

The Art of Intentional Inquiry: A Secret Weapon of High Performance Leadership

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A successful leader is engaged in their business and they stay engaged by practicing the art of intentional inquiry. Learning how to ask the right questions, that require your team to think instead of simply responding, is an art that requires experience and practice.

It's also the basis for good coaching. Most leaders don't know how to ask questions that encourage employees to speak their minds.

Each time a leader has an opportunity to force an employee to think, to discover, to search for answers and solutions they are helping their company push knowledge into the depths of the organization.

Knowing how to ask questions that get to the heart of a potentially troubling situations or that encourages people to open up and share their ideas and concerns is what I refer to as the art of intentional inquiry and will improve your leadership skills.

Ask yourself this question: As a leader in my organization, am I tuned in to how people are really feeling? Getting leaders to ask questions that relate to feelings, not ideas or attitudes doesn't come easy. It's much easier for a leader to ask: how is that project coming along -- to which an employee may answer in one syllable, Fine.

If the question asked was: how are you feeling about the progress of your project? I believe the answer will be much more expansive and tell the leader a whole lot more about the project and even more importantly about the employee.

Why do people find it hard to ask questions? Could be several things:

- Fear of looking stupid
- Fear of confrontation
- Failure to distinguish between arguing and asking
- Fear of too much information

In some organizations the culture is such that asking questions gets you a stern rebuke from a manager. Or asking questions may appear to challenge a leader's knowledge. Even worse, the person asking questions is made to feel like they don't have experience.

The art of intentional inquiry begins with a genuine curiosity. Intentional inquiry also must be planned and practiced. And the objective of the person who is asking questions should be to learn.

The outcome for the person who is being asked is that they will enthusiastically engage because they understand you are there to learn.

What's so hard about asking a question? I don't know. You tell me. Have you ever found yourself asking questions like this?

- What are you doing?
- Why in the world did you think that?
- Don't you know what the answer is?
- What, are you crazy?
- Didn't you think before you did that?
- Why didn't you do _____?
- Why didn't you ask me first?

My guess is we are all guilty at times. We are either in a hurry. Or we are frustrated. Or we want to put ourselves in a position of control.

Sometimes these reasons are subconscious, sometimes they are intentional. Here are some ideas to consider when you are looking to provide that opportunity to learn and ultimately to engage.

- Think before you talk
- Ask with genuine curiosity in order to learn, not preach
- Change your facial expression
- Change your voice inflection
- Be accountable for your question
- Practice -- know what you want the outcome to be

It gets a bit more complicated because asking is only half the equation -- listening and learning is your job.

Does the employee seem to be able to communicate freely with you?

- Do they establish good eye contact?
- Are they relaxed?
- Do their answers reflect the goals of the organization?
- Do they enjoy the interaction?
- Are they willing to tell you when things aren't so good.

Becoming better at the art of inquiry will help you become a high performance leader. Take the time to really think about what your goal is with each interaction, whether it's with a direct report or an employee in your organization.

Your ability to connect with the people in your organization at a level that encourages honest and open dialogue will ultimately impact your bottom line.

Here are some ideas on questions you can ask in different situations.

- Walk Around the Office Questions
- What have you done today that had an impact on the company?
- What activity today gave you the greatest challenge?
- What did you feel the most successful about today?

Feedback Questions with Direct Reports

- What is working?
- What isn't working?
- Where do you need help?
- What do you suggest?

Performance Questions with Direct Reports

- What did you accomplish?
- What would you like to accomplish?
- What do you suggest?
- How can I help?

Employee Development Questions with Direct Reports

- What did you learn?
- What do you need to learn?
- What do you suggest?
- How can I help?

Impact your ability as a leader to connect to your employees through the art of intentional inquiry and you will positively impact the ability of your company to grow and thrive in good times and bad.