

The New Leader: From Telling to Asking

By Judith Glaser

Environments where employees work by the book, laden with rules and regulations about what can't be done, rather than what can be done, are not attractive to people full of spirit seeking to make their mark on the world.

In such places, executives wonder why they have a stodgy atmosphere, why people call in sick too often, or why people don't seem to be enjoying their work.

On the other hand, workplaces that focus on developing rather than dictating to employees inspire them towards greater self-expression and encourage their "leadership voice." In companies where people development is flourishing we see employees valued for their contributions, sharing their voice without retribution from authority, taking risks, and energized to take on audacious goals that help the whole enterprise succeed. There is a great sense of shared ownership, accountability, and accomplishment.

These workplaces, the kind that allow the human spirit to soar, are not that hard to create. What is required is that leaders learn to bring forth the voices of the employees. Here are some actions any leader can take to ensure they are developing a workplace where all contribute.

Developers and coaches for those leaders can easily adapt these questions and ideas to use during training and coaching.

Celebrate speaking up. Acknowledge and celebrate speaking up as a cultural norm. Ask questions to draw people out. Make it easy to speak up, express a point of view, celebrate success, and push back on authority in a constructive way. Support an open environment by acknowledging you value it whenever you can. When someone has done something great, public

recognition from a boss can be as important or more important, than a monetary reward. Take the time to officially celebrate "expressing one's voice."

Great leaders make conversation easy. Candor and "tough" conversations solve tough problems. Provide coaching to employees — from the top of the organization to the bottom — about how to have "difficult conversations."



Honest talk is not mean talk; honest talk is about having candor with others, and without it companies are unable to work together strategically. Candor provides feedback vital to creating mutual success. Once a culture evolves with the candor skills clearly embedded

in conversations, it just becomes "the way we do things around here."

Coach with developmental questions. Developmental Coaching is one of the most essential skills a leader can learn. This type of coaching is not based on "constructive criticism," which is an oxymoron; it is based on developing "constructive foresight," which looks to the future and focuses on what people can do differently to create better results.

To develop foresight, ask questions such as:

- What have you learned from this challenge?
- What would you do differently in the future if you could do it again?
- How would you approach this if you had full authority?
- What would you try differently to get a different result?
- And then the most important development question a leader can ask is: How else can I help you in the future?

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Ask questions and wait for answers. In most company meetings, declarative statements outweigh questions by a large margin—85 percent to 15 percent is not unusual. Leaders who focus on learning how to craft great questions gain great benefits. They help people to think about issues in new ways, engage people in positively challenging each other's thinking, and create a culture of ownership for the outcomes.

While it at first may feel like you are not providing structure or guidance, the opposite is true. Learning to be comfortable living inside of questions helps create an environment where people can think out loud, make new connections, and think outside the lines about how they might approach a challenge. It enables their wisdom and insight to emerge.

As a result, people become comfortable with challenging the status quo, and the result is a healthy environment which develops talent.

Some questions for the leader. To perpetuate growth of both the staff and the organization, the leader should be prepared to ask himself or herself some key questions every day, questions like: How do I shift from a telling leader to an asking one? What actions can I take to support a mentoring and coaching culture? How can I grow talent and the business at the same time? How can I make development part of everyone's agenda?

Twenty Questions:

The best leaders focus more on asking than telling. Their priority is bringing out the potential in others, which inspires commitment and ownership of the future.

Experiment with leadership practices that create a culture where every individual makes a genuine contribution to the whole.

Here are some questions that indicate the attitude of a leader who develops others. Review the list. Consider which questions you often ask, and which you

could ask more often. Use them to help you convey to your staff the message you want to develop them and want to create an energetic workplace where they will thrive and reach their potential while helping you to reach yours.

1. I'm not the expert in these things. What do you think?
2. I value the differences you bring to this.... What is your perspective?
3. What can you add to these ideas?
4. What other jobs would you like to learn?
5. I'd like you to think big on this. What would be your greatest aspiration for the project?
6. What parts of my job would you like to learn?
7. I applaud you for encouraging your coworkers. What do you think you said that got them so excited?
8. I want you to stretch yourself a bit on this project. What would help you push outside your comfort zone?
9. Here are our key challenges right now. What ideas do you have on how to tackle them?
10. Bravo to you for your effort on that project! What was your biggest insight?
11. What have you learned from this challenge?
12. I have a couple of ideas for your development this year. Which one do you think would excite you most?
13. What would you like to do next to advance your leadership in the company?
14. Here are some ideas for your development. What can you add that I missed – something you really want to do and would like my support with?
15. We haven't talk about your progress on your number 1 project- I'd love to hear about your insights.
16. I'd love to know what "criterion you used" to make your decision.
17. I trust your judgment on this. It was a tough decision to make – what were the things you were thinking through – I'd love to see it from your perspective.

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18. How can I help you advance your career?
19. Where can I do less telling and more asking?
20. What are some of your ideas on how we can grow the business and talent at the same time?

The best bosses create environments where others can grow. But don't just give lip service to staff development.

When your employees feel genuinely challenged and inspired by you, they grow into their greatness. They are then more able to inspire growth in others.

Leaders who mentor and coach create other mentors and coaches. Together, you'll "coach" your company to greatness. Drawing out the best in others is a trait of real leaders. ☞

Judith E. Glaser is an organizational anthropologist and executive coach. She is author of Creating WE: Change I-Thinking to We-Thinking & Build a Healthy Thriving Organization and The DNA of Leadership (Platinum Press), both of which were listed on Amazon Business Book Best Seller Lists and were selected by Business Book Review as two of the best business books of 2005 and 2006. Based in New York City, Judith can be contacted at 212.307.4386 or benchcomm@aol.com. Her website is www.creatingwe.com.

