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AN UNDERUSED MANAGEMENT TOOL

We live in a fast-paced, demanding, results-oriented world. New technologies place vast quantities of information at our fingertips in nanoseconds. We want problems solved instantly, results yesterday, answers immediately. We are exhorted to forget "ready, aim, fire" and to shoot now and shoot again. Leaders are expected to be decisive, bold, charismatic, and visionary—to know all the answers even before others have thought of the questions.

Ironically, if we respond to these pressures—or believe the hype about visionary leaders so prominent in the business press—we risk sacrificing the very thing we need to lead effectively. When the people around us clamor for fast answers—sometimes any answer—we need to be able to resist the impulse to provide solutions and learn instead to ask questions. Most leaders are unaware of the amazing power of questions, how they can generate short-term results and long-term learning and success. The problem is that we feel that we are supposed to have answers, not questions. I interviewed leaders around the world about their use—or avoidance—of questions. This comment by Gidget Hopf, president and CEO of Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired—Goodwill Industries, is typical: "I just automatically assumed that if someone was at my door with a problem, they expected me to solve it." Hopf thought it was her job to provide answers. Then she realized that there was another way:

> Through coaching I realized how disempowering this is, and how much more effective I could be by posing the question back to the

> individual with the problem. . . . What I came to realize is that solving others' problems is exhausting. It is much more effective to provide the opportunity for them to solve their own problems.

Unfortunately, from an early age, we are discouraged from asking questions, especially challenging ones, be it at home, school, or at church, as they are considered rude, inconsiderate, or intrusive. Thus we become fearful of asking any questions. As we ask fewer questions, we become ever less comfortable and competent in asking questions.

And then when we become leaders, we feel that it is important for us to have answers rather than questions. Asking questions—or being unable to answer questions addressed to us—may show that we are somehow lacking as leaders. But this attitude leads to inertia. Consider what Jeff Carew, a vice president at Collectcorp, told me. "The easy way to lead, particularly if you are competent at your job, is to tell people how to do things in the way you have been successful." Usually, as Jeff has observed, people become successful either through a very capable boss who taught them the ropes or through their experiential learning that resulted in a successful track record and steady career advancement. Successful executives think they know the answers. "The problem with this is," Jeff noted, "if you do not create and maintain a working environment where you are always asking questions of your employees and forcing them to think, then you will probably never be any better tomorrow than you are today. Yesterday's solutions will not solve tomorrow's problems. I learned that you need to get to a different level of thinking if you are going to tackle tomorrow's problems—and who else is better to teach you how your environment is changing than the managers on the floor or in the trenches?"

Like Jeff Carew, a growing number of leaders recognize that their organization's success, if not survival, depends upon creating a learning organization, an organization that is able to quickly adapt to the changing environment, where every engagement becomes a learning opportunity, where learning and business objectives are necessarily interlinked. The ability to ask questions goes hand in

hand with the ability to learn. A learning organization is only possible if it has a culture that encourages questions.

Do you ever feel defensive when people ask you questions? Do you ever hesitate to ask a question, fearing it may reveal ignorance or doubt? If so, you are closing off the free flow of information and ideas your organization needs and potentially undermining relationships with those around you. In fact, avoiding questions can cause serious harm, even disaster.

What Happens When Leaders Do Not Ask Questions

History is replete with tales of dire consequences experienced by leaders who did not ask questions. Recent disasters at the *New York Times*, Enron, and Arthur Anderson can be attributed to the lack of inquiring leaders. Historians who carefully examined the events and details behind the disasters of the *Titanic*, the *Challenger*, and the Bay of Pigs have determined a common thread—the inability or unwillingness of participants and leaders to raise questions about their concerns. Some group members were fearful that they were the only one who had a particular concern (when, in fact, it was later discovered that many people in the group had similar concerns). Others felt that their question had already been answered in the minds of other group members, and if they asked the question, it would be considered a dumb question; and they would be put down as being stupid or not going along with the group. Because people did not ask questions, people lost lives when the *Titanic* sank, when the *Challenger* crashed, when President Kennedy authorized a covert attack on the Bay of Pigs in Cuba.

