

Our Mission

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

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What's Wrong With Bob?

Bob is the CEO of a highly profitable software company, one that he founded some 15 years ago and has overseen since. While the company has been successful, Bob's reign as CEO isn't so successful. When his direct reports are asked about him, the usual answer is, "You know Bob, he's always got the answer to everything."

That's a *problem*, having a CEO who knows all the answers?

Well, like most things in life, "it depends." In this kind of situation, it typically depends not only on whether Bob is right most of the time, but also whether Bob creates a climate where his direct reports and others "own" the answers. Let's explore what we mean by this line of inquiry.

When Bob Isn't Right Some of the Time

In these situations, where Bob answers any and all questions, if he's not right most of the time, the organization is not going to do very well. Of course, it may not do well for the obvious reason – it's not getting the right direction.

But it may not do well for another, and in some respects more important reason. Let's suppose that Bob's company is in a business that, at least for the moment, can't help but make money. It's a business with explosive growth, high margins, and few competitors. Bob's failure to provide the right answers can certainly hurt even this magical enterprise. Why? Because if Bob's key managers lose faith in his ability, this lack of faith will begin to

permeate the company like a corrosive acid, robbing the company of the vitality that any enterprise needs (particularly when it should be doing well).

When Bob Is Right All the Time

There are some businesses (like commercial bio-tech research labs, for example), where "right" decisions are critical in the allocation of (potentially) hundreds of millions of dollars in research and development costs, and ultimately, in the potential for gains or losses in sales of billions of dollars.

Yet even in these cases, if Bob provides all the right answers, the effects can still be corrosive. How?

Because when the Bob's of the world provide all of the answers, typically only the Bob's who are doing the answering actually "own" the results.

Example: A highly successful research and development company with a certifiably smart woman CEO has an enviable track record of choosing the right software projects to pursue as a result of her insight and assertiveness. The problem? The company can't hold on to the key managers necessary to execute the decisions made! When asked why, some of those who left said, "Why should I stay—all the decisions are made by Ms X—there's no room to contribute, I never felt like I owned any of the potential success of the company."

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That last phrase about ownership is key. When one person tells another “the answer,” the second person rarely “owns” the answer and its consequences. But for an organization to succeed, everyone must own answers, and usually the more ownership of those answers down and across the organization, the more successful it tends to be.

How Do Leaders Build Ownership?

One very clear way is to coach their employees into discovering the right answers. Now I don't mean “hiding the ball,” in the direct sense of that phrase. Instead, I mean framing questions that help those you are dealing with advance the inquiry so that the right answer begins to develop, and when it appears, everyone associated with the inquiry owns it and the consequences of it.

Another interesting dimension of this approach is that when one asks questions, it would appear (although I haven't seen any confirming proof) that one uses language that helps establish a stronger bond between the questioner and the person being asked. This use of a more “common” language itself may help improve the alignment of those involved.

But What If . . .

Here are some questions we commonly hear when this “inquiry” method is proposed, as opposed to a more directive approach:

- “If I already know the answer, it's disingenuous to hide it.” The fact is that, more often than not, even the leader learns something during the inquiry process. As “The Wisdom of Crowds” by James Surowiecki points out, a number of people – especially if they have some independent points of view – tend to make better decisions than individuals, even really smart ones. James Watson said when asked about how he and Francis Crick had beaten an extremely talented French scientist to the discovery of

the double helix theory in DNA, that she was isolated, whereas he and Crick had much more interaction with others, so their thinking advanced more rapidly.

- “I don't have time to do this all the time, nor does the company.” Absolutely right, but the question itself shows how pervasive some leaders' directiveness is. (My favorite rejoinder to this question is, “So as smart as you are, you can't figure out when it is important to use this approach . . .?”)
- “How do I know when people are getting this?” A great question. Of course, if you tell people what to do, how do you know if they are “getting it?” The response is to ask people at the end of such an interchange what they see as the answer (another good question!), and how they suggest the organization should respond to it. By the act of asking the question, employees typically already begin to own the execution of the answer the group reaches. And by the way, when people own things, they also tend to own the real-time course corrections often needed to make the results even more valuable.

So What Happened to Bob?

When Bob started to ask insightful questions, his managers initially thought it was a trap. Then his approach scared them (after all, they were used to taking direction, not owning success). After a period of just a few weeks, however, they began to take more responsibility for discussion, and subsequently, for ensuring that decisions reached became decisions executed.

Bob's company is doing better, he has a more loyal and satisfied group of managers and employees, and he himself (it turns out) relishes the role of facilitator and coach, as well as leader of his enterprise.

In our spring issue, we'll discuss the kinds of questions that Bob and others can ask that create the insightful discussion necessary to be successful.