

Have the Courage to Ask

By Marshall Goldsmith

Peter Drucker had a great way with words. He distilled meaningful concepts into short phrases more effectively than anyone I have ever met. I have had the privilege of being on the Board of the Drucker Foundation (and now the Leader to Leader Institute) for many years. At one of our early Board meetings, Peter observed, "The leader of the past knew how to tell, the leader of the future will know how to ask."

Why is asking so important? Almost all of the leaders that I meet manage knowledge workers. Peter defined knowledge workers as people who know more about what they are doing than their boss does. It is hard to tell people what to do and how to do it - when they already know more than we do! In today's rapidly changing world, we need to ask, listen and learn from everyone around us. As Peter said, "Leaders need to be willing to start with asking the question, 'What needs to be done?'"

Asking works! This isn't just a theory. As research shows, it is a fact. My partner, Howard Morgan and I published a study on leadership development programs involving over 11 thousand leaders and 86,000 of their co-workers from eight major corporations. Our findings were very clear. Leaders that ask co-workers to provide suggestions for improvement, listen to their co-workers, learn from the people around them and consistently follow-up are seen as becoming more effective. Leaders that don't ask - don't get much better. A few years ago, Leader to Leader published a similar study with relationship customers and found very similar results. External customer satisfaction goes up when customer service representatives ask, listen, learn and follow-up.

In addition to being supported by research, asking just makes common sense. When people ask us for our input, listen to us, try to learn from us and follow-up to see if they are getting better - our relationship with them almost invariably improves.

I have only one question. This seems so simple and obvious. Why don't we do it?

I have reviewed summary 360 feedback involving thousands of leaders from over 50 major organizations. If the item "Asks people what he or she can do to improve" is included in the company's leadership inventory it is almost always near the bottom (if not in last place) in terms of employee satisfaction. As a rule - in spite of Peter Drucker's good suggestions - leaders don't ask!

One of the major reasons that we don't ask is our inflated ego. When I have asked over 50,000 leaders to "rate themselves" relative to their professional peers - the results are very consistent - and very amazing! About 60 percent of all leaders rank themselves in the "top 10 percent" of their professional peer group, almost 85 percent say they are in the "top 20 percent." Over 98 percent claim to be in the "top half"! The performance of the company has very little to do with the self-assessment of its leaders. I have done this

exercise with leaders in four companies that were considered (at that time) as the "most admired" in America - the results were about the same. I have also done this exercise with leaders in two companies that were facing bankruptcy - the results were almost identical!

When we become successful we are often delusional about the reasons for our success. Successful people tend to attribute good results to our own motivation and ability. We tend to attribute poor results to environmental factors, bad luck or random chance.

When we over-rate our own performance and knowledge, we can easily justify not asking others for their input. After all, why should we ask others, when (in our own mind) we already know more than they do!

Although inflated ego is one important reason that we don't ask, it is not the biggest reason - the biggest reason is fear.

Recently I asked the VP of Customer Satisfaction in a major organization, "Should your employees be asking their key customers for feedback - listening - learning and following-up to ensure service keeps getting better?" "Of course!" he exclaimed. "How important is this to your company?"

I inquired - egging him on to be more enthusiastic. "It's damn important!" he cried out. I then lowered my voice and asked, "Have you ever asked your wife for feedback on how you can become a better husband?" He stopped, thought for a second, and sighed "No."

My interrogation continued, "Who is more important - your company's customers or your wife?" "My wife - of course!" he sadly noted.

"If you believe in asking so much, why don't you do it at home?" I inquired. He ruefully admitted, "Because I am afraid of the answer."

Why don't most of us ask - even though we know we should? We don't ask because - deep down inside - we are afraid of the answers.

Let me give you a personal example. At 56 years of age, one type of input that I should be asking for every year is called a physical exam. I managed to avoid this input - not one year or two years - but for seven years! How did I successfully avoid a physical exam for seven years? What did I keep telling myself - for seven years? I will get that exam after I quit traveling so much. I will get that exam after I go on my "healthy foods" diet. I will get that exam after I get in shape!

Have you ever told yourself the same thing? Who are we kidding - the doctor - our families??? We are only kidding ourselves.

My suggestions are very simple:

As a leader, listen to Peter Drucker. Get in the habit of asking key co-workers for their ideas on "What needs to be done?" Thank them for their input, listen to them, learn as much as you can, incorporate the ideas that make the most sense and follow-up to ensure that real, positive change is occurring.

As a coach - encourage the people that you are coaching to ask, listen and learn from everyone around them. Be a great role model for learning - then ask the people you are coaching to learn in the same way that you are. As an executive coach, I find that my clients can learn a lot more from their key stakeholders than they ever learn from me!

As a friend and family member - ask the people that you love how you can be a better partner, friend, parent or child. Listen to their ideas. Don't get so busy with work that you forget that they may well be the most important people in your life.

Improving interpersonal relationships doesn't have to take a lot of our time. It does require having the courage to ask for important people's opinions and the discipline to follow-up and do something about what we learn.

As Peter Drucker suggested we need to ask, "What needs to be done?"

Who do you need to ask?

When are you going to start asking?

Marshall Goldsmith is a world authority in helping successful leaders achieve positive, measurable change in behavior: for themselves, their people and their teams. He has been named one of the top 50 leaders influencing the field of management over the last century (American Management Association), one of the five most respected executive coaches (Forbes) and among the top ten executive educators (Wall Street Journal). He is the founder of the Alliance for Strategic Leadership and Marshall Goldsmith Partners. Marshall invites you to visit his library (MarshallGoldsmithLibrary.com) for articles and resources you can use. This article was originally published in Leader to Leader, 2005.