Dear Colleagues:

How are you today? Is now a good time? Though you can’t answer me directly, it’s my way of showing you that I know you are busy and that your time matters to me.

Every day, we ask and answer questions without even thinking about it. It’s how we gather information. It’s how we decide what to do next. It’s vital to our communication.

Questions, however, are more than just a part of speech. They are powerful tools that we can use to improve our communication and develop deeper relationships. If you ask the right question at the right time, you can ease the tension during a disagreement, move past an impasse in negotiations, or help a colleague make a difficult decision.

It’s not always easy, however, because it requires us to actually listen, something that doesn’t always come naturally.

In this newsletter, we’ll give you some ways to think about questions and suggestions on how to use them as tools for better management.

Sincerely,

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Good questions lead to better answers

Instructors often assure their students that there are no “stupid” questions. If this is true, then why the need for a reminder? Shouldn’t everyone know it?

The truth is that we are wired to ask questions. It’s how we find out about the world. We’re asking them all the time in our heads, whether or not we say them out loud. What is this article about? Why should I care? But many of us become concerned that asking questions may indicate that we don’t know something we should, so we end up talking when we should be listening.

The real question isn’t whether or not should you be asking questions but rather how can you use questions to make a difference in your daily interactions?

Change dynamics

You already know that asking people how they are or what they think shows that you care and can have a significant impact on how they respond to you and their work. People want to be understood and using questions will help you do that. But there is more you can do.

In a tense situation, for instance, calmly asking a question that shows you understand what someone is struggling with can help move that person out of panic mode so they can think more rationally.

Even when things are calm, your empathy allows people to look at their situation in a new way. In the book, Just Listen, Mark Goulston writes that people want to “feel felt.” Then, instead of spending effort trying to get you to see things from their perspective, they can look for a solution or find a better way of handling things.

This requires setting aside assumptions and letting people know that you are open to hearing their response, even when you think you know the answer or aren’t sure you will like what you hear. Suppose a colleague is not doing well on a project and it seems like he just can’t manage his time. If you ask before jumping in with solutions, you might find that the problem is a lack of resources.

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Uncover new ideas

When someone turns to us for advice, our first inclination is to give it to them. We usually have some pretty good ideas about what they could or should do. But there is another, often better option. It is to ask deliberate questions that will help him figure out the answer himself. What are your options? What do you want to see happen? What would it take?

When you are stuck, either in trying to write something or make a big decision, try using questions to get yourself out of the rut. They should be open ended and yet specific. What is the best approach? What advice would I give someone else in this situation? What are my priorities? Asking yourself questions stimulates your reasoning powers and unleashes your creativity.

Empower and motivate

Beyond just gathering information, questions can effectively be used to bring out the best in people. The questions you ask can reveal hidden motives, biases or assumptions that are holding back a person or project. Imagine you are working with a team that is struggling. Before telling team members what you think is going wrong, ask them what they think are the roadblocks and then ask more questions to help them find solutions. “What seems to be the trouble? How are you going to address that? What tools would you need? How can this be done better?”

Asking these kinds of questions sends a signal that you trust the people with whom you work and that you believe they can find solutions. This is a strong, affirming message.

But that’s impossible?

As you think through your options, it’s natural to automatically bypass those that are out of reach. But what if they weren’t? What if there really was a way? In *Just Listen*, Mark Goulston writes about a simple question that can move people beyond their apparent limitations: What’s something that would be impossible to do, but if you could do it, would dramatically increase your success? Or allow you to realize a dream or solve some problem? Once you look at all the reasons why it’s impossible, you will often find that it’s more possible than you realized.

Resources:


*Just Listen: Discover the Secret to Getting Through to Absolutely Anyone*, Mark Goulston, American Management Association, 2010

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