

Are You Asking the Right Question?

by
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Many participants find this issue the most useful part of *Leading Through The Storm: The Eagle Perspective*. I'm constantly amazed at how my audiences' perspective differs from mine. Things I find profound sometimes fail to reach them while other issues that do not strike me as significant create major shifts for them. One of these is the question of questions.

Frequently when I'm asked to help a client I find that they haven't defined the problem. Someone said that half the solution to any problem is correctly defining it.

As a leader, you need to constantly ask yourself: "*Are we asking the right question?*" Once you frame the question correctly, your troops will be able to come up with the solutions to the problem. Trust me on this one. As leaders, we should spend most of our time asking ourselves if we've defined the right issue or if we're asking our people to solve the wrong problem. This technique is called "reframing."

Examples of reframing issues to ask the right question

1. I was asked by a president of a company to coach his V.P. of Marketing who had "poor conflict resolution and people skills"—an interesting way of defining someone who had received *six* harassment complaints. While agreeing to talk to the V.P., I suggested to the president that the most pressing issue to consider was "*what is it about our culture that allows this behavior to continue?*"

2. A CEO. I coach called me to help him prepare for the performance review of his VP of HR. She thought she should receive a significant raise because the work she was doing was "strategic." After explaining the details of these projects and issuing his own opinion that none of these efforts met his definition of "strategic" he wanted to know what I thought. I responded that I agreed with him but that wasn't the question he should be asking.

Instead, I suggested he focus on making sure he had defined the goals and objectives he wanted her to be meeting and analyze how well she had risen to that challenge. Did he even want her to be doing strategic work? Had he given her enough staff to deal with the day-to-day issues so that she had time to focus on strategy? (I happened to know that her department was

understaffed) And, perhaps more important, how did he measure his other VPs (all of whom were male and were paid at least \$20,000 more than the HR VP). Were they required to exhibit strategic thinking in order to receive raises or were they simply required to be good at what they were doing? He left our session with an entirely new view of the problem.

3. Another executive I coach was frustrated with her new boss. She had an ambitious agenda of projects. She was having trouble eliciting his support. Her question to me was “*How can I persuade him that these projects are important?*” A better question, I responded is “*What is his agenda? What are his goals and objectives?*” She was embarrassed to admit that she did not know, even though she had been working with him for a year. Once you understand his agenda you can determine how your projects will meet his needs. (I also advised her that should work need to be a bit of a detective to find out since he was not a leader who spend time given vision speeches to his troops.)

Avoid wasting precious resources answering the wrong question

Recently, I was interviewing a utility executive who works with many federal and state regulators, and I asked him what he thought of the question of questions, he admitted he had been too busy to consider whether his staff was spending time on the right issues.

“I think we need to push back more. I think we are spending a lot of time just allowing the regulators to frame the problem and I have my people frantic trying to meet their needs. We should be more aggressive about making sure they’re asking the right question. Otherwise, we’re wasting resources.”

Because we all tend to lack the Eagle Perspective when we’re stressed, we frequently need an outside ear to hear the Right Question. Pick someone outside your organization: a coach, therapist, friend, your priest or even your spouse if they have a business perspective and can stand to hear it one more time.

Spend time as a leader trying to look at the big picture, what I call the Eagle Perspective. A significant part of this time should be spent trying to ask the right questions. Once you can frame the real issue and be patient with yourself and your staff in “living with the questions,” the answers will emerge.

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