

Caution: thinking encouraged here

Want results? Stop telling employees what to do and, instead, ask them thought-provoking questions

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Ssshhhh. Be quiet and let people think.

That's the advice **Jane Moran** gives to managers at technology service company EDS Canada Inc.

Ms. Moran was hired two years ago as manager of learning and development. Her mandate: Inspire employees to be more creative.

But the company's top-down leadership was getting in the way of such creativity. "A leader might come into an office and dump a problem on the table and start going on about what he thought the best solution might be based on past experiences," Ms. Moran says.

That hindered discussion of other possibilities. So she organized workshops that encourage managers to stop telling people what to do and, instead, ask thought-provoking questions of employees.

"It gets people thinking for themselves about possibilities and, when they come up with their own answers, they are energized and excited about implementing them."

It's a lesson more managers should heed, says David Rock, chief executive officer of Results Coaching Systems LLC, based in New York and Sydney, Australia, and the author of *Quiet Leadership, Help People Think Better — Don't Tell Them What to Do*.

"A tremendous amount of brain power is wasted every day because managers still think their job is to tell people what to do," he says. But, in reality, "workers know much more about the work they are doing than the boss does." Being told what to do can actually sap their motivation for the job.

"The suggestions managers and co-workers typically make are always a crap shoot: You scramble for ideas and hope that one will fit," Mr. Rock says. "The problem is that, even if you do have a winning idea, the person still won't do it because the suggestion came from you. So, in a sense, it is a game you don't want to win."

He says that recent scientific research about brain activity and behaviour explains why this happens:

- Because the brain is programmed by experiences unique to each individual, everybody thinks in a different way. This means that what someone else tells you is nowhere near as meaningful as ideas based on your own experiences.
- The brain will actively resist what it is told. People invariably question and react negatively to ideas they didn't create.
- On the other hand, when people come up with an idea themselves, it creates a boost of adrenalin and positive feelings that makes them want to take action.

How to make that happen? People should be encouraged to focus their thinking by answering questions from their own experience. That will invariably make them come to a solution on their own, Mr. Rock says.

Choreographing the questions creates what he calls a “dance to insight” that has a series of steps:

- Get permission. People may be too preoccupied to be ready to listen. Schedule a time when they're willing to pay attention.
- Describe the process. Tell people that you are going to ask them questions about what they are doing and make it clear they are expected to do the thinking and come up with their own conclusion.
- Start with the present. For instance: What are you stuck on? How long have you been thinking about this? That will identify the issue and get the person focused on how much energy is being wasted spinning their wheels on the problem.
- Clarify their understanding. For instance: What have you done so far? What alternatives have you identified? Which do you think is the best alternative?
- Listen carefully. Restate what they have said in simple terms to clarify the insight. For instance: “I hear you saying that you would like to . . . Is that correct?”
- Stimulate action. An example question might be: “What is the most logical next step?” If more than one option is identified, ask further questions to help the person decide which one to pursue, Mr. Rock recommends.

The goal is for the person to conclude "I just decided what I need to do," he says. At that point, because it is their idea, they will be committed to take action on it.

In asking, the focus should always be on finding a solution rather than identifying a problem, he adds. Once thinking patterns are established, they are difficult to break, so little can be changed by asking "Why isn't this working?"

Instead, Mr. Rock suggests a question like: What do you need to do to make this work? Or, what do you want to do next? Because the brain is always making new connections, this will develop new habits and goals.

Once people get used to the approach, conversations will take only a few minutes before people have the insight they are looking for, Mr. Rock says.

However, it is important to make employees comfortable with a questioning technique, says career coach Nina Spencer, president of Nina Spencer & Associates and author of *Getting Passion Out of Your Profession*.

"Being questioned can scare people because they might fear they are being evaluated on their answers. So it is vital that managers explain the goals and express confidence that the person is not being judged."

It can also be intimidating for relatively new employees, Ms. Spencer adds. "It is important that the employee have the experience and competency to come up with good answers. If they are being asked very technical questions and don't have the background, it can be humbling."

She says employees can prepare themselves by asking some questions of their own regularly.

For one, it's good advice in any career for people to regularly do self assessments, she says. The questions to ask yourself include: How am I growing in my role and what expertise do I contribute that is unique to the organization?

Ms. Moran acknowledges that self-inquiry can be a stretch for employees. "We are challenging people's thinking and it can take people outside their comfort zones."

For that reason, at EDS, participation in the questioning process is

voluntary. "This isn't something we inflict on people. But most employees are open to it and become willing to participate because they see results."

Indeed, the quiet approach has been so well received at EDS that it is now being used at its offices across the country.

Managers who use it regularly have seen an increase in productivity, and employees report they are more enthusiastic because they are pursuing their own ideas, making their work more personally meaningful.

"Creating a structure for thinking is like providing a hand rail," Ms. Moran explains. "They still have to go along a rocky path, but they are going to get to the goal quicker and with less likelihood of getting sidetracked."

Questions to ask

How to help employees gain problem-solving insights? Here are the kinds of questions to ask, suggests David Rock, author of *Quiet Leadership, Help People Think Better — Don't Tell Them What to Do*:

- How clear is your thinking on this? This might lead to the conclusion that someone hasn't spent enough time thinking about the issue .
- What would your most desired outcome look like? This helps to create a mental picture of the goal.
- How will you know when you have been successful? This helps visualize what completion would look like, and how satisfying it would be to do well.
- How are you going to keep yourself accountable to this? People often make promises they don't really intend to keep. Making a commitment to be accountable strengthens resolve.
- What would need to happen for this to be an outrageous success? This question gets people thinking in new ways, opening up possibilities for grander outcomes.