

Members Quarterly

Spring 2014 Edition

Feature

The Art of Powerful Questioning

Move toward powerful thinking and positive change

This segment in the Energy on the Frontline series builds on the two previous concepts – shifting from manager to leader and examining our attitudes about how we think about others' capacity. How do we do that? We develop the skill of the single most powerful tool in the manager's toolbox – powerful questions. By employing powerful questions, we move from telling to teaching, doing to being and expert to coach. This means shifting our role and engaging powerful questions to build capacity, resiliency and accountability in others. Powerful questions generate powerful thinking. Powerful thinking generates positive change. Let's explore how.

Listening is the Key to Questioning

Listening is the foundation to generating questions. In particular, active listening (-listening for **their** story) is the key to forming questions that will delve deeper and create introspective thinking. Move beyond your own curious agenda and hear just enough to enable you to offer your own experience. Give others the gift of your full, focused and undivided attention so they feel seen, heard and understood. Listening is the launch pad of powerful questions.

Get at the Emotional Root

Behavioural change comes from the place of awareness and desire. If an employee doesn't have an emotional connection to the change they need to make, then they won't make that change. Active listening will allow you to both hear what's on the surface and understand what's deeper. Is there a common thread, theme or topic that keeps showing up regardless of the direction of the conversation? Identifying, naming and asking questions about that theme will enable employees to get at it. Delve deep to unearth that 'root' stimulating further opportunity to ask the tough questions necessary to create awareness - that essential condition for personal and professional growth.

Let them Lead

It's essential not to focus on your agenda. How many conversations have you been part of where you feel the other person would benefit from your experience, knowledge of how you handled a situation or advice on how they might approach a similar situation? That's NOT what coaching is all about. Listen to their story and use questions to explore their reality. Recognize and suspend your need to be the expert. Demonstrate your -expertise in using powerful questions as a tool to support their self-discovery and growth.

Don't embed your answer in the question. An example: "If you were to approach that situation, would you do X or Y"? This leads the employee to make a choice between your two options. What if they had other options? Reframing the question to "What are the options to approach this situation?" leaves it open and creates space for the person to explore and innovate. Additional powerful questions can assist in weighing the pros and cons of each option. The em-



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Employee becomes an active participant in their development. They develop critical thinking skills they can transfer to other situations.

Keep them Open

Questions should invite a response beyond 'yes' and 'no'. Open questions usually start with 'what' or 'how'. They are designed to dig deeper and enable a more thoughtful response. The individual has to critically think, create ownership in the solution and accountability for the outcome.

Consider the difference between the following: "Do you think the situation with the customer went well?" "What stands out for you in this customer interaction"?

The first question is 'closed'. It requires only 'yes' or 'no' without further exploration. The second prompts examination of the customer experience. It asks the employee to think out loud about what makes a customer experience stand out. That's information to be used in the future. The person identifies, names and shares what's important. Just this small nuance in how the powerful question is asked can have 'staying power'. Coaches develop that question style intentionally so that they can be a catalyst enabling employees to grow.

Questions for Clarity

Questions asking 'who', 'when', and 'where' are used to gain additional information, add detail and advance the conversation. These questions should be used in moderation. Sometimes, we can overuse clarification questions which keep us 'on the surface' of the conversation and away from exploring the root or what's underneath.

Avoid Rapid Fire

Powerful questions often create intensity. When delivered in succession, the employee can feel like they are being interrogated. Multiple questions can invade the safe space and lead to the person feeling overwhelmed and uncertain of what question to tackle. If you notice yourself doing this, name it and offer choice: "I just asked you two questions, which one would you like to answer"? This accomplishes several things. It sends the message that there's no perfection in coaching, it lets them lead and it deflates the 'interrogation room' feel. This is a situation where less is more to enable creating the safe space where the employee can explore and develop.

Reframe the Why

'Why' questions tended to be loaded! They can send the message of judgment, interrogation and usually elicit a defensive response often not conducive to learning and growth. A quick technique to avoid asking why is to reframe to "What are the reasons for" or "What about this approach feels right to you"? This subtle difference can shift the space so the individual can reflect, learn and move forward.

What feels different between the following questions? "Why did you approach that situation the way you did"? "What are the reasons you approached that situation in that way"?

Reframing the 'why' with a 'what' question is an open invitation for exploration and will establish more productive conditions for a developmental conversation.

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Silence is a Question

Silence can be the largest tool in the exploration tool box. It is also really uncomfortable. As a coach, asking a question and then letting the space hang waiting for the answer creates a place where the employee can really examine what's going on for them. Wait long enough and they will engage. Some of the most profound statements and learning often emerge from that quiet place of introspection. Feel free to give space and resist the urge to fill it up.

Enable Exploration of Barriers and Impact

Powerful questioning can also provide a 'test run' and allow an employee to safely explore potential challenges and implications to their plan of action. Asking questions to identify what will get in their way, how their approach might be perceived by others and the implications of their actions gives the person the place to critically think through their plan. Anticipating the pitfalls and giving thought to potential strategies to address them will position the employee for future success – that 'staying power' after they leave your office.

'A' is for Accountability

Powerful questions need to inspire action and ownership. A conversation without the person positioned for forward movement is a nice interaction but it is not coaching. To make it last, the employee needs to leave your office with definitive action. Asking questions about next steps, time frames for completion and follow-up are key to the employee's accountability including application and transferability of learning. Employee accountability honours their capability and creates independence.

And Remember, There's No Perfect Question

Finally, we believe that daring to be curious regardless of the 'perfect' question opens the space for collaboration, co-creation and innovation. Sometimes, as a coach you are more concerned about crafting the perfect question rather than just listening and trusting yourself to let them flow based on the employee's needs. Even if a question doesn't quite land, it elicits some thought process in the receiver and opportunity for them to say "No, that's not quite it, it's more like this". Powerful questioning is about making space for them. If you 'hold them big', you trust that they are resourceful, whole, capable and able to find the solution themselves.

In summary, think of powerful questions as the wind in the sails. The leader as coach provides the environment through powerful questioning to safely propel the individual into uncharted waters. This questioning can supportively push the employee outside their comfort zone to a place of new opportunity.

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