

How Do You Ask? Strategies for **Always Seeking Knowledge**

Last month I discussed the various benefits of “ask”. My premise was that most people don’t ask enough questions in their interpersonal conversations. Yet, asking is the key to learning how to improve the human dynamics of work and family life. By asking for feedback we establish a context for interpersonal trust and competence-building. By asking for another person’s opinion, we show we care and set the stage for open and frank communication. By asking for advice we gain information and boost the other person’s self-esteem. And, by asking for support, we increase the chances of actually getting it.

So given the positive consequences of this seemingly simple communication technique, we are motivated to “ask”. Right! But how should we ask? That’s the focus of this follow-up article to my *ISHN* column last month.

Nondirective Asking

Nondirective counselors carefully avoid personal judgment or interpretation while listening patiently and empathically to their client’s stories. They respect the unique and distinctive views of every individual, and they do not make comparisons or generalizations between the stories of different people. In the same way, nondirective asking occurs when someone’s opinion or personal view is solicited without any expectation, judgment, or interpretation. With sincere interest and appreciation, you merely ask for another person’s outlook.

This is the kind of asking that shows you care. It facilitates open discussion and builds interpersonal cohesion. The key is to be nondirective. With

no ulterior motive, the one doing the asking shows genuine regard for the other person's perspective. The purpose is to learn more about another person's perceptions, sometimes to understand or improve a particular circumstance.

Developing a Safety Process

Nondirective asking can be quite useful in obtaining information relevant to developing a safety process, while gaining buy-in at the same time. An open and frank discussion about certain safety guidelines can lead to a customized protocol workers willingly follow because they had an opportunity to offer input when procedural steps were derived. And this all started with genuine nondirective asking.

Addressing At-Risk Behavior

What about an observation of at-risk behavior? Can nondirective asking be helpful under these circumstances? First, consider that telling workers they are not following certain safety guidelines can feel insulting and put people on the defensive. Sure, they might quickly fall in line, but how will they feel about such reactive compliance? Will they feel responsible and self-motivated? I doubt it.

On the other hand, a nondirective question can put the focus on personal choice and self-accountability. For example, an observer could remark that certain personal protective equipment is not being used, and ask, "In your opinion, why is that PPE unpopular?" Or, it might be more suitable to ask, "What can I do to facilitate the use of that PPE?"

The key is to ask with genuine and empathic concern. Assume there are legitimate barriers to the safe behavior you want to see and there are ways to

remove at least some of these barriers. Who knows better how to address this problem than the workers themselves? Also, believe that most of the workforce wants to help prevent personal injury. With these reasonable presumptions, nondirective asking seems to be a most sensible way to approach the observed occurrence of at-risk behavior.

Directive Asking

Sometimes more directive asking is called for, meaning it's useful to ask for something specific. You might ask for behavioral feedback, or you might request support through certain resources, personnel assistance, or opportunities for professional development.

Why Don't We Ask

Some believe asking for something is a sign of weakness or incompetence. Others resist asking because they fear rejection. Please consider the irrationality of these two excuses. First, asking is key to acquiring knowledge and building competence as discussed in my *ISHN* column last month. So, people who ask for feedback or support demonstrate concern for being the best they can be at a particular task. Such asking signals dedication and commitment, certainly not incompetence or insecurity.

The second excuse for avoiding asking reminds me of a story I heard about Dr. Albert Ellis, the renowned clinical psychologist who developed the popular and effective cognitive therapy entitled Rational Emotive Therapy (RET). Specifically, Dr. Ellis has reported that as a college student he never had difficulty getting dates, unlike his more handsome friends. Why, because he

simply asked many more girls for a date than did his friends. Why, because he didn't fear rejection.

Dr. Ellis did not entertain the nonproductive and irrational thought or self-dialogue that "Everyone must like me." Therefore, rejection is normal and to be expected. So keep asking for what you want, and eventually your request will be honored. Of course, it's wise to hedge your bet and ask strategically. So how should we perform directive asking?

Be Genuine and Sincere

Drop the act of over-competence. No one is perfect, and everyone can improve. So whether you're asking for feedback or support, show a willingness to be vulnerable. Sure, you're good at what you do, and you make things happen with less-than-optimal resources. But, you could do more with the kind of support you're asking for. Speak from your heart with genuine desire to make a bigger difference.

Be Results-Oriented

When you ask for support be sure to project the beneficial results that might be expected. Consider the question most people ask following a request for their services, if only to themselves, "What's in it for me?" So, we're back to the motivation issue again. You're motivated to ask because of potential consequences, and people are more likely to honor your request when they see the possibility of beneficial consequences coming their way.

You may not be able to estimate the ROI (or return-on-investment), but you can certainly explore possibilities. What could a slight improvement in your

competence do for your organization? What long-term consequence could be gained from an investment in certain support?

Keep it simple, but be direct. In essence, translate your motivation for asking into the kinds of positive consequences that could appeal to those from whom you're asking support. Also, realize people are motivated by more than money. As a teacher, for example, I'm persuaded to offer extra support for students when I believe the effort will enable them to become more competent contributors to humanity.

Your request is not impulsive. You've considered the costs and benefits for the support you need, and you're confident the positives outweigh the negatives. Your challenge is to sell this view to the person whose support you need. So while you're vulnerable, you're also convinced the support is advantageous from both a personal and organizational perspective.

Be Concise and Precise

In these hectic days of undersourcing and multitasking, time is precious. Thus, it's critical to be prepared to ask concisely and precisely. Specify what you want and when. Then, explain clearly why you want it, in terms of both short and long-term positive consequences.

Make your thoughtful request direct and to the point. List the benefits as definitively as possible. Then listen attentively and patiently for a response. Wait for a complete reaction before mounting a defense, if needed. Usually, you'll only get questions, which you can answer precisely and concisely because you anticipated them and prepared answers beforehand.

Be Good-Natured

When the reaction is disappointing, resist the urge to argue, unless this is a last-resort request and the support is necessary now or never. But even under these circumstances, you need to sustain a congenial atmosphere if you have any hope of reversing the decision.

If your request is proactive and the support can be delayed, ask for an opportunity to revisit your request at a later date. In other words, if you sense a negative response to your asking, don't enable a commitment to "No". The more often a person says "no" to a request, the more difficult it is for this person to say "yes". This is especially true if the context of the request becomes confrontational. Thus, it's important, but not easy, to remain as friendly and cordial as possible in the face of a disheartening decision.

Be Persistent

Your first unsuccessful asking for support provided an invaluable needs assessment. You became aware of costs you hadn't anticipated and benefits you exaggerated, at least in the eyes of the person who must honor your request. So now you have an opportunity to re-group and ask again. At least you remained good-natured and avoided conflict.

Bottom Line: Keep the door open for re-asking, and persist when you know you're right. Timing is often critical. On another day, the climate and relevant person states might be more aligned with your asking. And you will likely make a more powerful request, especially if you consider each of the recommendations offered here.

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help people develop, refine, and implement interventions that prevent workplace injuries. SPS is offering a series of seminars throughout 2004. For more information about these seminars, related books, training programs, video and audiotapes, and customized consulting and training options, please visit safety@safetyperformance.com or call us at 540-951-7233.