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Beware the Man Who Knows...

THE THREE MOST FRIGHTENING WORDS FOR high achievers may actually be the three most powerful words in a leader's vocabulary: "I don't know."

The secret to success for organizations that sustain change and grow innovatively is that their leaders have an affirming curiosity, an open stance that makes them comfortable with action in the face of the unknown.

It may feel hard to say "I don't know;" it takes humility. But it opens the door to learning and understanding. As the old adage warns us: "Beware of the man who knows the answer before he understands the question."

"I don't know" relieves us of the burden of analyzing or processing, of feeling frustrated or impatient, of struggling to remember a technique or a formula for success. It means: "Nothing occurs to me at the moment, but I have confidence that an insight will come to me or to someone else." These three words liberate us from being stuck in any sort of rut and set us on an adventure of discovering something fresh.

It's true that innovation happens only when people aren't afraid to explore a question—to look away from what they already know. But this goes against our training: We've been taught since elementary school that it's important to know the answer. And it goes against our beliefs about work. After all, weren't we hired or promoted because someone thought we already had the required knowledge and skill for the position?

In fact, when the boss asks a question, we're apt to feel a twinge of fear. Our automatic assumption is that we're being tested, not consulted. Suddenly, what's at risk is our

job. We've cringed in meetings where the boss has blown up because he couldn't get the information he thought he needed. Or we've watched others make stuff up out of thin air rather than utter "I don't know."

Yet how can we anticipate every question that might be asked? "Overwhelming" isn't too strong a description for the task of knowing everything. We not only have to learn best practices, but we have to keep up with academics who are stroked to write about their concepts ("publish or perish"), consultants who package abstractions in multimillion-dollar engagements, and journalists who look to turn lists of good ideas into best sellers. Not only is the effort to stay "in the know" futile, but it defies common sense. Which is more valuable in seeking resolution to a problem: researching past successes or discovering a fresh insight via a moment of reflection? Which is more reliable for tackling your challenges and finding the route to sustained accomplishment: applying someone else's answer or discovering your own commonsense solution? Which is more likely

to keep your firm on the cutting edge: copying a competitor's "Big Idea" or relying on the creativity of your own people?

Tried-and-true experience can be very useful, particularly in "routine" situations. But many business opportunities (and many life decisions, in fact) don't fit into neatly categorized answers. What they require is a creative form that is perfectly responsive to the moment—in other words, a flash of insight—of vision—that points to what needs to be done, leaping beyond accumulated experience to inspired, yet pragmatic, action.



We've all seen what happens when leaders aren't willing to admit that they don't know it all; truth be told, we've been there, done that ourselves. We become self-righteous, defending our view ever more loudly as if volume alone could make something true.

As a leader, you might be surprised by the energy unleashed when you adopt the habit of readily asking, "What do *you* think?" One of our clients once praised the strategic thinking of a team member. We found this puzzling because we couldn't recall a single idea or piece of advice that person had delivered; she hadn't *done* anything. But the client said: "She asks great questions; she gets me to think about things I hadn't considered before."

That's how "I don't know" works. Leadership isn't about knowing all the answers or being able to make earth-shattering pronouncements. It's about seeing the right questions to ask and posing them in a way that is energizing, not discouraging. In short, engage in the kind of dialogue that brings out insights—in ourselves and, more important, in our teams.

What's more likely to motivate people to keep working on a difficult problem: insistence that they pour more effort into existing systems and procedures or confidence that there are possibilities beyond what they already know? If the answers to our problems could be found in what we already know, wouldn't we have solved them already?

How many times have you seen people fit the conclusion derived from their past success to the situation at hand, even though you can plainly see that the present circumstances require something different? One famous example stems from the

early days of the Ford Motor Company. It had achieved dominance by mass-producing the Model T—one model in one color. "You can have any color you want," Henry Ford said, "so long as it's black." His initial success validated its founding principle: "Not wandering from our own path, but doing one thing well."

As times and tastes changed, Henry Ford's stubborn attachment to the black Model T threatened to bankrupt his company. Unwittingly, he was trying to shape a future with too much reliance on an old answer. What eventually saved the company was Ford's courage to free his thinking from what he "knew." Ford took bold action: He shut down production for more than a year and re-tooled.

When we lack the strength or courage to change our minds—to admit we are wiser now than we were then, that something new and fresh might be better than what we already know—we embed ourselves in the past. In other words, we are trapped by our old beliefs and assumptions. As Albert Einstein said, "Insanity (is) doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

You've probably experienced the chilling effect of phrases such as "We've tried that before" or "That will never work here" or even "I like things the way they are." We've all seen how such thinking can cause promising new ideas to wither.

No matter how much success skillful leaders have enjoyed, they retain the humility to cultivate feelings of curiosity. Thus, they help people let go of negative thoughts and free their minds. Such curiosity generates a palpable sense of enthusiasm that's sometimes even more valuable to the organization than

any particular accomplishment. We stride into the future with confidence, not because of past success but because we are eager to see what new answers will appear.

What we are talking about is faith. Normal business practice is to avoid that word in favor of less religiously loaded terms, such as "confidence" or "trust." Sooner or later, however, all leaders find themselves acting on faith.

By faith we mean having certainty or conviction about something for which there is no proof. In business we call this "going on gut instinct." Ironically, the bigger the idea or decision, the more faith plays a role.

Part of faith is the knowledge that we have our whole lives to draw on. This isn't our first breath or the first beat of our heart. We have with us all our experiences, all our life's lessons, to remind us that we can prevail, that we aren't without resources.

Faith is there when we've exhausted ourselves. When we have tried everything we "know" and are shocked to stillness, what lies waiting for us is faith. We stand atop the cliff and leap into the void—confident that there are invisible wings under each arm. At worst, we will fall gently to earth and pick ourselves up again. At best, we will soar. ■

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