

## **Questions Leaders Should Ask of Their Direct Reports--Part 2**

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Are you a leader who not only wants to accomplish today's objectives, but also wants to build future leaders? If you are interested in building the future capacity of your organization, work to build your skills in asking open-ended, inspiring questions.

Last week I introduced two foundational questions. The purpose of those questions is to generate a sense of mutual trust between you and the individual under your authority.

That person wants to know you care about him or her as a unique human being. Ask **"What is important to you in life?"** Then genuinely listen, storing away the information for future reference.

You also need to trust this person who is handling some specific responsibility in your organization. Although you can observe the individual's competence in the execution of duties, it is hard to observe motive and commitment.

So, ask the follow-up question: **"How does your participation with our organization contribute to what's important in your life?"** The person's answers give some assurance of what drives the person's behavior. Further, you can evaluate how thoroughly he or she understands the symbiotic relationship between fulfilling the organization's purpose and vision and satisfying personal needs.

You'll likely want to ask these questions in your own style over several conversations; there's too much to learn in a single brief dialogue. As mutual trust develops, ask more pointed questions that stimulate the individual's creativity in developing his or her natural talents. For example, **"How could you enhance your competency and commitment as a contributor on your team?"**

Quickly follow with **"How can I support your efforts?"** Listen carefully for the role you can play. You may be asked to serve as mentor or coach. Make promises sparingly, only if you are convinced the request is appropriate and you are certain you are able to follow through.

These questions presume that the expectations for performance in the role are clear to the individual. These should have been shared early in the person's work assignment and further clarified in the "what's important" conversations described above. However, if you determine that the individual is not clear on what's expected in terms of process and results, don't ask more questions until you've made sure the individual understands those expectations.

The next set of questions causes the individual to move from examining personal skill enhancement to thinking more organizationally. **"If you had responsibility for bringing improvement into your team, what would you do to..."** This question can be completed in many ways. Look for specifics that will enhance your operations. Here are some possibilities:

- **"improve safety?"**
- **"improve communication?"**
- **"enhance what we deliver to customers?"**
- **"improve quality?"**
- **"improve productivity?"**
- **"reduce costs and waste?"**
- **"keep our best people engaged, contributing, and growing?"**

You should routinely be asking those who do the work how the operation can be improved. However, one or two of these questions should be sufficient for any given conversation!

Each of the questions cited above can be supplemented with this one: **"What do you suggest that I start doing (or stop doing) that would improve the results of your team?"** People love to tell the boss what to do--both jokingly and seriously--so listen closely to what is offered. You will likely obtain some excellent feedback, and you are teaching those in your organization to be more open to feedback themselves.

Leadership is associated with inspiring individuals with a vision of what's possible. Unfortunately, stereotypical leader behavior is telling others what to do. Many leaders have found, however, that "telling" is not nearly as effective, especially in building future leaders, as asking open-ended and thought-provoking questions.