

## QUESTIONS ARE OUR BEST FRIENDS

Have you heard this quotation from Rudyard Kipling? “My six best friends’ names are Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How.”

As a leadership consultant and coach who emphasizes the value of purposeful questions, I’d like to change the quotation. In business, it’s more apt to say, “**My three best friends’ names are What, Why, and How.**”

Sure, there are times when we need to specify the who, when and where. No question about that.

But think about these fundamentals in our business lives, and how critically important they are:

- Knowing **what** our success looks like, by asking our clients, our board, our stakeholders, our boss.
- Asking our clients and team members **what** good communication looks like to them.
- Asking our team members and our clients **how** we can help them.
- Asking our team **why** we do things the way we do. Is there a better way?

Remember, we cannot assume, we must ask, and we must ask each person. As a leader, we serve our constituents, our external and our internal clients.

In fact, as a leader, it is essential to realize that we are here to guide and help others. We must recognize **what** our teams want and need from us as their leader. Each may have differences, but we do know from studies that our team members want to feel appreciated, and that they are an important member of a team. They want to be heard and to feel their ideas matter. And they want to feel supported, that they are being helped to succeed.

Feedback is the lifeblood of teamwork. Setting a positive, constructive tone is true leadership at its best. It takes inner confidence to ask such questions as, “**What** do you think?” “**What’s** your opinion?” “**How** can we be better?” and, especially, “**How** do you think I can be better?” When we humbly strive to improve our own core competencies, we show others how important this is, and how to begin this essential process.

If we don’t have inner confidence, it is important to develop it. Without it, it is difficult to grow and improve.

I have a wonderful example of the power of good questions. A client, a highly capable executive, received feedback from his 360-assessment that he needed to contribute more in senior management meetings. He was eager to do this, though not at all comfortable with how he was going to go about it. At that point in his career, it was just not in his nature to speak boldly. So, rather than thinking about the actual statements he should make in

meetings, we decided he could have the most impact and influence by asking powerful questions that could lead to new thinking by the group: “**Why** do we think that?” “**What** are other ways we could accomplish that?” “**What** do we want our competitive advantage to be in three years?” and “**How** do we get there?”

Two weeks later, he told me he felt these contributions to senior management meetings were quite significant. Thanks to his high-level questions, the other committee members seemed to respect and admire his thinking

It is said that the very best questions are followed by silence, as people need time to reflect on them.

This is an area in which men could learn from women, who are generally more inclined to ask questions. The classic example is the guy driving his car who is lost, but won't stop to ask directions, when a woman is far more likely to do so.

While that example of the guy driving with the “I can do this myself” attitude is amusing, this tendency also exists in business. “I've got this, I don't need any help.” Yet, people appreciate being asked, and offering their ideas and input. They want to be included in decision making, when appropriate.

Bear in mind that 75% of people leave their jobs because they don't feel appreciated by senior management and their bosses.

I often hear senior execs say that people today don't have the same passion and work commitment that we do. Are they rationalizing? Do these execs realize the effect that they could have with a “**What** do you think? and, “**Why**?” and “**How** could we improve?”

I recently wrote about my conversation with Taylor Price, a highly intelligent and dedicated young person with a U.S. government department who was eager to introduce me to his boss. Taylor greatly respects his boss. He specifically told me that she is inclined to ask for his opinion. She is an executive who has the inner confidence to include her reports in her thinking. She clearly understands the importance of servant leadership, which is the act of helping a person's motivation, learning, growth and success.

Remember, the best ideas are usually bottom-up ideas. Want something improved? Ask the people who are actually doing that work!

Questions have the power to change thinking, to jump start creativity, to call people to action and even to change lives.

When we appreciatively ask a team member a purposeful question, we honor that person - that is, if we really listen to their response. This builds trust between us.

Questions are vital to the health of our cultures. When we ask about challenges, keys to success, competitive advantages and **how** to get excellence, **what** is significance and **what** are your dreams, we create a feeling of unity, that we're all in this together and we are all important to the mission.

We can practice asking follow-up questions such as “Tell me more.” and “**What** is behind that?” to go deeper and to understand and learn as much as we can from one another.

Body language matters greatly. We do not want to appear judgmental or uninterested. We should lean forward, maintain comfortable eye contact, maybe a slight smile, to let people sense that we respect them and truly want their ideas.

While I've written about asking questions of others, it is equally important to ask questions of ourselves. In fact, two of the most important questions we execs can ask ourselves in business are, "**How** could I be more helpful?" and "**How** do I want to be perceived by others?"

**Please know, appreciative and purposeful questioning is one of our most powerful and effective leadership skills. It is on our path to success!**

#### **About The Author**



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