

Recognizing and Using “Content” and “Process”

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Leaders find it beneficial to understand the distinction between content and process. Being aware of this difference allows you to focus when you need to, yet also step back from the details to evaluate what's working, what needs improvement, and where further enhancements are possible.

Helpful Questions. Most of us learned in an English class about the six questions that a reporter needs to answer in a thorough news story. They are: Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?

In any given activity, content is the “what” being addressed. In a meeting, for example, content is the current agenda item--the topic important enough to command everyone's attention at the moment.

The remaining five questions address process:

- Why are we having this meeting?
- Who will be invited to attend the meeting?
- Where will the meeting be conducted? Where will people sit?
- When is the meeting? When (in what order) will each agenda item occur?
- How will each agenda item be introduced and handled? How long will each agenda item last?

In planning the meeting, the leader thinks about both the content (the individual agenda items) and the process (all the other remaining considerations).

Participate or Facilitate? I encourage leaders to clearly choose in advance between participating in the content and facilitating the process.

Attempting to both participate in the dialogue and manage the flow of the meeting creates confusion for the other participants. Such a leader is subject to allegations of manipulation: “Well, he just stopped the conversation to prevent those with opposing viewpoints from expressing their opinions!”

Sometimes the leader may intend to manage the process, but be pulled into the content by another meeting participant. If the leader expects this may occur, or if the leader wants to participate in the dialogue, arrangements should be made for a different person to serve as process facilitator.

Working “In” or “On.” Repeated processes are usually called “systems.” We all have systems in our personal and professional lives. We would struggle to function without systems; they provide the structure by which we make progress and keep things in order.

At work, you probably devised some of your systems. It's likely, however, that some of your work systems existed before you were hired. Further, you may be required to comply with some systems so that your efforts fit well with those of other employees.

As long as you are satisfied with the outcomes you are achieving, you typically execute your systems habitually, without even thinking about them.

Ah, but what if you want something better? Then you start analyzing not only the content of what you are doing, but also the process by which you do it.

Working “in” your systems (focusing on content) is appropriate much of the time. However, little improvement will occur by working “in” your systems. Working “on” your systems will more effectively yield the progress you seek.

Summary. Early in our careers, we focus on “content.” Most of our time is spent executing some particular aspect of the work.

As we mature as leaders, we spend more of our time considering the overall “process.” We focus on process as we plan and lead meetings and other projects. We seek balance, ensuring that all the important focus areas are addressed. As leaders, we have moved from executing the work to facilitating the work of other individuals.

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