

SOLVE MORE PROBLEMS BY ASKING BETTER QUESTIONS:

The Impact of Breaking Your Telling Habit

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You might think that to be a great leader or coach you have to be the expert in the room with all the answers. Maybe you feel like you have to be the one putting out all the fires and completing urgent tasks instead of using your problem-solving skills and your time to address the most impactful challenges to develop people.

So, what if that belief isn't true? What if you don't have to be the expert in the room? What if you don't have to have all the answers?

As a leadership coach, one of the questions that I get asked all the time is:

"What if I already know the answer? Should I just keep asking questions even though I already know the answer?"

4 My answer: it depends on your INTENTION.

Ask yourself:

- What is the impact that you want to have on the person

you're asking the questions to?

- What is the importance of getting to the "solution" that you have in your mind right now?
- How open are you to other answers?
- How important is it for **your** answer to be the "right" answer?

Asking questions aligned with the purpose to develop learning is one of the most important skills leaders need to develop — learning how to navigate the continuums between asking and telling, advocacy and inquiry, and expert and coach.

Reflect on your purpose in that moment: are you there to help someone **learn** how to learn to get to an answer and to give them space to think, or is it more important to get to your answer immediately (and potentially skip an opportunity to learn the process of learning)?

A Leader Doesn't Have to Have All the Answers

One of the fundamental concepts of a lean learning culture is that "no problem is a problem", or as Toyota leader

and subject of my book *Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn*, Isao Yoshino says, ask for “bad news first” ahead of what is going well.

However, one of the challenges that many leaders take on is the burden that they themselves need to take on all of the problem-solving responsibility for any problems that arise in their organization.

That isn't the leader's role.

Of course, a leader needs to take on complex issues that are outside of someone's else's span of control, to remove barriers, and to provide support to their people to solve the problems they own.

But problem-solving is not about the leader — or YOU — having to have all of the answers all of the time or taking on the burden of solving all the problems in an organization.

To be more effective as leaders or coaches, we must break our telling habit and learn to ask better questions to expand thinking across our teams and organizations.

This requires us to know when it is more helpful to be directive and when it is more important to invite thinking through open inquiry.

What Does Intentional Leadership Look Like?

When you lead with intention, you begin to successfully navigate the leadership and coaching continuums of:

- When to ask and when to tell
- How to provide both challenges and support as people are learning
- How to achieve business results while developing people at the same time

It guides you to better fulfill your purpose as a leader and coach, while helping others to be their best selves.

And, importantly, you solve more problems at the same time!

As a leader, how do

you navigate these opposite poles on a spectrum?

- How do you set a direction and provide meaningful challenges?
- How can you support and nurture your people as they pursue these challenges?
- What is your attitude towards “failure”?
- How often do you teach your team the process of learning — and of failing — or and how often do you prescribe the “answer”?
- What questions do you ask to foster curiosity and learning?
- And how are you constantly developing yourself as a leader?

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Your role as a leader is to create an environment where people can bring problems and issues forward.

The Leading to Learn Framework

As I describe in the book [Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn](#), a leader's purpose is threefold:

- 1) **Set the direction:** provide a clear challenge or target
- 2) **Provide support:** help others develop competence & confidence in solving problems & achieving goals
- 3) **Develop yourself:** see yourself as a business condition that also requires improvement.

Intentional leadership is about setting the direction — having clarity of targets or goals, or what should be happening — and then providing the support so that people can solve pro-

blems and come up with or generate ideas.

And, of course, this means we always have to look at how we can improve ourselves as leaders to more effectively do both.

It's how intentional leaders amplify organizational impact, team impact, and personal impact.

It is simple in concept, more challenging in practice.

Your role as a leader is to create an environment where people can bring problems and issues forward, secure in the knowledge that they have the capability to clarify what the actual problem is, and that they have the confidence to move forward. This way, they know that they have the support to solve the problems within their span of control — or if there are bigger challenges, that they have their leader's support to remove barriers or help them navigate their way forward.

What are the ways that our habits limit learning?

In our interactions with people, we may assume that they need us to provide more explicit direction, when in fact they only needed us to listen and ask questions so they could think out loud through the situation in front of them.

When we make assumptions that others need “our answer”, we limit our ability to genuinely connect with people, understand what is actually happening, and allow them space to grow and learn.

We are in the habit of telling -- sometimes without even realizing it.

Sometimes, especially under real business pressures and uncertainty, it can be easy to focus singularly on the business targets or goals you need to achieve. It can feel easier to tell people what to do or to give your ideas to get to “the answer” (or what you think is the answer) more quickly. Yet when you default to being the sole idea generator, you limit the richness that

comes from collaboration and the generation of many ideas from others, and you end up owning responsibility for solving all of those problems!

When you shift your leadership approach from being directive to being focused on asking others to bring forward their ideas, you leverage creativity and develop problem-solving capabilities across your team.

When you ask intentional and open-ended questions, you give your team the opportunity to be forward-thinking and come up with ideas that you might not even have thought of.

How can you do that?

1. Ask questions to expand learning and possibilities: Ask open questions that do not presume a solution or imply judgement, and listen to what your team is telling you to un-

tion of the organization, you'll likely find that it allows them the creative space to make the connections of their ideas.

3. Be comfortable with struggle as part of the learning process: Understand that struggle is an inherent part of the learning process. We often jump in to "tell" the answer when we see someone struggling or not sure of how to answer our question. Sometimes the other person does need us to move into a more directive teaching role to help them move forward and get unstuck, but we often move to this role too soon when we see the first sign of uncertainty or struggle. Your purpose as a leader or coach is to find the balance between challenge and support -- this is the learning zone -- where someone is stretched to learn but has enough support to keep moving forward.

happens even if you don't necessarily think they will work

- Focus on helping develop people first and on "competition", dollars, and business results second.

Never forget the power of asking questions from a place of genuine caring and curiosity. When you ask the right questions, you give your team members the opportunity to be a part of the solutions. You give them the opportunity to learn, to develop their capability and confidence, and ultimately to accelerate continuous improvement.

When you realize leadership is about both setting direction and providing support, you are unburdened from having to be the expert with all the answers. When you break your telling habit and strengthen your



derstand what is happening now — for them and with their work. Maintain your connections with your people by checking your assumptions before jumping to conclusions.

2. Give space for thinking and invite reflection: Instead of posing a solution, consider asking your team to reflect on potential countermeasures they see to a given problem. Instead of independently generating ideas, give your team the opportunity to openly share ideas that they may have to achieve the goals. By giving your team more autonomy and time for thinking as it aligns with the direc-

Below are some additional ideas to incorporate into your practice to move forward with more kindness, love, and caring so that you can break your telling habit -- and to solve more problems at the same time:

- Ask open inquiry questions with the intention to help the other person think and learn.
- Listen without judgement to what others have to say with open ears, an open mind, and an open heart.
- Value the process of learning and be willing to out ideas to see what

habit to lead with inquiry, caring, and curiosity, not only do you solve more problems, your team -- and organization -- is able to flourish.

Want to start breaking your telling habit and learn how to ask more effective questions? Download this helpful guide for more actionable advice: 3 Tips to Break The Telling Habit <https://kbjanderson.com/telling-habit> ■

