

Why Do You Work--HERE?

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You're the leader of an organization. Maybe it's simply a team of five people. Or perhaps you lead a large corporation. However great your authority, you can lapse unintentionally into thinking of your direct reports as all being "the same." After all, many systems in your culture apply equally to everyone.

You know inherently, however, that each person is unique. Still, you've known the unrewarding feeling sometime in your life when you were treated simply as the next number in line, not as an individual.

We all want to be recognized for our distinct skills and contributions. Do you really know, however, the remarkable, noteworthy individuals with whom you work? Could you learn about them in a fresh way?

This article offers a pair of questions that work great as a conversation starter, allowing you to learn the particular interests and capabilities of each of your colleagues. First you ask, "Why do you work?"

Be prepared to receive a surprised look that communicates something like, "What? Are you stupid?" Let the silence exist for a few moments, then follow with, "Sure, most people work to earn income, but they spend it in very different ways. I'm curious about what's important to you in your life. Will you share with me what you do with your time and your money when you're not at work?"

Most people will open up and enthusiastically describe their families, their hobbies, their long-term dreams, etc. It's a wonderful way to get to know a person's noteworthy interests and values.

A few people may consider the question an invasion of their privacy. If you receive that kind of response, merely back off and explain, "I just want to learn something about you as an individual: your likes, your interests, your family relationships, and so forth. Please know that I care about you as a person, so when you are ready to share those kinds of things, be aware that I will make time to listen."

Once you've learned some interesting and unique characteristics of the individual, follow with the question, "Why do you work HERE?" This question elicits a very different awareness, for both you and the individual. The question carries with it the connotation that you realize the person is always free to pursue employment elsewhere, and that continuing to work here, with this organization and with you, is a choice. By inviting the person to reflect on what keeps him or her here, you reinforce that choice.

You also learn what appeals most to the individual about the work and your organization's culture. You may learn about ways in which the person wants to grow and contribute in the future. The conversation will naturally move into what you can do to support the career growth of the individual. You need make no promises, but if you don't know what the person desires, you'll never consider the possibility of supporting those needs.

Keep in mind that your employees are your customers. If you don't know what would keep them seeking your services, it will be hard to compete with rival employers who are trying to convince them that they would be more valued there than in working with you.

The dialogue you stimulate will help you evaluate the services you supply to the individuals under your authority. Leaders who remember that each person has a life outside of work usually retain good talent far better than those who pretend otherwise. Your focus may heavily be in the workplace; you make a mistake if you presume that's true for everyone who works with you!

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