

ASK QUESTIONS - THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT HABIT FOR INNOVATIVE LEADERS

Children learn by asking questions. Students learn by asking questions. New recruits learn by asking questions. Innovators understand client needs by asking questions. It is the simplest and most effective way of learning. People who think that they know it all no longer ask questions – why should they? Brilliant thinkers never stop asking questions because they know that this is the best way to gain deeper insights.

Eric Schmidt, CEO of Google, said, 'We run this company on questions, not answers.' He knows that if you keep asking questions you can keep finding better answers.

When Greg Dyke became Director-General of the BBC in 2000 he went to every major location and assembled the staff. They came expecting a long presentation. He simply sat down with them and asked a question, 'What is the one thing I should do to make things better for you?' Then he listened. He followed this with another question, 'What is the one thing I should do to make things better for our viewers and listeners.' He knew that at that early stage he could learn more from his employees than they could from him. The workers at the BBC had many wonderful ideas that they were keen to share. The fact that the new boss took time to question and then listen earned him enormous respect.

Columbo solves his mysteries by asking many questions; as do all the great detectives – in real life as well as fiction. All the great inventors and scientists asked questions. Isaac Newton asked, 'Why does an apple fall from a tree?' and, 'Why does the moon not fall into the Earth?' Charles Darwin asked, 'Why do the Galapagos islands have so many species not found elsewhere?' Albert Einstein asked, 'What would the Universe look like if I rode through it on a beam of light?' By asking these kinds of fundamental questions they were able to start the process that lead to their tremendous breakthroughs.

The great philosophers spend their whole lives asking deep questions about the meaning of life, morality, truth and so on. We do not have to be quite so contemplative but we should nonetheless ask the deep questions about the situations we face. It is the best way to get the information we need to make informed decisions and for sales people it is the single most important skill they need to succeed.

If it is obvious that asking questions is such a powerful way of learning why do we stop asking questions? For some people the reason is that they are lazy. They assume they know all the main things they need to know and they do not bother to ask more. They cling to their beliefs and remain certain in their assumptions – yet they often end up looking foolish. Other people are afraid that by asking questions they will look weak, ignorant or unsure. They like to give the impression that they are decisive and in command of the relevant issues. They fear that asking questions might introduce uncertainty or show them in a poor light. In fact asking questions is a sign of strength and intelligence – not a sign of weakness or uncertainty. Great leaders constantly ask questions and are well aware that they do not have all the answers. Finally some people are in such a hurry to get with things that they do not stop to ask questions because it might slow them down. They risk rushing headlong into the wrong actions.

With prospect, with clients, at school, at home, in business, with our friends, family, colleagues, or managers we can check assumptions and gain a better appreciation of the issues by first asking questions. Start with very basic, broad questions then move to more specific areas to clarify your understanding. Open questions are excellent – they give the other person or people chance to give broad answers and they open up matters. Examples of open questions are:

- What business are we really in, what is our added value?
- Why do you think this has happened?
- What are all the things that might have caused this problem?
- How can we reduce customer complaints?
- Why do you think he feels that way?
- What other possibilities should we consider?

As we listen carefully to the answers we formulate further questions. When someone gives an answer we can often ask, ‘Why?’ The temptation is to plunge in with our opinions, responses, conclusions or proposals. The better approach is keep asking questions to deepen our comprehension of the issues before making up our mind. Once we have mapped out the main points we can use closed questions to get specific information. Closed questions give the respondent a limited choice of responses – often just yes or no. Examples of closed questions are:

- When did this happen?
- Was he angry?
- Where is the shipment right now?
- Did you authorise the payment?
- Would you like to go to the cinema with me on Saturday evening?

By giving the other person a limited choice of responses we get specific information and deliberately move the conversation forward in a particular direction.

Asking many questions is very effective but it can make you appear to be inquisitorial and intrusive. So it is important to ask questions in a friendly and unthreatening way. Do not ask accusing questions. ‘What do you think happened?’ will probably get a better response than, ‘Are you responsible for this disaster?’ Try to pose each question in an innocent way

and ensure that your body language is relaxed and amicable. Do not jab your finger or lean forward as you as put your requests.

Try to practise asking more questions in your everyday conversations. Instead of telling someone something, ask them a question. Intelligent questions stimulate, provoke, inform and inspire. Questions help us to teach as well as to learn.



About the Author: *Paul Sloane held senior positions at IBM and Mathsoft. He writes and speaks on lateral thinking and innovation. His best-selling books include *The Innovative Leader* and *How to be a Brilliant Thinker*. He speaks at conferences and facilitates workshops.*