

Our Mission

To help individuals, teams and organizations reach their potential through strategic planning, innovative coaching, development of team effectiveness and management consulting.

Cook & Company Areas of Concentration

Strategy

Coaching

Assessments

Team Building

Consulting

Training

Workshops &
Retreats

Mergers &
Acquisitions

Ethical
Performance

Asking Good Questions

In our last issue we discussed the importance of leaders creating ownership in their organizations by, generally, being less directive and more focused on drawing in their managers and employees by seeking input. We also promised that we would take a look at the actual process of asking good questions.

When Kevin Sharer, the current CEO of Amgen, took over the reins from his predecessor he conducted interviews with every single vice-president and above in that company. To make sure his managers were prepared, he asked them to come to these meetings ready to answer, among other questions, two that have always stood out to me: 1) What do you want me to change? 2) What DON'T you want me to change? By the simple act of asking those two questions, he accomplished a number of objectives:

- He made it safe for managers to be more candid with him
- He began to develop a good idea of what really concerned people throughout the organization about his perceived management style
- He opened a window on the unresolved issues that faced the company

Andrew Finlayson, in his book *Questions That Work*, contends that good questions are “a positive destructive force,” that is, they open the door to a new way of doing things, to creating change. That’s exactly what Kevin Sharer’s questions did, help people realize that there were some things that were important to keep at Amgen, and some things that needed to be changed. That concept then morphed later into a notion still cited around the company to the effect that its employees needed to keep in

mind that they were, on the one hand, the world’s largest and most successful biotechnology company, and they should be immensely proud and thoughtful about what had brought them to that summit. On the other hand, if they were to survive, they needed to compare themselves in size, innovation, and competitiveness with the world’s great pharmaceutical companies, and that would require change. All from two simple questions.

To return to Finlayson, he suggests that we keep the following thoughts in mind when we ask questions:

- What is most important to know
- What is the ability and expertise of the person or persons with whom you are dealing
- What is the attitude of the person you are asking
- What will it take to create the most uninhibited conversation
- What kind of quality of response are you receiving
- Have you expressed gratitude for the answers you have gotten
- What do the answers imply for action

Based on our last newsletter, I would obviously add, “How can you frame your questions in a way that draws the individual or individuals with whom you are dealing into owning the outcomes,” and “How can I make sure I learn as much as I can from this person?”

What does it take to make questions work for you in these ways?

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If you would like to receive these commentaries by e-mail, or if you have a colleague you think might be interested in receiving them, just e-mail your request to:

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Asking Open-ended Questions

Ask open-ended questions wherever possible (except if you are trying to advance the discussion by paraphrasing your questionee's response in your own words to confirm you have heard it correctly).

Use Your Questions to Advance the Discussion

Try to advance the discussion, rather than defend a position. Because once you have defended a position – even if it hasn't actually been attacked – the questionee will invariably be drawn into an attack and defend mode herself.

Questions that advance the discussion move the discourse forward, or explore other dimensions of the issue. Good insight into the variety of perspectives you can use to enrich a discussion are provided by Edward de Bono's wonderful work which is best captured in his book *Six Hats Thinking*. De Bono posits that there are at least six different perspectives that we can use to enrich decision-making. The same can be said for improving the quality of your interaction as a leader, and using your interactions create ownership.

The six different questions - each represented by a different color "hat" - are as follows:

White Hat -- White is neutral and objective, concerned with objective facts and figures. Representative question: "...Let's start off by putting on our white thinking hats and telling what we know about xyz. What are the figures? Where are the reports? Who can give evidence?"

Red Hat -- Red suggests anger (seeing red), feelings and emotions, the exact opposite of white hat thinking. It is concerned with hunches, intuitions and impressions with no need to justify. Representative question: "... I want you to put on your red hat and tell me how you feel about my proposal."

Black Hat -- Black is somber and serious, the basis of critical thinking and is always logical. It is the most used of all the hats and is perhaps

the most important. Representative question: "...This seems like an excellent idea. Let's have a strong black hat effort to find out the weaknesses so that we can do something about those weaknesses right now at the design stage, rather than find out about them too late."

Yellow Hat -- Yellow is sunny and positive, seeking to find the merit and benefits of a given approach. Representative question: "... When the merger occurs, let's think about the positive impact it will have on our department."

Green Hat -- Green is grass and abundant, fertile growth, indicating creativity and generating new ideas. Representative question: "... We have laid out the traditional approaches to this problem. We shall come back to them. But first let's have ten minutes of green hat thinking to see if we can come up with a fresh approach."

Blue Hat -- Blue is cool, and it is also the color of the sky, which is above everything else. It is responsible for summaries, overviews and conclusions. Representative question: "...John, you keep pushing this same idea all the time. We do note it as a strong possibility and we will examine it later. I think we should try for some additional alternatives. This is meant to be an exploration not an argument."

How does one get started down the road of asking good questions? Both for myself, and in the coaching I have done, I have found that having several good questions in mind (like Kevin Sharer's two discussed above) are a great way to initiate the process. Once started, most of us can quite easily engage. Another useful idea is to try to identify in your mind the "hat" that you are dealing with, and to pick another hat's approach to advance the discussion. This avoids the "attack and defend" issue, and since it is less threatening, tends to open up the discussion, rather than to narrow it or shut it down.

Next Issue: A return to Behavioral Economics, with some interesting new work done by researchers that sheds further light on our behavioral side.