Sinking of the *Titanic*

Why did the *Titanic* sink? When the luxury ship went down, on April 14, 1912, more than fourteen hundred passengers perished. Afterward, many questions were raised on both sides of the Atlantic. How could the allegedly unsinkable ship go down on its maiden

voyage across the North Atlantic? What had gone wrong? Why couldn't the planner and builders have foreseen such a tragedy? Upon investigation, it was discovered that several of the planners and builders of the ship had indeed been concerned, though none of them had ever raised their concerns in the company of their colleagues. Why not? Because of their fear of appearing foolish by asking dumb questions. If no other "expert" seemed unsure about the structure and safety of the ship, then everything must be OK. Once the voyage was under way, many reports came in from nearby ships describing icebergs around them. "*Titanic* received many incoming messages warning of ice," Robert E. Mittelstaedt writes in *Will Your Next Mistake Be Fatal?* (2005, p. 101), "but there is no mention of her inquiring of others for updates or more information. What if someone was curious enough to ask for more information from the ships in the area?"

The Explosion of the *Challenger* Spacecraft

The spacecraft was launched on January 28, 1986, and exploded seventy-three seconds after liftoff. Much of the research into what went wrong with the *Challenger* launch focuses on the lack of communication between NASA, Morton Thiokol, Inc. (MTI) and the Marshall Space Center. MTI was the contractor responsible for the component that failed during the launch and depended on Marshall for the contract, and Marshall depended on NASA for funding and support. Almost two years before the fatal launch, MTI became aware that there could be a problem with the O-ring, a sealing component that prevents hot gases from escaping the solid rocket booster and burning a hole in the fuel tank (the physical cause of the *Challenger* disaster). The engineers at MTI documented this problem and insisted that further testing needed to be done to determine the reliability of the O-ring. Upon further testing they confirmed that the O-ring *was not* reliable, particularly when temperatures dropped below fifty-three degrees. Why then was the *Challenger* given the go to launch on January 28, 1986, when

the temperature at launch time was thirty-six degrees, well below the safety margin? The people around the table were afraid to express their doubts or even to ask questions that they had determined before entering the room that morning that they would ask.

The 1961 Bay of Pigs Invasion

Fears of shattering the warm feelings of perceived unanimity—of rocking the boat—kept some of Kennedy's advisers from objecting to the Bay of Pigs plan before it was too late. "How could I have been so stupid?" President John F. Kennedy asked after the Bay of Pigs fiasco. What happened? In 1961, CIA and military leaders wanted to use Cuban exiles to overthrow Fidel Castro. After lengthy consideration among his top advisers, Kennedy approved a covert invasion. Advance press reports alerted Castro to the threat. More than fourteen hundred invaders arrived at the *Bahía de Cochinos* (Bay of Pigs) to find themselves vastly outnumbered. Lacking air support, necessary ammunition, and an escape route, nearly twelve hundred surrendered. Others died. Top CIA leaders blamed Kennedy for not authorizing vital air strikes. Other CIA analysts fault the wishful thinking that the invasion would stimulate an uprising among Cuba's populace and military. Planners assumed the invaders could simply fade into the mountains for guerilla operations. Trouble was, eighty miles of swampland separated the bay from the mountains. The list goes on. *Groupthink* was the term Irving Janis (1971) chose to use for the phenomenon: the kind of flawed group dynamics that lets bad ideas go unchallenged by questions and disagreement and can sometimes yield disastrous outcomes. Kennedy's top advisers were unwilling to challenge bad ideas because it might disturb perceived or desired group concurrence. Presidential adviser Arthur Schlesinger, for instance, presented serious objections to the invasion in a memorandum to the president, but suppressed his doubts at the team meetings. Attorney General Robert Kennedy privately admonished Schlesinger to support the president's decision to invade. At one crucial meeting, JFK

called on each member for his vote for or against the invasion. Each member, that is, except Schlesinger—whom he knew to have serious concerns. Many members assumed other members agreed with the invasion plan. Schlesinger later lamented, "In the months after the Bay of Pigs I bitterly reproached myself for having kept so silent during those crucial discussions in the cabinet room." He continued, "I can only explain my failure to do more than raise a few timid questions by reporting that one's impulse to blow the whistle on this nonsense was simply undone by our inability to challenge one another and ask questions" (Janis, 1971, p. 76). After that huge blunder, JFK revamped his decision-making process to encourage questions, dissent, and critical evaluation among his team.

Day-to-Day Disaster Prevention

Questions and a questioning attitude are not just important for avoiding historic disasters: they are also useful day in and day out for giving feedback, problem solving, strategic planning, resolving conflicts, team building, and more. When we avoid questions, all these activities suffer, even if they don't lead to disasters of historic proportions. Consider what Cindy Stewart, president and CEO of the Family Health Council of Central Pennsylvania, told me:

> One of the first jobs that I had was in a sewing factory. My job title was "floor girl," which was the assistant to the "floor lady"—no kidding! This job entitled moving work from one process to another to assure that none of the workers in your section were without work, and that specific garment lots would be completed by the deliverable date. It was not considered a management position. I distinctly remember overhearing the management team discussing a particular bottleneck that routinely occurred with this one style of nightgown. As they wrestled with solutions, none of which worked, I can clearly recall that I was thinking, "I wish they would ask me." Since I was the one that worked the closest to the problematic process, I felt I was in the best position to solve the problem. Of course, they never did ask me.

