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# Powerful Questions for Effective Leadership

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*In his article on the importance of powerful questions for leadership, Ulrich Geuther, a Leadership Trainer and Coach based in Lisbon, Portugal, examines the impact of three categories of questions which he calls "power questions":*

***meta questions, hypothetical questions and reflecting questions.***

*He shows what effects power questions can have in particular situations and gives some practical examples to explain how managers can use power questions to bring about targeted changes.*

## **Death or freedom – and you have just one question**

A prisoner is taken into a room that has two exits. One exit leads to certain death, the other to freedom. Both doors are locked and are manned by a guard. One guard always tells the truth, the other always lies. The prisoner does not know which guard always lies and which one always tells the truth. The prisoner has one chance: he can ask one of the two guards a single question...

What question<sup>1</sup> would you ask to find out which door leads to freedom?

Now you may well say, what does that have to do with me as a manager? After all, our business is not so dramatic that a single question can decide over life or death. Not over life or death, but over

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<sup>1</sup> The question is: "What would the other guard answer if I asked him which door leads to freedom?" Whatever the guard answers, the prisoner takes the other door. Why? Whichever guard the prisoner asks, the liar – and therefore the false information – is always part of the equation.

success and failure? Have you ever been in a situation where a single question changed everything?

Here are just two examples.

## **"Do you want to be world famous?"**

Jim Bergquist, a consultant and trainer from King County, USA, became involved with a small fishmongers in Seattle that was near to bankruptcy<sup>2</sup> and turned it into a runaway success.

In one of the first sessions with the team, which up to that point had been largely unsuccessful, it emerged that one of the employees was a passionate guitarist. Jim asked him: "Where does your passion for guitar playing come from? Do you want to be famous?" The prompt reply was: "Yes, world famous!"

The team, which lacked an ambitious goal for success, seized on this and, a few sessions later, changed its name to "The World Famous Pike Place Fish Market". They gave content to what being world famous should mean and committed themselves to dealing with their customers and partners in a passionate, original and unique, fun way.

The result is well known. Within a short time, costs were reduced by a quarter, sales quadrupled and profits increased tenfold – and were sustained. They did become world famous too.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Joseph Michelli & John Yokoyama: WHEN FISH FLY. Lessons for creating a vital and energized workplace from the famous Pike Place Fish Market. New York 2004.

## What have you dreamed of doing for a very long time?

The second example of decisive changes that can be triggered by one question comes from my work as a coach.

In a coaching session with the General Manager of an international industrial concern in Portugal, we were working on his personal and professional perspective. He had to decide whether or not, as part of a European merger with an American global player, he wished to head the new Business Unit that was being set up. He hesitated, and his reservations were in relation to the incredible strain that he, and also his family, would come under during the integration process. These questions eventually led to his decision:

"Is there something you've dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven't you done it?"

When he looked for an answer, he realised that he had never allowed himself to do things before that were just for fun and had no other purpose. He learned to see fun and duty differently and to redefine them. And then, despite the high personal risk, he took on the running of the Business Unit.

So what was the result? The post-merger integration has so far been a great success and, by redefining his work and family life, the General Manager has strengthened his work-life balance, with the result that his family is now also happier than before.

We have thus seen that asking the right questions at the right time opens up possibilities that were previously out of sight. But what makes us so sure that it is the questions and not the answers that have this effect?

Because it is only with questions that you get the scope for answers. Depending on the type of question asked, questions open up and expand, or reduce and specify, the search area for solutions, thereby creating possibilities for finding the right answers in quite different ways.

Why can this be important for you as a manager?

Because, in my view, effective leadership largely depends on your ability to ask the right questions in a situation that is decisive for success.

## The three power categories of effective questions

In countless management training courses and coaching sessions, as well as in my work with sales managers and sales people – for whom the right questions decide whether or not they clinch a deal – three types of questions have emerged which I call the three power categories of effective questions.

1. Meta questions
2. Hypothetical questions
3. Reflecting and summarising questions

The hallmark of all these categories of questions is that they produce much more than just factual information. Let us take a look together at what gives these questions their added value.

