

■ WARNING: THE QUESTIONS YOU'RE ASKING MIGHT BE HAZARDOUS TO WORKPLACE IMPROVEMENT!

by Tom Terez

John Keller is a can-do kind of person. He built his 30-person printing company from scratch, and he plans to buy a new building and add 15 more employees within two years. He's also a walking reference book of positive quotations. "Problems are just opportunities in disguise," he likes to say. "No problem is bigger than one person with creativity and the will to use it."

Job performance at the company had always been good, but John felt he could motivate people to do even better. So he decided to reward the very best performers, teaming up with the HR chief to develop an "Employee of the Quarter" program that would give each recipient a celebratory luncheon, an engraved plaque recording the honor, and a weekend stay at a nearby park lodge. The plan was for John himself to select the top employee based on nominations from employees.

It seemed like a great idea at the time. There was just one problem: not a single employee submitted a nomination.

John and the HR manager figured that employees didn't understand the program, so they explained it in greater detail at an all-hands meeting. Still no nominations. They concluded that the program needed to be more prominent, so they posted signs in the break room. Still no nominations. Then they decided to take a more personal approach and ask employees directly to give it a try and nominate one of their co-workers. The result? You guessed it: no nominations.

So what happened?!

John wanted to boost job performance, and he assumed that a lot of it had to do with personal motivation. He assumed that a bit of healthy competition and public recognition would have a motivating effect, so the employee-of-the-quarter approach seemed perfect. He assumed that people would respond to monetary value, which is why he included the free weekend at the lodge. He assumed that employees would want some say in the selection process, which is why he gave everyone a chance to sub-

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mit nominations. And he assumed they would be interested enough to do so. They weren't. In the end, John's good intentions were undone by his assumptions.

The assumption trap awaits us all, and the only way to steer clear is by asking the right questions from the outset. It's a matter of reframing. In John's case, he began by asking: How can I reward the highest-performing employees for doing exceptional work? He should have stepped

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■ **WARNING: The Questions You're Asking Might Be Hazardous...** *continued*

back, widened his angle of view, and explored a more fundamental question: What factors have the biggest impact on performance among the people working at this company? And instead of conjuring up his own answer, he should have posed this question to the employees themselves. They're the real experts on what gives rise to their own great performance.

In fairness to John, all of this is easier said than done. We naturally gravitate to the narrow questions, with their built-in assumptions, because they're so ingrained in our workplace thinking. Here are three of the most common:

▶ **How can we do a better job of communicating with employees?**

Communication "problems," such as a lack of communications or communication breakdowns, tend to be symptoms of deeper problems. For instance, that person who complains about being left out of the communication loop might actually be revealing that she doesn't have all the tools and resources she needs to get the job done. Solving the "problem" by adding her to an e-mail distribution list or including her in another meeting is unlikely to get to the heart of the matter. Try asking this instead: "Where are communications breaking down, and what are those breakdowns telling us about our workplace systems?"

▶ **How can we get employees to take more responsibility for their work?**

Most workplaces are task-driven, with sharp divisions between management and everyone else. In this kind of culture, people punch in and out with a basic quid-pro-quo mentality: "Pay me fairly and I'll give a fair day of work." For people to take responsibility, there needs to be a sense of mission, and managers and workers need to be partners who pursue that mission together. Try asking this instead: "What could we do to help you be more successful in your work?" Try

to uncover a story: "When during the past six months did you really get fired up about your work? Tell me about it. What could be done to have more of these positive experiences?"

▶ **How can we generate greater creativity and innovation among staff?**

Every person brings tremendous creative powers to the workplace, so it can be terribly frustrating when people do things the same way day after day. So how do most managers respond? They set aside creative time at meetings and try to get people to think harder. Or they have a retreat in which everyone brainstorms long lists of ideas. If you're unsatisfied with the results, take a different tack by asking employees about their deep interests. That's right, skip the part about knowledge, skills, and abilities – and learn more about the activities and pursuits beyond work that stir their greatest enthusiasm. Say you learn that a colleague is an avid weekend jazz musician. This gives you a new key into their creativity. Now ask: "Are there any similarities between our efforts at teamwork and the challenge of putting together a good jazz ensemble?"

For someone like John, with his bias toward action, questions like these can seem awfully roundabout. The resulting answers often lead to more questions and more exploration and still more questions. But John will be the first to confirm that this inefficient approach is also the most effective in the long run.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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