In avoiding questions, the management team at that sewing factory closed off a potentially important source of ideas and information, and their problem-solving ability suffered as a result. The experience left a lasting impression on Stewart.

> I think I made up my mind at that time that, if I were ever to be in a leadership position, I would never assume that having the title would mean that I had all the answers. Over my twenty-plus years in executive positions, I have come to realize that much of my success can be attributed to the fact that I believe in the capacity of the people who have worked with me. I truly think that the leader who tries to know it all and tells everyone what to do is doomed to failure.

Facing Reality

No company can become great, Jim Collins tells us in *Good to Great,* without the ability to confront the "brutal facts of reality" (2001, p. 88). Consider the story of the Boston Red Sox. The team's recent World Series win, as is well known, was long in coming. But in the 1940s the Red Sox was one of the dominant teams in baseball. Then in the 1950s the team went into a significant decline. One reason for the decline was attributed to racism. As other major league teams were widening their talent pools by recruiting black players, the Red Sox was slow to change. It passed on hiring Jackie Robinson and Willie Mays, and became the last major league team to recruit black players. Not until 1959 did a black player show up on the diamond in a Red Sox uniform. Prejudice played an obvious role. But reinforcing this prejudice was an unquestioning attitude. As Sidney Finkelstein writes in *Why Smart Executives Fail,* "Tom Yawkey, the owner of the Boston Red Sox, provides an all-too-typical example [of complacent prejudice]. When his scouts reported that African-American players were not good enough or simply not ready for big league play, he accepted their reports without question. Yet any serious attempt to verify these evaluations might have caused Yawkey to question his picture of baseball reality" (2003, p. 200). When leaders fail to ask questions, they forgo

the opportunity to test their own assumptions and prejudices, whether those prejudices involve race or beliefs about consumer behavior, strategic threats, market conditions, product quality, staff abilities, or what have you.

The failure to ask questions, in other words, allows us to operate with a distorted sense of reality. In fact, Finkelstein calls companies that are unable to question their prevailing view of reality *zombies*. A zombie company, he says, is "a walking corpse that just doesn't yet know that it's dead—because this company has created an insulated culture that systematically excludes any information that could contradict its reigning picture of reality" (2004, p. 25). But as GE's former CEO Jack Welch says, leading successfully means, "seeing the world the way it is, not the way we hope it will be or wish it to be" (Tichy, 2002, p. 64). Those responsible for the Bay of Pigs, the *Challenger* disaster, and the sinking of the *Titanic* were all operating under a distorted picture of reality because they failed to ask questions.

Organizations and leaders that avoid questions are actually losing opportunities to learn, according to Noel Tichy. "This is not a trivial issue. Many executives close off learning. In their day-to-day interactions with staff they are usually either issuing instructions or making judgments about the ideas or performance of others" (2002, p. 60). By telling rather than asking, Tichy says, they are actually making their organizations dumber, "less smart, less aligned, and less energized every day." In such organizations, "there is little or no knowledge transfer, intelligence is assumed to reside at the top, and everyone below senior management is expected to check their brains at the door" (p. 53).

Mike Parker, president and CEO of Dow Chemical, notes, "a lot of bad leadership comes from an inability or unwillingness to ask questions. I have watched talented people—people with much higher IQs than mine—who have failed as leaders. They can talk brilliantly, with a great breadth of knowledge, but they're not very good at asking questions. So while they know a lot at a high level, they don't know what's going on way down in the system. Sometimes

they are afraid of asking dumb questions, but what they don't realize is that the dumbest questions can be very powerful. They can unlock a conversation" (2001, p. 37).

Questions as the Ultimate Leadership Tool

Oakley and Krug (1991) call questions the "ultimate empowerment tool" for the leader. They observe that the better we as leaders become at asking effective questions and listening for the answers to those questions, the more consistently we and the people with whom we work can accomplish mutually satisfying objectives, be empowered, reduce resistance, and create a willingness to pursue innovative change.

John Kotter, the noted Harvard professor and author on leadership, writes that key difference between leaders and managers is that leaders focus on getting to the right questions whereas managers focus on finding solutions to those questions (1998). The focus on finding answers must not obscure the importance of asking the right questions. Successful leaders know that they cannot get the right answer without asking the right questions.

