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## The Art of the Question

Carmen was a competent department director who was frustrated with Megan, one of her nurse managers. She was concerned about Megan's difficulty with some of her management responsibilities, but her attempts to talk with Megan about these problems weren't working. Most recently, Megan was late with the performance reviews for her staff. Carmen asked Megan why she was late with the reviews, and Megan looked dumbfounded—almost as if Carmen's question was falling on deaf ears. So Carmen asked the question again, this time adding more volume and urgency. Again, Megan didn't answer. Carmen gave up, returned to her office, and grew increasingly frustrated.

Her irritation mounted as she thought about the other recent times when Megan “stonewalled” her questions or didn't perform as required, or both. She “knew” she couldn't keep asking Megan questions since she just got blank stares in response. So she thought about putting Megan on a performance plan and, if necessary, making a personnel change. Finally, she concluded she could not do that because there was too much going on in the organization and decided to just live with it.

Unfortunately, Carmen's thoughts about Megan and her decision to “live with it” came at a cost. But that cost was outside of her awareness; it was that her internal dialogue generated even more resentment. Had Carmen been conscious of this, she probably would have said her increased anger came from Megan's actions. But Carmen's amplified bitterness did not come from Megan; it came from her own thoughts.

Rightly or wrongly, Carmen had concluded that she “could not” ask any more questions or put Megan on a performance plan. Although the latter choice might have been logical, the former conclusion was not. Carmen had not considered her questions or the way she was asking them, nor had she asked herself whether her own behavior was escalating the issue.

Carmen also didn't realize that she had made a deal with herself when she decided to just live with it. That decision had costs, too, such as:

Carmen would probably grow more, not less, frustrated with Megan's behavior.

- Carmen would probably not change the tone or the direction of her dialogue with Megan.
- Megan's behavior was unlikely to change.
- Megan's poor performance would affect others around her.
- Carmen's team and the organization would suffer as a result.

If we step away from the specifics, we can see that there are several ways in which Carmen can avoid these consequences. She has two options that are relatively easy and readily available. At least temporarily, she can shift the focus to herself and her own behavior, and shift her attention away from Megan. She can also change the quality of her questions and the tone she uses when asking them.

Turning her attention inward can increase Carmen's awareness of her own internal dialogue and the power she is giving to it. For example, she might reconsider her belief that she can't ask any more questions and she just has to live with it. Rather than dismissing the prospect of any more questions, she can rethink the ones she is asking and the way she is asking them. She can also consider her goals: What did she want to accomplish with her questions for Megan? What impact did she want to have on Megan? Was she simply asking for information? Or is it possible that she also wanted to let Megan know that she was frustrated and angry? Although no leader wants to admit less-than-admirable motives, it is important to be honest with ourselves when we reflect on our own actions and intentions.

Marilee Adams<sup>1</sup> offers a relevant perspective: “A question can be an invitation, a request or a missile. What impact do you want your questions to have?” We don't know the history of Carmen's relationship with Megan, and we can't speculate on what impact Carmen wants to have now. However, we can look at her behavior and her words. Any question that starts with why can easily elicit a defensive response. Better choices for honest responses are words like how, what, and when. While questions that begin with these words can't guarantee positive results, they are far less likely to produce reactive, self-justifying answers.

Carmen can also change the tone she uses when she asks her questions. Although this

seems easy enough, adjusting her tone will be more effective if she also changes her attitude. It is highly likely that Megan senses Carmen's irritation, and as a result, she may feel threatened or shamed, or both. Whatever Megan's feelings are, they are probably negative and undoubtedly contributing to her inability to respond.

If Carmen wants a different dialogue with Megan, her best option is to ask herself if she can have a positive attitude and listen to what Megan has to say. Perhaps Carmen can shift her stance from anger to curiosity. These internal changes may require real effort on Carmen's part, especially if she has been frustrated for any length of time. There are several ways she can increase the likelihood of being successful with her efforts to change her attitude:

1. She can focus on whatever is constructive about Megan's work history or their past personal relationship. If she can do this, it is likely that she can find more capacity to be positive and to question Megan accordingly. If she shifts her attitude, she is in a better position to ask questions that are not laden with a negative edge.

2. If Carmen is too angry to become genuinely curious, she can try suspending her anger just for a short time. She can tell herself it will still be there when and if she wants it back. In the meantime, she can try out being open to a positive outcome and genuine curiosity.

Even in difficult circumstances, most of us can momentarily let go of negative judgments and difficult feelings if we know we can return to them. When we do let go, even for a few moments, our attitudes, and the quality of our questions can change dramatically. It's still possible that we won't get answers that are satisfactory, and it's also possible that people listening to our newfound positivity won't immediately accept and believe it. But if we keep it up and we still don't create better dialogue and good outcomes, at least we will have adjusted our own attitudes and become more skilled communicators.

Carmen wanted to experiment with these strategies. Although she was not certain she could develop a better rapport with Megan, she was willing to try. She was surprised and delighted when they were able to have several qualita-

tively different conversations. It wasn't long before she learned that Megan had significant family issues and minor, but disruptive, health concerns. Megan was embarrassed to tell Carmen about these problems, but she knew they were getting in the way of her job performance. Together, Carmen and Megan built a plan to help Megan get back on track. Carmen was especially happy because she had taken steps to improve her working relationship by increasing the effectiveness of her questions and examining her own behavior.

## Reference

1. Adams M. *Guidelines for Great Question Askers*. Lambertville, NJ: The Inquiry Institute; 2011.

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