This is another good question, but be prepared for the answers. People will say they don't like the working hours, they want better parking, and they want to bring their dog to work. As someone who has brought a dog to work, I really cannot argue with that one, but be careful about asking if you don't want the answers. Common employee answers are about their computers and software. Computer malfunctions, glitches, and crashes remain the top time-waster for many employees.

Leaders also need to ask about processes and procedures that don't make sense. At one job, I could not figure out why I was getting a 40+ page report every month. After the 3rd month, I asked my deputy what I was supposed to do with this report. Forward it? File it with another agency? Send it to my boss? Sign it?

"No," he patiently said. "That is for you."

"Me?" I wondered. "Why? What do I do with it?"

"It is so you know what is going on," he continued, still patiently.

"But why? It takes work for people to put this together. I didn't ask for this!"

"Someone in your job before you asked for it. So we keep doing it." came the answer.

We stopped producing that report that day. It was a waste of manhours and resources, and I was chagrined that it took me three months to ask why I had it. I was horrified that it was being produced, but was slightly relieved that this was discovered after just a few months instead of 2 years. Small consolation.

To fix endemic problems, when you are ready to tackle serious process improvement, ask:

- What are we doing that you think is stupid?
- What or who wasted your time today?
- If you could work on anything to make this organization better, what would it be?

Good leaders don't settle for a superficial dialogue. Don't limit your employees' answers by asking questions that don't allow for substantive answers. Asking the right questions is critical to being a better leader. But if you ask questions, be ready to take action on the answers. Until then, everything is just "fine."

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