In a recent *Harvard Business Review* article, Peter Drucker (Drucker & Maciariello, 2004) writes that he found that effective executives all tended to follow the same nine practices:

- They asked, "What needs to be done?"
- They asked, "What is right for the enterprise?"
- They developed action plans.
- They took responsibility for decisions.
- They took responsibility for communicating.
- They were focused on opportunities rather than problems.
- They ran productive meetings.
- They thought and said "we" rather than "I."
- They listened first, spoke last!

Questions are at the heart of each of these practices.

The importance of asking questions was forcefully conveyed in 1843 when John Stuart Mill wrote *The System of Logic*, in which he noted the emptiness of a set of opinions accumulated without the help of strong-sense critical thinking. "He who knows only his side of the case knows little of that. His reasons may have been good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side, he has no ground or preferring with opinion."

The ability to ask questions effectively is one of a leader's most important tools. Donald Peterson, former CEO of Ford Motor Company, once remarked, "Asking more of the right questions reduces the need to have all the answers."

When Alan Wurtzel, as the new CEO of Circuit City, first began turning the company around, he started with the realization that he did not know what to do next. He resisted the urge to walk in with answers, and instead began with questions. According to Jim Collins (2001), Wurtzel stands as one of the few CEOs in a large corporation who really made use of questions, with both his top team and his board. Each step along the way, Wurtzel would keep asking questions until he had a clear picture of reality and its implications.

> When Alan Wurtzel started the long traverse from near bankruptcy to these stellar results, he began with a remarkable answer to the questions of where to take the company: *I don't know*. . . . Wurtzel resisted the urge to walk in with "the answer." Instead, once he had the right people on the bus, he began not with answers, but with *questions* [emphasis in original]. "Alan was a real spark," said a board member. "He had the ability to ask questions that were just marvelous. We had some wonderful debates in the board room. It was never just a dog and pony show, where you would just listen and then go to lunch." Indeed, Wurtzel stands as one of the few CEOs in a large corporation who put more questions to his board members than they put to him [Collins, 2001, pp. 74–75].

In my own interviews with successful leaders, I found a similar willingness to express ignorance and an equal respect for the power of questions. Consider these remarks from Douglas Eden, president of Cargill's Malt Americas division:

> When I came back from my assignments overseas and was appointed president of Malt Americas, I was asked to make critical changes as the business was failing. We had to quickly decide whether to stay in or exit, and if we stayed in, what changes would be necessary to make the business viable. I did not consciously make a decision to become a questioning leader, but it began to naturally occur as I had lots of questions and had to search for answers. Should we remain an efficient, low-cost supplier or should we become the premier solution provider to the brewery business? What would be of most value to brew masters? Technical solutions such as better foam and flavor, or supply chain solutions?
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> I was new to the brewer's malt business and naturally had lots of questions. Some of the staff wanted me to be more directive, and to tell them how to execute various tasks. I really did not know immediately what to do, and was not ready to immediately propose strategies. Some were more comfortable with this approach than others. As we all got better at asking questions of each other, we generated solutions that led to longer-term contracts and more value to our customers.
>
> Now, four years later, we are a more successful business. I attribute much of this success to our ability to ask questions. Our business is very complex, and we have to search for the answers together.

Both these leaders were willing to say "I don't know" and to ask questions and work with others to find answers. As Collins tells us, "Leading from good to great does not mean coming up with answers and then motivating everyone to follow your messianic vision. It means having the humility to grasp the fact that you do not yet understand enough to have the answers and then to ask the questions that will lead to the best possible insights" (2001, p. 75).

Another example of a leader who makes effective use of questions is Commander D. Michael Abrashoff. Through what he calls "Grassroots Leadership," Commander Abrashoff turned around the operations of the USS *Benfold*, one of the U.S. Navy's most modern warships. His methods were not complex, yet the results were astounding. Under Abrashoff's twenty-month command, the *Benfold* operated on 75 percent of its allocated budget, returning $1.4 million to the Navy coffers. During that time, the ship's combat readiness indicators were the highest ever in the history of the Pacific Fleet. The promotion rate of his people was two and a half times the Navy average. The predeployment training cycle, which usually takes a total of fifty-two days, was completed by the *Benfold* crew in just nineteen days. During a twelve-month period under the previous command, there were twenty-eight disciplinary actions for which twenty-three sailors were discharged. During Abrashoff's tenure there were five disciplinary cases and no discharges. Under his predecessor thirty-one people were detached from the ship for limited duty, usually for complaints of bad backs. He had only two crew members leave for health reasons. A third of all recruits don't make it through their first term of enlistment, and only 54 percent of sailors stay in the Navy after their second duty tour. Commander Abrashoff had 100 percent of the *Benfold*'s career sailors signing on for another tour. It is estimated that this retention alone saved the Navy $1.6 million in 1998 (Crowley, 2004).