### 1. Meta questions: "He never listens!"

When we tell others something, we almost always do so in abridged form. Abridged in relation to what? (meta question!) Abridged in relation to the richness of the experience that forms the basis of our communication. Here are two examples:

- "Customers are demanding more!" and
- "He never listens!"

How exactly are these statements abridged? Let us take a closer look.

### "Customers are demanding more!"

said one insurance broker to his Area Manager. As his boss, how would you have responded to this remark? Would you have entered into a discussion with your employee about customer needs? Let's hope not! Instead you would want to

know what he meant by this statement, and why and for what purpose he had said it, wouldn't you? It is precisely this clarification that meta questions provide. So what questions can you ask? These, for example:

"Which customers do you mean?" "Which customers exactly are you talking about?" "Customers are demanding more in comparison to what?" "Who says that?"

Using these and similar questions, the Area Manager found out that the broker did not agree with the new sales strategy, which gave him far less time with customers. The request contained in the questions "Which customers?" and "Whose customers?" to clearly specify just who "the customers" were allowed both of them to define precisely which customers have a particularly strong need for advice, and which do not. And by asking the question "Who says that?" the boss reminded the broker of his duty to come clean and explain that it was actually about himself, and that his problem was that he had not yet managed to align the sales strategy with his own priorities (intensive customer support).

None of this was evident from the original statement, which revealed neither the context nor the special importance it had for the speaker. Nor was it clear what message was supposed to be conveyed. Using meta questions, this is precisely what we can learn. And more besides, as the second example shows.

As part of 360-degree feedback, the General Manager of an international financial services provider in Portugal found the following assessment of himself on the feedback form of one of his Departmental Managers: "He never listens!" After getting over the initial shock, he invited the employee to come and talk to him.

How would you have acted? What would you have said to the employee?

The General Manager asked this one question: "Since we've been working

together, has there never been a situation in which I've listened to you?"

This question was the trigger for a great number of changes that were established and agreed in the meeting between the boss and his employee. The employee recognised that his strong tendency to generalise restricted him not only in the way he perceived his boss. In this meeting he discovered other areas in which his undue generalisation meant that his perception of reality was heavily distorted. "No one in the company sees how much effort I put in!" "No-one? Has no-one ever recognised what you do?" one could immediately ask. And it would be just the right meta question.

#### This is what meta questions do:

They ensure the most complete description of events possible. (See "Customers" example)

They clarify the individual meaning for the speaker of what has been said. (See "Customers" and "Never listens" examples)

They serve to identify limitations in the speaker's world model. (See "Never listens" example)

## **2. Hypothetical questions: "If you could wake up tomorrow having gained one ability or quality, what would it be?"**

For managers, hypothetical questions are a silver bullet. They open up new possibilities of perception in a systematic and targeted way and so create new alternatives and options.

"Suppose we were to disregard this point for a moment (don't worry, I will come back to it again straight away). If we were then to focus our attention for a moment on the initial situation, what would you say is the biggest problem that you want to solve?"

With this question, the employers' chief negotiator managed to turn around deadlocked collective bargaining talks with

trade union representatives. Instead of haggling about pay-rise percentages, following this question the partners in the pay negotiations turned to their real task of finding forward-looking solutions for retailing in a dramatically changing market.

We find quite similar situations in sales, when the sales talk revolves only about the price. Hypothetical questions show a way out.

Another example:

"Supposing we took Monica out of the team. What exactly would change?"

The Departmental Manager of a direct insurer's put this question to his argumentative Team Leader. Instead of becoming embroiled in pointless discussions with the Team Leader, he introduced this possibility into the conversation just to test the water and see what advantages the Team Leader would see in transferring the employee. The impact of the question went far beyond this, however. For without fully realising it, the Team Leader passionately outlined his idea of the objectives and priorities for his team. And the Departmental Manager could see that these only partially coincided with the annual goals agreed for the team. As he had not put any constraints on the Team Leader beforehand but had encouraged him to express his views, the Departmental Manager managed to get his Team Leader back on track.

This is what hypothetical questions do:

In a management, coaching or sales meeting they steer the focus onto other aspects and other important areas without the other person in the talks being snubbed.

