

“What Objective Are We Seeking to Achieve?”

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My wife and I spent the week of Thanksgiving with two other couples hiking in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The weather was beautiful, and we exercised muscles we don't often use.

Our most difficult task each evening was seeking agreement with the others on what particular trails we were going to explore the next morning. We'd gather around the dining room table, each with our maps and guidebooks. The conversation would be something like this.

- “My primary desire is to spend at least one day on the Appalachian Trail.”
- “My calves ache; I need to take a shorter hike tomorrow.”
- “Let's do a loop rather than hiking in and then coming back out on the same trail.”

Seeking agreement and commitment among six people for an activity that will consume a full day is a situation that you as a leader face frequently. How do you focus the energies of multiple individuals on a single achievable vision when each person has his or her personal agenda?

I pondered that question briefly while hiking at the highest elevations in the park, through beautiful terrain lightly dusted with the first snowfall of the season. I consciously decided to delay thinking about the question until I was on the drive home. May I share some thoughts with you?

What is your response when someone comes to you and says, “What should I do about ____?” The person is seeking direction in response to a situation where you may have only minimal information. The temptation is to give an answer based on your experience. (Isn't that the easy thing to do?) What if instead you asked, “What is the outcome you hope to achieve?”

Many times, that will cause the individual to pause and reflect. He or she may have never thought that far. Give the person some space to consider the question. (Be careful: the seduction is to fill in the silence. Avoid it!) When the person provides an answer, you can support the effort by generating some possible actions to take. Together, you and your colleague can evaluate which will most likely succeed.

I always suggest to my clients that they stretch themselves to consider at least five different options for how to respond to any given situation. Doing so prevents the tendency to jump on one of the behaviors that first comes to mind. The most effective option may be one that seems a little far-fetched at first. But a really crazy idea can occasionally be modified and wind up being the most attractive possibility.

Another time when you might ask, “What are we trying to achieve?” is when you want to engage a large group, reminding them of the vision they collectively share. As I write this, I imagine the coaches who are meeting on the football fields today for the championships of the Atlantic Coast Conference (Georgia Tech vs. Clemson) and the Southeastern Conference (Florida vs. Alabama).

Sure, their teams know what's riding on today's game. Do they need to be reminded? Of course not. However, every member of the team will perform better if he thinks in a fresh way about his unique role relative to his teammates. Can he focus anew on the satisfaction associated with the term “Champion”? He'll head out onto the field with a clearer understanding of what behaviors will most support the team!

Another appropriate time for the question “What is your desired outcome?” is when you are asked to provide feedback. Is the person hoping you will validate what was done? Is he or she fishing for compliments? Or does the person genuinely want to grow by exploring with you what other approaches might have been taken? Maybe the person wants you to become his or her mentor.

You have two major roles in your organization. One is to satisfy your customers, whether those are the folks who pay the bills or are members of a downstream department. The second is to build the skills and awareness of the individuals under your authority. Either way, learn to ask, “What are you seeking to accomplish?” You'll provide a perspective that many employees don't naturally have!

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