

Are You Giving Direction or Making a Suggestion?

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Which of the following individuals are you? Are you in a position of authority, accountable for some major piece of responsibility in your organization? Or are you a willing contributor, supporting the success of the organization in major ways?

I've been in both positions, and you probably have been, too. This is a story of unnecessary confusion. My hope is you'll be able to eliminate this happening to you.

I was the Employee Relations Manager for a manufacturing plant startup. Allen was the plant manager. He passed by my office every time he headed into the plant. Allen had many opportunities to stop in and give me direction or offer suggestions!

One day Allen stepped into my office and said, "I stopped by one of our training sessions for a few minutes. Do we know how effective we are in qualifying new employees for their assignments?"

It was a worthy question. I had been involved in the design of some of the sessions, and I knew the trainers were giving it everything they had. But I did not know whether we were qualifying operators faster and more thoroughly than other plant startups. And frankly, I didn't think we had established any criteria for measuring the quality or speed of technicians assuming responsibility.

I spoke with the trainers and department managers to establish some success criteria. I then sought individuals at other plants who might have information about their startups. As you can imagine, this effort consumed the better part of a week.

I gathered the information into a rather weak presentation and headed to Allen's office. When I explained why I was there, he waved me off. "I hope you didn't put a lot of effort into that. I know we have to complete that training, and I'm satisfied with our progress. I was just offering an idea to you."

I tromped down the hall fuming. After a week of work, he wasn't interested in my findings at all!

Allen often stopped by my office. We'd share ideas and swap suggestions. One time he said, "We're within just a couple of weeks of starting production. Do we know how our average wage rate compares to the other mills in Georgia?" I said I wasn't sure, and he headed off to lunch.

Three days later, Allen stopped by my office and said, "By tomorrow afternoon, I need that information on how our wage rates compare with other mills. The Southeast Operations Manager will be calling to find out not only how we compare now, but where we expect to be in a year and two and three years from now. We need to include the impact of both turnover and technician promotions."

He quickly walked away. I was stunned. I remembered the conversation where he raised the question, but for the life of me, I could recall nothing about a deadline or a projection of future wage rates. I cancelled my commitments for the rest of the day, enlisted some help to make phone calls, and we worked very hard to gather and organize data.

I provided the desired information to him by noon the next day, but it wasn't my best work. However, that generated-in-a-day format served as the foundation for a similar report we prepared every year for the next several years!

The next time Allen stopped into my office, I asked if he would sit down and talk with me for a few minutes. I recounted the times I had misinterpreted his guidance to me. He was surprised. Allen thought he'd always been clear.

I asked permission to inquire of him, "Are you offering a suggestion, or are you giving direction to go do something?" He thought it curious that I would need such clarity, but he agreed.

Allen heard that question many times over the next couple of years. I never had the problem again.

Are you a willing contributor who sometimes labors on a project when it's really not required? And do you sometimes get blindsided by a request that you thought was a passing question?

Or are you guilty of confusing those who look to you for guidance? If you are a visionary leader, that's very possible. Every time you share something that "could be," you may be unintentionally triggering activity by someone who wants to help make it happen.

The problem occurs innocently enough. The simple intentional question above, however, provides an easy solution. Give it a try.