

Career Compass No. 24: Asking Powerful Questions

by Dr. Frank Benest

3 March 2012

In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest helps us understand why our leaders don't just tell us what to do.

My manager seems to be always asking our team questions. In fact, we spend a lot of team time responding to her queries.

We are a high-functioning and productive team but I wish my manager would just come in and tell us where she wants us to go. I thought a leader took charge and made decisions.



These are times of great flux—new technologies, demographic changes, and severe financial shifts all are forces disrupting our local government world. In these uncertain times, a manager cannot know all the answers and be certain about direction. While we in government, business, and education have traditionally focused on having the right answers, there are no right answers. Therefore, “a good question beats a good answer.” In these times of great flux, leaders need to harness the energy, creativity, and commitment of everyone to adapt to this disruptive world.

We tend to think that leadership is all about having the answers, making decisions, and determining direction. Ron Heifetz, in his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, emphasizes that the big issues of the day are not “technical challenges” (such as designing a road), which can be addressed by technical experts. Rather, we face “adaptive challenges.” With adaptive challenges (such as addressing a homelessness problem in a community), there are no right or wrong answers; choices often involve value conflicts among stakeholders; and leadership is required to bring people together to do difficult work.

In this kind of environment, the role of leaders is to invite people on a journey whose destination may be unclear. Asking powerful questions is an effective leadership approach in order to engage team members and external partners. Moreover, posing genuine questions allows the leader to demonstrate a little humility and vulnerability and thereby become more human and authentic, enhancing one’s ability to lead. People are less likely to follow if they cannot relate to you on some level as a person.

THE IMPORTANCE OF QUESTIONS

Why are the right questions so powerful? First, leaders cannot force followers to follow. Therefore, leaders use questions to generate conversations. The poet David Whyte suggests that leadership is the art of conversation. So, who are we engaging in conversations? What is the content of our conversations?

Second, questions are also the key to engaging people and securing their discretionary effort and commitment, without which we cannot be successful as organizations.

Finally, in a disruptive world, learning agility is the critical skill. Technical knowledge (knowing the correct answers or solutions) becomes quickly obsolete in a world of accelerating and non-linear change. Learn-how becomes more important than know-how. The foundation to learning agility is the ability to ask fundamental questions.

POWERFUL QUESTIONS

As a leader, the trick is asking provocative and engaging questions. Anyone can exert leadership by asking questions such as:

1. Why does what we do matter?
2. For what ideas are we fighting?
3. Are we as an organization or department who we say we are?
4. Why would anyone follow our team?
5. Are we focused on the right challenge or problem?
6. What is our organizational culture all about?
7. How do we sustain our culture?
8. What if we take a completely different approach?
9. How do we accelerate our learning?

As Polly LaBarre discusses in her hbr.org blog piece "[The Question That Will Change Your Organization](#)," the more disruptive your questions, the more opportunity that your team or organization will create or shape your future. The questions of "Why?" or "Why not?" or "What if?" will invite possibility, not doubt about the future.

BEGINNER'S MIND

All of us can lead through asking important questions. To do so, leaders must not only ask questions but be open to the responses. As the Buddhists say, we need to avoid an "expert's mind." An expert's mind is full—there is very little room for new or contrary information or other perspectives. Therefore, leaders who wish to truly engage others must exhibit a "beginner's mind." A beginner's mind is empty and thus open to all kinds of ideas and different views. A beginner's mind demonstrates authentic curiosity about what is happening in a dynamic world and how we might respond to it.

LEADING THE WAY

To use powerful questions, leaders at all levels must:

1. Prepare for the conversation and identify courageous questions that will provoke the kind of conversation that the team needs in order to move forward.
2. Demonstrate some humility and vulnerability by asking questions for which you may not have the answer.

3. Be open to the responses to your questions and be unafraid of where the conversation may lead.
4. Make it safe for others to ask questions by modeling—asking tough questions, being non-defensive to the responses of others to your questions, and encouraging others to do the same.

A NEW LEADERSHIP COMPETENCY

In our disruptive world of local government, leaders at all levels of the organization must be able to ask questions and start conversations. This new leadership competency will help us engage others in shaping a new future for the organization.



Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff, and appears in ICMA's [JOB newsletter](#) and online. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future *Career Compass*, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com.