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Ask Questions Instead of Giving Direct Orders

In the military, orders are a part of everyday operations. You receive orders and you are expected to follow them to a T. But when Captain D. Michael Abrashoff took command of the USS *Benfold,* a guided missile destroyer, he knew he was facing a challenge that would require a different approach.

The *Benfold* was not the top ship in the navy, not by far. The crew was sullen, morale was low, and most of the sailors on the ship were just biding their time until their discharge date. To add complexity to an already difficult leadership situation, the previous commander had not been well loved, so the crew was assessing their new leader with a harsh and critical eye.

But this was Captain Abrashoff's first sea command, and he was determined to do it well. His first step: learn about his crew. "It didn't take me long to realize that my young crew was smart, talented, and full of good ideas that frequently came to nothing because no one in charge had ever listened to them," wrote Captain Abrashoff in *It's Your Ship,* his leadership chronicles of his time aboard the *Benfold.*[1]

So Captain Abrashoff vowed to listen to his crew, but not just when they decided to speak up. He knew that if he wanted to turn the ship around, the ideas for how to do that had to come from the crew. And what better way to find out what their ideas were than to interview them? Captain Abrashoff interviewed five crew members a day until he had interviewed every crew member on board—approximately 310 of them. What did he learn?

That they wasted a lot of time on dreary chores, such as painting the ship six times a year. So Abrashoff found a way to replace all of the fasteners on the ship that caused rust streaks and a way to run many of the exterior panels through a special paint process. The ship didn't have to be painted again for almost two years, freeing up time for more valuable endeavors, such as advanced training. He learned that many of them had signed up for the navy as a way to pay for college. So he arranged for SAT testing on the ship and long-distance advanced placement courses for the crew. He found that many of them came from rough backgrounds and had led tough lives but also were very attached to their families, so he included family members as much as possible in the sailors' lives by sending birthday cards, letters of praise, and other important notes to parents and spouses. "I wanted to link our goals," wrote Captain Abrashoff, "so that they would see my priority of improving *Benfold* as an opportunity for them to apply their talents and give their jobs a real purpose."

What was the result of asking questions of his crew? A serious shift in morale, a greater willingness to push the limits of what was possible, and some of the highest testing rankings the navy had ever seen.

If Captain Abrashoff had stepped on board, issued a directive that the crew was to improve its rankings, and then outlined how that would happen, what might the result have been? We'll never

know, but it is unlikely that the *Benfold* would have become the ship—or the leadership catalyst—it became.

Asking questions not only makes an order more palatable and reduces resentment, it often stimulates creativity and innovation in solving the problem at hand. People are more likely to follow a new path if they feel that they have been involved in shaping it.

The familial leaders of the Marriott organization were known for their intense devotion to inspecting Marriott hotels to ensure that they were well run. Bill Marriot Jr., in particular, "was constantly on the go, asking questions and paying close attention to the responses," writes Ed Fuller, the leader of Marriott International Lodging.

> In fact, sometimes he would be criticized for listening to too many people—and listening just as hard to frontline people as to senior executives. . . . His favorite question during his frontline visitations was, "What do you think?" It was his way of combating the tendency of employees to shy away from rocking the boat or passing on bad news to the boss.[2]

Bill Marriot Jr. was an enlightened leader who understood the negative power of the Mum Effect and how best to engage employees in making every Marriott property live up to his expectations.

While we understand that asking questions increases the engagement of those we hope to influence, many leaders don't take this route. Why? Because at times, asking questions can seem like a roundabout way to lead people to the answer you already have in your head. Why not just tell them? It would be more expedient.

People don't like to be ordered around, that's why.

Leaders are also reluctant to ask questions because they don't

know what responses might result. What if the other person doesn't head in the direction you were intending? There is no way to overcome that possibility. Instead, leaders must think about it as an opportunity rather than as a risk. The answer you get may be better—likely will be better—than the one you already know.

When Ian Macdonald of Johannesburg, South Africa, the general manager of a small manufacturing plant specializing in precision machine parts, had the opportunity to accept a very large order, he was convinced that he could not meet the promised delivery date. The work already scheduled in the shop and the short completion time needed for this order made it seem impossible for him to accept the order.

Instead of pushing his people to accelerate their work and rush the order through, he called everybody together, explained the situation to them, and told them how much it would mean to the company and to them if they could make it possible to produce the order on time. Then he started asking questions: "Is there anything we can do to handle this order? Can anyone think of different ways to process it through the shop that will make it possible to take the order? Is there any way to adjust our hours or personnel assignments that would help?"

The employees came up with many ideas and insisted that he take the order. The order was accepted, produced, and delivered on time.

While it should not be the case, many leaders dread doing performance reviews. They know they have employees who need improvement, and they foresee a battle as they deliver criticism and the employees become increasingly defensive and sullen. These leaders need to take a different tack.

Most employees have a keen understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses. While some may be obtuse, most, if you ask, will tell you exactly what you are thinking. Many

organizational psychologists recommend instituting a self-appraisal stage in the review process. Studies have shown that self-appraisals lead to reviews that are more satisfying for managers and employees and have a greater positive effect on performance.[3] Begin by giving the employee some questions to think about prior to the review: "What do you think you're exceptionally good at? What are your goals for the coming year? Where do you think you could improve your skills or abilities to help you meet those goals?"

Imagine beginning the meeting with a complete set of answers to these questions, answers that you don't have to deliver. At least 80 percent of the time, they will have come to the same conclusions you've arrived at and the conversation will be a much more positive one.

The wonderful thing about asking questions is that it can be effectively done in almost any medium. What if you sent a text or tweet to your team with a question about how to handle a recalcitrant client? Would that help employees who might be weak in this area reconsider their own methods or recognize that they don't have one? You can ask pretty powerful questions in 140 characters or less.

Questions allow you to create a conversation—in any medium—that can lead to a better place for all involved. And it allows everybody to feel that they were involved in shaping the outcome.

Wouldn't you rather be asked a question than be given an order?