

Choose Your Questions Wisely

What propels leaders to carry out unprecedented, bold visions? Is it fear, foolishness or ambition?

In a 2014 McKinsey Quarterly article, Joanna Barsh, a director emeritus and Johanne Lavoie, a master expert, both at the consulting firm tackle this question and suggest the answer is hope based on their book, *Centered Leadership: Leading with Purpose, Clarity, and Impact* (Crown Business, March 2014).

In their work with executives, they found the most effective leaders tend to use fear as fuel for action, but they favor hope. Fear is of value because it gets adrenaline flowing, sharpens focus, and makes extraordinary contributions possible. But it's easy to succumb to fear and feel overwhelmed by risks. Fear spreads through an organization like wildfire. Without the counterbalance of hope, fear can paralyze.

Based on their research, the authors propose a way to find the right mix of both by starting with the questions leaders should ask. They offer a simple exercise. Find an associate and ask that person to discuss their most pressing work problem with you. Initially, use only these questions to guide the conversation:

- What's the problem?
- What are the root causes?
- Who is to blame?
- What have you tried that hasn't worked?
- Why haven't you been able to fix the problem yet?

After receiving answers to the above, restart the discussion, using these questions instead:

- What would you like to see (and make) happen?
- Can you recall a time when the solution was present, at least in part? What made that possible?
- What are the smallest steps you could take that would make the biggest difference?
- What are you learning in this conversation so far?

After soliciting these answers, debrief your associate about their thoughts and feelings during the first versus the second discussion. What did you notice? What was the person's underlying mind-sets? What were yours?

The difference should be tangible. The first set of questions geared more for solving technical problems, often prompts defensive reactions and leaves participants feeling drained. By contrast, participants report feeling animated, curious, and engaged the second time around.

We tend to use the first set more often. These problem-focused questions work well for linear issues that have "right" answers. As we move up the ranks as leaders and the challenges become more complex, our problem-solving instincts can lead us astray. By contrast, when we develop solution-focused instincts, we empower and engage others, deliberately infusing hope. Remember that employees with problems already feel fear. Problem-focused questions only fuel it.

Look for problems and you'll find them; look for solutions and people will offer them. By choosing thoughtful questions, we can shift our mind-set from "my organization is a problem to be solved" to "my organization holds solutions to be discovered."