

March 2016



Just Answer the Question! The Keys to 'Humble Inquiry'

Dear Drew,

It has long been known that one of the more effective methods of teaching, and thereby leading, is by asking questions, also known as the Socratic method. It is named after the classical Greek philosopher Socrates (470BC - 399 BC). It involves a form of cooperative argumentative dialogue between individuals, based on asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking and to draw out ideas and underlying presumptions. The lean community has been suggesting such to leaders for years, and for good reason:

- * Leaders who provide the 'answers' (e.g. ideas for improvement, specific steps that should be taken to address a problem) to others are demonstrating that they do not value them, their ability to come up with an answer on their own, or their opinion.
- * All thinking stops when leaders provide the answers to others. Therefore opportunities are forever lost to develop critical thinking skills in team members. These skills are important to the development of effective problem solvers and process improvers, and to the creation of a lean culture.
- * Little or no learning occurs when people are given the answers, and continual learning is important to one's personal development as well as their satisfaction in any work environment.
- * Leaders lose the opportunity to 'peek' into the thought process of others when they are directive. Therefore they lose the opportunity to gather important information that can be used to determine necessary coaching of the team member or members.

In short, it is disrespectful to others.

In addition, it undermines true engagement where team members contribute their hearts and heads, as well as their hands to an organization. A leader takes 'ownership' of the specific idea being discussed and the process overall when they provide the 'answer'. One of the objectives of engagement is for associates to take ownership of process improvement and problem solving. This is undermined when leaders dictate the path. It remains the leader's idea, and therefore full buy-in is often lacking, a common cause for less than expected results for many a change effort. Even well meaning leaders can fall into this ownership 'trap' unintentionally. Here are some examples:

- * A leader takes ownership when he or she says "Have you thought of", as associates hear "the boss wants me to".
- * A leader takes ownership if he or she says "I'd like to suggest...." and the associates hear "I better do what the boss says.."

Help Is On The Way

I, like many of my colleagues, were excited with the publication of "Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling" by Edgar Schein (2013). The author defined 'humble inquiry' as questioning that does not influence either the content of what the other person has to say, nor the form in which it is said. Finally, a go-to reference on the subject was available, a reference that would go well beyond our typical suggestion to "go see, ask questions, and show respect." We eagerly read it, and began recommending it immediately. Many individuals and organizations positively responded to the suggestion, often making it a part of their 'Lean book club'.

Over time, I began to receive more and more feedback from folks about the book. Contrary to helping people by providing clarity, quite the opposite was happening for some people. The theme for the feedback could best be summarized as, "I'm so worried about how to frame my question, that I am reluctant to ask it for fear of getting it wrong." I would respond with words of encouragement. "I appreciate your concern in 'getting it right'. In time and with practice it will all come more naturally." There was sufficient feedback that I decided to re-read the book. As I read it in this new 'light' I gained an understanding of the source of the concern. The author identifies four types of 'diagnostic inquiry':

1. Feelings and Reactions
2. Causes and Motives
3. Action Oriented

4. Systemic Questions

Examples of 'dos and don'ts' for each were provided. I continued reading about consideration of roles, status, rank and situations. Again examples were provided as well as suggestions on how to handle the multitude of scenarios that could arise. Whew! There was a lot to think about.

I began to reflect on my own experience and observations. I recall many examples of leaders posing questions to team members that made me cringe. However there was not the negative reaction, as I would have expected. (Of course I can recall many more examples of the opposite). There was something to learn here, if I can just pinpoint it. In many cases, people were just happy to have a leader take an interest in their work. They weren't parsing the wording of the questions being posed to them. They were pleased and eager to show the leader what they do, or to point out an obstacle that they were encountering, even willing to provide suggestions to improve. In other cases, what I observed were people pleased simply that a leader was willing to listen to them. Again, it wasn't about the precise wording of the question that prompted the dialogue. It was what followed.

The Keys

A leader listening, sincerely listening is the key, or at least a key. A leader quieting their mind for the moment to really listen to another person. A leader resisting the temptation to quickly respond, as so many leaders do as if they are fulfilling some perceived model of how leaders should behave. A leader giving up 'control' of the communication process for a moment. A leader being empathetic to the other person's feelings and emotions during the interaction. All keys to effective listening.

But, there was something more. If leaders go into the interaction with the true intent to learn, the precise wording of the question or questions becomes secondary. The author used the terms 'humble' and 'humility' - a modest or low view of one's importance. I began thinking that terms such as 'genuine' and 'sincere' were also appropriate. Leaders must ask questions with a genuine intent to learn. People will quickly see through facades and recognize ulterior motives, such as pre-disposed biases. If the team member believes that the inquiring leader is truly sincere, they will provide much leeway in terms of how the questions are phrased, and not misinterpret their meaning. Genuineness is surely another key.

My suggestion to leaders is before posing a question, take a moment (a few seconds really) and remind yourself that you don't really know the answer to it, and you sincerely want to learn. Obviously there is a strong element of humility on the part of the leader in doing this. Also, the leader must prepare themselves to really listen. Now all of this can indeed be

particularly difficult for leaders who have not been effective listeners in the past, and/or have often imposed their pre-disposed biases in such interactions. It will not be easy for them to change, but change they must. I often suggest to such leaders that they be open and honest with their folks about the fact that they are trying to change their ways. To not do so would certainly generate questions, doubts and distrust. Any observed change in a person's typical behavior will give rise to such. So why not be upfront about it? And while you are at it, have a bit of fun with it. Take the opportunity to remind people that you really don't have the answer. Say "If you're looking to me for the answer, then you're looking to the wrong person", or something to that effect. Remind people that they are the real process 'experts'. Walk a way (but not too far) as people consider the response to your inquiry. Return and ask, "What did you decide?"

Finally, the first key is so important, to listen. Take note of all aspects of the communication process; body language, eye contact, tone, exhibited emotions. Look beyond the words that make up the response. Look for indications that the question was not received as intended. Openly acknowledge the concern to the other person or persons. Ignoring it will certainly not help the matter. People will see that you are really trying so you must be sincere. To summarize, before practicing 'humble inquiry' remember the two keys; be genuine, and listen. Take stock of your own intentions, and be prepared to truly listen. The words and their proper meaning will just naturally come.

Best Regards

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Announcement!! "The Complete Lean Enterprise: Value Stream Mapping for Office & Services (2nd edition)" is now available

The second edition of this award winning best seller is now available from Productivity Press, and with plenty of new content. A new service oriented case study is used to enhance the reader's learning experience. The important seven future state questions have been revised to make it easier for practitioners to apply the key

concepts of lean to re-designing any business or service process.

An entire chapter is dedicated to leading in the future state, and the importance of a new management process that must accompany a new work process. Practical implementation tips are provided as you 'learn your way to the future state.' And much, much more. The authors incorporate their collective experiences over the past ten years practicing the powerful value stream mapping tool. So, even if you were one of the 40,000 who purchased the first edition, you will not want to miss the second. And if you missed the first edition, here is your chance to learn from the original leaders of the application of value stream mapping to office and service processes. [Click here](#) for more information.