What did he do to stage such a turnaround in less than twenty months? As he himself remarks, he continuously asked questions; he listened, and then he acted on what he heard. Almost immediately upon taking command, he had a fifteen- to twenty-minute personal interview with each of his staff of three hundred. He asked each person these three questions: "What do you like best about this ship? What do you like least? What would you change if you could?"

Abrashoff acted as quickly as he could to implement the ideas that came from these questions. He realized that simply following

existing procedures and doing things the way they had always been done could no longer be effective.

Abrashoff set the vision and trusted his crew. He helped people take pride in their work.

> Whenever I didn't get the results I was looking for on the *Benfold*, I tried to look inward before flying off the handle. I also asked myself three questions each time: Did I clearly articulate the goals I was trying to achieve? Did I give people the time and resources they needed to succeed? Did I give them enough training to get the job done properly?" Eighty percent of the time, I found that I was part of the problem and that, through my actions alone, I could have altered the outcome significantly.

Abrashoff questioned every rule. He noted that when an officer or sailor came to him for approval or a signature on something, his first question was always, "Why do we do it this way?"

> If the answer was, "Because this is the way it's always been done," I would say, "That's not good enough. Find out if there is a better way to do this."
>
> After a while, people began doing their homework before they ever brought issues to me. And they could explain, "This is why we do things this way." Or, "We've thought of a better way to get this accomplished." It drove my officers crazy, but by creating a culture in which we questioned everything, we were training our people to keep their eyes open to new ways of doing business [Abrashoff, 2002].

Great Questions Define Great Leaders

Asking rather than telling, questions rather than answers, has become the key to leadership excellence and success in the twenty-first century. Peter Drucker, considered the leadership guru of the twentieth century and still going strong, notes that the leader of the past may have been a person who knew how to tell, but

certainly the leader of the future will be a person who knows how to ask. With the growing complexity and speed of change in the world, the traditional hierarchical model of leadership that worked yesterday will not work tomorrow. The leader simply won't know enough to adequately tell people what to do; the world is changing too rapidly. No one person can master all the data needed to address the complex issues that confront today's organizations.

Michael Dell, founder and leader of the computer company that bears his name, is a strong believer in the power of questions. "Asking lots of questions opens new doors to new ideas, which ultimately contributes to your competitive edge," he says (Tichy, 2002, p. 61). Dell is also a big believer in learning from everyone in the company. It does this systematically by polling people around the company. "We also learn a lot by asking the same question in similar groups across the company and comparing the results. . . . If one team is having great success with medium-sized companies, we cross-pollinate their ideas . . . throughout the organization."

Leaders need to create a questioning climate where employees feel safe and able to trust the system and the people involved. Without this level of safety and comfort, people are generally unwilling to be vulnerable, and to be comfortable answering questions that might seem threatening. And without trust and openness, people are unwilling to communicate about feelings and about problems, and thus ask the leader questions that may help them.

Marshall Goldsmith, recognized as one of the top leadership coaches, regularly teaches leaders to ask questions. In "Ask, Learn, Follow Up and Grow," he writes,

> The effective leader of the future will consistently ask—to receive advice and to solicit new ideas. Tomorrow's leader will ask a variety of key stakeholders for ideas, opinions, and suggestions. Vital sources of information will include present and potential customers, suppliers, team members, cross-divisional peers, direct reports, managers, other members of the organization, researchers, and thought leaders. The leader will ask in a variety of ways: through leadership inventories,

> satisfaction surveys, phone calls, voice mail, e-mail, the Internet, satellite hookups, and in-person dialogue [1996, pp. 229–230].

Aside from the obvious benefit of gaining new ideas and insights, Goldsmith adds, "asking by top leaders has a secondary benefit that may be even more important. The leader who asks is providing a role model. Sincere asking demonstrates a willingness to learn, a desire to serve, and a humility that can be an inspiration for the entire organization" (p. 231).

Looking Ahead

Contrary to much received wisdom, effective leaders do not have all the answers. Instead, effective leaders make it a practice to ask questions. One of the best things you can do to strengthen your leadership is to ask questions. Another is to encourage others to ask questions.

When we learn to ask questions, and do so effectively, our questions can transform individuals, groups, and organizations. How this is so is the topic of the next chapter, which explains the many dividends that a question-friendly organizational culture pays.