(Example: "Collective bargaining")

They therefore open people's eyes to new choice and behaviour options.

(Example: "Collective bargaining")

They have the power to resolve a muddled situation.

(See "Collective bargaining" and "Team problem")

They "force" people to reflect by introducing unexpected situations into the conversation.

(See question in the heading and the following examples: "If you were to die this evening, with no opportunity to communicate with anyone, what would you most regret not having told someone? Why haven't you told them yet?" "If a flying saucer arrived and aliens invited you to visit their planet for five years, would you go?")

### **3. Reflecting and summarising questions: "Are you wondering whether this strategy can be successful?"**

With the meta questions it became clear that in most cases it is not automatically clear to the person in the talks what the other person is getting at.

Can you also remember situations in which you were quite wrong when it came to guessing the intention that lay behind a statement? Or where, because of a really neutral formulation, you completely underestimated how important something was for the other person? What can be done to minimise such situations?

Reflecting questions are the most effective and at the same time "gentlest" way of ascertaining what exactly the person we are talking to wants, what matters to them and how important it is for them.

To see how this works, let us go back again to our insurance broker and his Area Manager. After the broker had explained that intensive customer support was absolutely essential for successful sales, the Area Manager summarised what he had said and reflected back what he had seen as the prime motive for the original statement that "customers are demanding more!" "My understanding is that customer support is of great concern to you, is that right?" After the employee had confirmed this, the boss went on to say:

"And now you're wondering whether our strategy of making meetings with customers more efficient can be successful?"

If you put yourself in the broker's shoes, how do you think he will react? What do you think?

Well, the question was spot on. The preceding summarising question already had the effect of making the employee feel that his boss understood him. With the power question though, the boss also obtained a much greater effect. "And now you're wondering whether our strategy of making meetings with customers more efficient can be successful?" said something that the employee had not actually disclosed and perhaps did not want to disclose either: namely that he had major doubts as to the meaningfulness of the sales strategy. The reflecting question brought to light his doubts in a respectful way and his immediate reaction was great relief. In the subsequent clarification, not only was it possible to say precisely how the employee could align his own values and sales strategy (see above) but the relationship between the two could be strengthened considerably.

How is it possible to achieve such effects with a few simple questions?

The ease with which summarising and reflecting questions allow even the trickiest subjects to be dealt with is due quite simply to the fact that these power questions create a rapport and lead to the expression of empathy. Summarising and reflecting questions allow me to see the world through the other person's eyes and to adopt their perspective. This immediately creates a strong bond with the other person which, the better I succeed in putting myself into their shoes, becomes more and more resilient. Reflecting questions thus prove to be a powerful tool for influencing my partner in the talks through empathy and ultimately being able to manage them. Including, and especially, in difficult situations. There are only two prerequisites: stepping into the other person's world without preconceptions and listening attentively.

Haven't you tried out reflecting questions yet? If you want, you can discover for yourself in the following exercise whether you can recognise reflecting questions or reflecting listening.

### Exercise on reflecting questions and reflecting listening

An underwriter, Marek Król, does work both for you, the chief underwriter and for another member of your department, Vanda Matussek. One morning, you walk up to Marek's desk and he greets you as follows:

Marek: "What am I supposed to do about Vanda? She throws more work at me than I can possibly handle. I've told her but she won't listen. I don't want people to think I'm trying to get out of doing my job but she's really got me totally buried!"

Which of the possible responses listed below represent reflective listening and which would not<sup>3</sup>?

1. Hang in there: I'm sure it will work out eventually.
2. I'll talk to Vanda about it.
3. It sounds like this is really getting you down.
4. You're worried people will think you are a slacker?
5. Vanda is really unfair, huh?
6. Have you discussed it with Martin [the boss]?
7. You were discouraged when Vanda didn't listen?
8. Why have you let things go on this long?
9. You're really getting fed up with the situation.

And as we see, sometimes the most powerful questions turn out to be ones that are not even formulated as such.

<sup>3</sup> Reflective listening shows in 3. and 9. (although they are not questions) and in 7. With a slight, but significant alteration in the words, 5., too: "You feel that Vanda is unfair, don't you?"

