

Inquiry: The Information Window

Leadership is no longer about simply *delivering* the right information, but about creating an environment where the right information *flows freely* throughout an organization and *emerges* as a matter of natural course where it is most useful. This means disseminating the power of inquiry to all levels in an organization, facilitating information flow rather than “owning” or controlling it. The traditional model of power was for leaders to define a course, monitor progress, and correct mistakes that arise. But this approach narrows and leaves untapped the flow of creative energy that might be available.

The frenetic pace of today’s business environment and the often chaotic complexity of organization relationships necessitates the transfer of knowledge and information as a continuous and shared process. But keeping abreast of the “latest and best” information is a challenging, sometimes even daunting prospect. A key to releasing creative and productive energy from others lies in how we elicit information and release it to others.

Powerful Questions that Open the Window

Questions can open windows or close them. They can expose creative possibilities or force them into the dark. Do you often self-critique the kind of questions you ask? The two main characteristics of powerful and meaningful questions are that they are *open-ended* and *non-judgmental*, encouraging rather than shutting down responses. There are several crucial things leaders can do that will open the information window and allow creative ideas to flow freely.

Remove Punitive Consequences

The first step to releasing energy to lower levels is to remove the punitive consequences of sharing information so people can explore new, creative, ideas openly. This ensures people that even if they have an idea that may be wrong or weak, they will never be penalized for suggesting it. Some of the most creative and successful endeavors

can evolve from an original idea that may be a little “strange” or “off-the wall.” On the flip side of the coin, imagine what kind of creative inspiration that is lost if people are afraid to speak up.

Apply the “Team Brain”

If the latest numbers have indicated your company was losing to a competitor, it might be reasonable to want to reduce production costs. A sound, open-ended approach directed toward production managers might be: “We’re losing customers to a competitor. I would like to hear your ideas for how we could win them back.” Opening this type of discussion invites input and lets others know it is desired and will be taken seriously. When open-ended inquiry of this type is passed downward throughout an organization, the entire “team brain” from CEO to front-line personnel can work on solving the problem. Facilitating the entire team brain may bring forth a solution or a line of thinking that may not have surfaced under more closed and restrictive inquiry—a synergistic solution that surpasses any single individual’s idea or solution.

It is true that people value something most if they helped create it and have been a part of its implementation. This sense of “ownership” in a project or idea strengthens commitment to the everyday, even mundane details of the job. When people know they are heard, they will give their honest opinions when asked, even going to far as to *volunteer* information and ideas.

Don’t “Impose” Solutions or Ideas

Opening up discussion with meaningful questions is a good start toward generating truly effective inquiry, but responses can still be less than candid if a leader “implies” a certain solution in his or her inquiry. People look to leaders for guidance; inquiry that “imposes” a solution, even in subtle ways, discourages others from challenging it. What often happens instead is *groupthink*—when people converge around an idea or solution—even subconsciously—because of who proposed it. “The CEO thinks this is a good idea, so let’s make it happen.” Causes for groupthink are numerous (fear, desire to impress, etc.), but in the final

analysis, whatever the cause, it results in a lack of candor and objectivity. Charismatic or dominating leaders *invite* groupthink when they impose or imply their own solutions when “asking” for input from others. Groupthink also develops when leaders surround themselves with “yes” people instead of involving people who will challenge their reasoning. An effective leader helps to generate an environment of inquiry where others are not afraid to “challenge up.”

This doesn't mean that a leader should never offer a solution or an idea, but that it should be done in a way that it is clearly seen as a “possibility” that has as no more weight than any other idea that may be offered: “I've have this idea floating around in my head about expanding our product line.” Perhaps we might...” Then describe your idea and follow with: “What do you think? What other ideas do you have about this?” Contrast that approach with this example: “I've given this a lot of thought and have an idea. I think we should...”—and then—“Doesn't this sound like a good idea?” In the second example, the leader has subtly suggested that his or her idea is a sound one and the only response others can give is to reinforce his or her thinking. These, of course, are only examples, but illustrate the concept that leaders need to exercise care when voicing their own ideas and solutions so they do not evoke groupthink or shut down candid, honest responses from others.

Clarify Expectations and Accountability

Strong leaders facilitate implementation by asking: “How would this work? What resources (time, money, equipment, personnel, etc.) do you need to complete this project? How much time do you need?” Then follow through on your commitment to the project by making the needed resources available. Clarify performance standards and expectations up front so everyone involved clearly understands his or her role in achieving the desired results, but refrain from instructing “how” it should be done. Allow those responsible for implementation to *define their own course* of accomplishment. Have the courage to release the project into the hands of those accountable for implementation. Use your power and authority to become a coach who maximizes resources by bringing key people together. Ongoing powerful questions in the form of periodic critique play a crucial role thereafter in checking for progress and making adjustments that might be necessary, but resist the urge to micro-manage.

When an idea is accepted or a consensus is reached, accountability plays a large part in successful implementation. Accountability for accomplishment lends a sense of pride in the outcome. “Look what ‘we’ have accomplished. ‘We’ made this happen!” People will embrace a challenge

with enthusiasm when they are entrusted with responsibility and accountability for implementing an idea they “own.” By displaying confidence and trust in others' abilities, you free them to stretch and expand their own horizons.

Liberating Information

As a leader, you have the unique ability to facilitate information sharing by setting the example for others to see. There is a natural, symbiotic “cycle of events” that occurs when leaders liberate information. When information is given candidly and openly and “belongs” to everyone, it returns in kind and the process grows exponentially throughout the entire organization. The more information received, the freer people feel to give information and ask questions. This open exercise of inquiry creates confidence and evokes a thirst for knowledge. Knowledge, in turn enables creativity and confidence, increasing the free flow of information. As a leader, there are many of ways you can liberate information to take advantage of all possible resources. A few examples might be:

- Establish and enable reporting systems that reveal problems early.
- Create advisory groups that link people with valuable information and the experiences of others.
- Design and facilitate forums where people can exchange ideas for improvements in operations.

But most important: Keep your own eyes—and ears—open and be willing to ask and be influenced by the information you receive from others. Practice effective listening. This can be *especially crucial* if your initial reaction is to disagree with what a speaker is saying. Checking your own initial reactions can be a powerful way to expose your own hidden prejudices toward information you receive from others. Be attentive. Give the speaker your undivided attention and respect the speaker's right to his or her opinion or idea. Refrain from responding until he or she has finished. Reiterating what you've heard—in your own words—once the speaker has finished is a way to assure both you and the speaker, that you have clearly understood what he or she has said.

The responsible and effective leader is the one who understands how powerful inquiry and effective listening can open the window to increased commitment, confidence, accountability, and creativity in others.

Take the Leadership “Values” Assessment:
Visit our [web site](#) and determine what leadership style you value most.