

The Benefits of a Questioning Culture

Excerpts from “*Leading with Questions*” by Michael Marquardt

In organizations that discourage questions, information is usually hoarded, people keep their heads down and stick to their knitting, and few people are willing to take any risks. In answer-driven organizations, curiosity, risk taking, challenging the status quo, and even the willingness to be wrong takes a back seat. These organizations usually suffer from low morale, poor teamwork, and poor leadership. They become fossilized, even moribund.

Questions, on the other hand, establish an inquiring culture in organizations, and such an inquiring culture builds a learning organization. Michael Dell, founder of Dell Inc. observes that “Asking lots of questions opens new doors to new ideas, which ultimately contributes to your competitive edge....That’s why you must encourage the free flow of information at all levels.” Questions also build a culture of accountability. They can foster commitment without barter and sustain the corporate community through civic engagement. Leaders must be the ones who indeed ask the most and the best questions.

What is a Questioning Culture?

A questioning culture is a culture in which responsibility is shared. And when responsibility is shared, ideas are shared, problems are shared and ownership of results is shared. When an organization develops a questioning culture, it also creates a culture of we, rather than a culture of you versus me, or management versus employees. A questioning culture has six hallmarks. When an organization has a questioning culture, the people in it

- Are willing to admit, “I don’t know.”
- Go beyond allowing questions; they encourage questions.
- Are helped to develop the skills needed to ask questions in a positive way.
- Focus on asking empowering questions and avoid disempowering questions.
- Emphasize the process of asking questions and searching for answers rather than finding the “right” answers.
- Accept and reward risk taking.

Organizational Benefits of a Questioning Culture

1. *Improved Decision Making and Problem Solving.* Questioning helps people gain perspective and understand the perspectives of others. As they see issues and problems from different points of view, they gain an appreciation for their complexity and also expand the range of possible solutions. Organizations that encourage leaders at all levels to take the time to ask thoughtful and probing questions improve the odds of making good decisions. Questions help create a higher level of trust that dialogue and debate will occur before major decisions are made. As a result, people feel included in the process and there is more of a commitment to execution when changes have to be implemented.
2. *Greater Adaptability and Acceptance of Organizational Change.* Change brings new ideas, new ways of doing things to the organization. Change and new ideas are often rejected in organizations without a questioning culture because they might conflict with existing, established mental models or ways of doing things, which have never been questioned. Great questions cause the questioner to become more aware of the need for change and to be more open and willing to change.

3. *Motivating and Empowering Employees.* Good questions energize people to devise their own solutions. When people discover their own answers, they develop self-responsibility and accept ownership of the results. Questions move people from dependence to independence. A questioning culture can energize an entire organization. People are energized because they have been asked for their ideas. By asking questions, leaders help people discover for themselves what is important for them in doing what is necessary for the organization. This discovery process improves their self-confidence and self-esteem, empowering them in the process. Concurrently, they take ownership of the solution because they have participated in developing it.
4. *Stronger Teamwork.* Putting people together around a conference table doesn't make them into a team whose members all pull together. Questions help the group recognize and reorganize its collective knowledge. As group members engage in asking questions of one another, they gradually gain a group consensus on answers and strategies since they now more clearly see each other's perspectives and also gain greater clarity of their own.
5. *Enhanced Innovation.* Innovation happens when people see things differently. It starts with a questioning culture that helps people gain new perspective and see things differently. Innovation requires genuine curiosity and genuine questions generate genuine curiosity. Innovation requires risk and questions encourage people to take risks. Innovation requires creativity. Creativity requires asking questions for which an answer is not already known.

(Excerpts from “*Leading With Questions: How Leaders Find the Right Solutions By Knowing What to Ask*” Jossey-Bass, 2005, pp. 27-39)