## Asking power questions as a management task

For managers, asking questions is becoming increasingly important – and increasingly easy!

Increasingly important because the managers of the future increasingly have to build on the creativity and intelligence of others. Why is that? Because the world has become too complex and dynamic for one individual to have all the answers. And, as we have seen, it is power questions that include others in finding solutions and enable them to find appropriate answers.

This means that in the future it will also be easier for managers, as people's expectations of them change. Whereas it was formerly assumed first and foremost that managers should have the right answers to the various challenges, nowadays we tend to assume that it is having the right questions that helps.

Just think what managers will be able to achieve if they ask more questions and make use of collective intelligence instead of stewing in their own juice. The following overview once again summarises and presents at a glance the function of the power questions that have been described.

### Summary: The function of questions and power questions

#### 1. To gain information and getting an idea.

At the level of situational questions<sup>4</sup> which only obtain facts, no added value is produced as part of the leadership.

#### 2. To clarify the meaning, intention, scope and validity of statements.

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<sup>4</sup> Neil Rackham calls the questions that are aimed only at collecting information "situation questions" and distinguishes them from "problem questions", "implication questions" and "need pay-off questions". On the basis of 35,000 sales talks, he analysed the questions that made a difference to clinching the sale. These were above all the implication and need pay-off questions. (See Neil Rackham: SPIN Selling. McGraw-Hill 1988).

This is where power questions start. Meta questions and reflecting questions are suitable.

#### 3. To resolve muddled situations, looking at new possibilities, creating options.

Here, meta questions and hypothetical questions achieve the best effect.

#### 4. To build a relationship, creating rapport and empathy, managing through rapport.

This is the area of application of reflecting questions.

### "And what did he want from you?"

The greatest skill in achieving strong effects with questions is illustrated by two scenes from the film "Invictus"<sup>5</sup>. In it, Nelson Mandela asks the Captain of the South African rugby team a question aimed not at a specific answer or a specific behaviour but at changing his attitude and goals.

After Nelson Mandela has recognised what unique socially-unifying meaning a victory by the South African rugby team would have in the world championships taking place in his own country, he invites François Pienaar, Captain of the legendary Springboks, who are hated by black South Africans, to the Presidential Palace and asks him the following questions:

"How do we inspire ourselves to greatness when nothing less will do? How do we inspire everyone around us?"

The Captain of the South African rugby team doesn't really know how to answer the question but listens attentively to Mandela as he tells him what inspired him in his own life to rise above himself. Somewhat at a loss, François Pienaar leaves the Presidential Palace, where he is picked up at the exit by his girlfriend in her car. She wants to know how things

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<sup>5</sup> "Invictus". Film by Clint Eastwood about the start of Nelson Mandela's presidency in South Africa and the winning of the 1995 Rugby World Cup by the Springboks, the South African rugby team.

went with the President and asks him: "And what did he want from you?" After brief doubting consideration, François answers in amazement: "I think he wants us to win the World Cup!"

## Leadership of the future

In this way, effective leadership becomes increasingly further removed from what we had once identified as the defining characteristic of leadership, namely that the leader knows the direction and the most important answers, which he can then pass on to others for guidance.

Leadership of the future will look different in large parts of the world. By asking suitable questions, the manager ensures that the answers piece themselves together in the heads of his employees. The somewhat outdated phrase "the one asking the questions leads" thus gains a new, powerful dimension.

As a manager, what can you do to lead your colleagues through effective

questions to new and ever more complex challenges? One possible answer is: draw yourself up a list of power questions which you can use flexibly in the relevant situations.

Here are the top five on my personal list. Perhaps some of these questions will also be of interest to you.

1. Who is the most important person in your life? What could you do to improve the relationship? Will you do it?
2. If you were guaranteed honest answers to any three questions, who would you question and what would you ask?
3. If you could wake up tomorrow having gained one ability or quality, what would it be?
4. If you could spend one year in perfect happiness, but afterwards would remember nothing of the experience, would you do so? If not, why not?
5. What could you do today?

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