

Questions Leaders Should Ask of Their Direct Reports--Part 1

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Think back to when you were twelve years old. What leadership tendencies did you display then?

Think about your neighbor's kids or your own children and grandchildren. How often do you seek them out to think with you on improved approaches to handling your responsibilities?

If you learned of a child of twelve who was already astounding the most respected experts of his day, would you be curious to learn of his techniques?

In the culture of Israel two thousand years ago, intelligent males studied the scriptures. The most knowledgeable became teachers of the Mosaic law. An elite group of elderly men regularly debated and challenged each other in the temple.

In his gospel (chapter 2, verse 41+), Dr. Luke records that a twelve year old boy spent several days sitting with the Jewish teachers and asking them questions.

You might presume the juvenile questions a curious boy would ask. If they were typical of someone his age, however, the teachers would not have tolerated his presence. Yet he was with them for several days "asking them questions," and "they were astonished at his understanding."

What kinds of questions would astonish these experienced, educated men?

What kinds of questions astonish you? Are they questions that make you think? Do they cause you to step back from your day-to-day commitments and reflect on what you have assumed is "truth"? Do they make you challenge your presumed cause-and-effect relationships?

Interestingly, Luke's record continues, describing that the Jewish teachers were "astonished at his answers." When you become skilled at asking thought-stimulating and paradigm-shifting questions, people want your thoughts as they explore for meaning.

Wouldn't it be great if those under your authority were engaged with you in thinking about how to improve your organization? For most of us who experience the time pressures of a normal day, we assume that the most effective way to get things done is to tell people what to do.

The Jewish teachers would not tolerate that kind of dictatorial behavior from a boy. So Jesus used a more effective approach. In fact, throughout his ministry, Jesus frequently used questions to engage those he wanted to influence.

You can apply this same process with those under your authority. Next week, I'll provide a variety of questions that will engage your employees, but there is a key initial set of questions that is a prerequisite. The objective of these questions is twofold.

First, you want to learn about the individual, so you have a basis for a healthy relationship. Second, you want the individual to become aware that achieving his or her personal agenda and accomplishing the mission of the organization are mutually supportive.

What's important to you in life? [listen intently to the answers] **How does your participation with our organization contribute to what's important in your life?**

It's critical that you deeply and genuinely listen to the individual's responses! Artificiality will kill your ability to build a mutually beneficial relationship.

Your showing authentic interest will yield a lot of information about the individual's family, values, and hobbies. This awareness will help you realize the unique qualities of the person, and will help him or her feel appreciated as more than just another anonymous body in your growing empire.

Knowing that you have a genuine interest in him or her, the individual will be more receptive to the subsequent questions you'll periodically ask. I'll share those questions with you next week.

Dennis Hooper helps leaders build the capabilities of individuals in their organizations. Learn about Dennis' work at www.buildingfutureleaders.com. E-mail him at dhooper2@juno.com.