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Terry J. Fadem

QUESTIONS MANAGERS SHOULD AVOID ASKING

Be Productive, Not Destructive



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Be Productive, Not Destructive

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Many managers ask questions that represent an abuse of the power of their positions. These are questions that would otherwise be unacceptable to ask among peers or would embarrass the manager if published on the first page of *The Wall Street Journal*. Consider the following situation.

A business team was presenting a new strategic plan to a senior manager, a leader in the company. This was a conservative company where numbers were checked and rechecked, and all optimism was downgraded to reflect an aversion to risk. This particular senior leader was an anomaly among her peers. Her behavior was more reminiscent of a gunslinger than the corporate banker mode of behavior shared by the rest of the senior officers. Her steep rise to the top echelon was beginning to be noticed by the more junior members of the organization, which gave her an air of invincibility, great influence, and power.

She was prone toward optimism and speculative behavior, and worked mostly from her gut with a “the hell with the numbers” attitude. Fortunately for the company, she had a habit of being correct and, better yet, delivering the forecasts she promised.

This is a reconstruction of the conversation. The names and identifying details have been changed to protect the guilty.

Senior manager: What is the largest annual revenue projection you can make for the business?

Middle manager: We forecast it to grow to be approximately \$850 million.

Senior manager: Is that all? Don't you believe you can do any better than that? (She brings her fist down on the table for added emphasis.)

Middle manager: That is a conservative estimate. We think there may be a considerable upside to well over a billion.

Senior manager: Oh, come on now. Can't you lie to me? How large can this be in your wildest dreams? (Her arms open, palms up, as if to show the size of a fish she just reeled in.)

This is an improper question. Even if it is being asked in a lighthearted manner, it is a mistake many times over. Yet, this is a quote—it is exactly what a senior manager asked of a middle manager. She had asked him for a lie. She had asked for unfounded speculation that was totally out of character for the company and for the people who worked there.

One might argue that the success of this manager over time had educated her gut, so to speak, to be able to sniff out substantial growth opportunities when she saw them. Perhaps. However, her years of success might have been serendipity—luck. Moreover, just think about the impact an influential and highly regarded leader can have on all levels of an organization, on people who may follow her lead.

If you ever hear this kind of a question, run screaming from the room. This is not a manager you want to be standing near when the SEC¹ arrives. She will point to the person who lied to her. If, on the other hand, you have asked this question of others, you must enter a rehab program.²

You can and should ask people to imagine, guess, reach—all positive actions. However, if there is one rule for asking a question in any context or circumstance, it is to *never, ever ask for a lie!*

So here's what happened.

Middle manager: We have numbers to suggest that, over time, this business could grow to between \$1 and \$2 billion, but a lot of things have to happen right.

Senior manager: I am very impatient. I don't want over time. I want to be excited about supporting your plan now. I'm still not excited about this. Make it a bigger lie. How large is this market right now—the total market, not just the targeted segment?

Middle manager (looking around at his team members, who are avoiding his desperate nonverbal screams for help): The market is about \$9 billion in North America and \$15 billion globally.

Senior manager: And you say this market is growing between 10 percent and 12 percent per year?

Middle manager: Yes.

Senior manager: And are you telling me that you are unable to see us leading this market on a global basis? (She puts her hands together in a prayerful pose.)

Middle manager: Well, we could.

Senior manager: Okay. What is the largest number you can make up?

Middle manager (taking a final look around the room for help from his team members, who are by now in self-induced comas): \$4 billion.

Senior manager: Now you have my interest! (She thrust her index finger in the air to emphasize the point, while appearing to skewer the middle manager at the same time.) This is exciting!

What is the danger in this? The senior manager could start to act as if this number were reliable. Worse, the team might try to make their business case fit this new number when they are clearly unprepared to do so.

Abuses of power do not have to be as obvious as this case. They can be subtle, casual, or even humorous. An abuse of power question is one that people are compelled to answer only because the person asking is at some higher level in the organizational structure. Period.

Check on your questions using simple criteria. Although you might feel as if you are not abusing the power of your office, the answers to these questions may give you a different perspective:

- How would you feel if this question were printed on the front page of the next edition of *The Wall Street Journal*?
- Would you want to be quoted asking the question?
- How would you react if the same question were asked of you, by your boss?
- Do you have to justify the question with a defensive preamble?
- Do you tell people not to take the question too seriously, but to answer anyway?

Questions are powerful—they are management's version of power tools. Anyone in a position of responsibility must treat them as such.

Are There Questions That Should Not Be Asked?

Yes, a number of questions should not be asked.

Some questions should be avoided under almost all but exceptional circumstances. They fall into the categories listed here (along with some examples). Most of these are common sense, such as the first category: Avoid questions that intentionally mistreat anyone.

Others are subtle, such as prejudicial questions—questions that offer a judgment as part of the question, and that judgment is unnecessary. Try to avoid these types of questions:

- Questions that belittle, demean, humiliate, or otherwise cause harm to another person

Q: Everybody else can figure it out, what's wrong with you?

Q: What is it about you and yellow paper? (Personally, I like yellow paper, and it's easier on my eyes. I once had a manager say this to me in front of the CEO. I felt stupid, and I switched to green paper instead. He hated green, too.)

- Questions that are personal

Q: Are your kids always sick?

Q: Tell me, Art, are those reports difficult to read, you being dyslexic and all? (This was a power abuser. He actually asked this question of one of our analysts.)

- Questions that add nothing or are unrelated

Q: What do you think of my shoes?

This is the management version of “Do you think this makes me look fat?” Managers must not ask for personal or subjective judgments from their employees. It is one thing to ask whether a tie is blue or black if you are known to be color-blind and if you have an open relationship with your staff. It’s another matter to ask whether the tie looks good.

Q: How long do you think this full-day seminar will really run?

Q: When will the market open tomorrow?

- Questions where a positive or negative answer may mean the same thing

Q: Do you think that we should do this or not?

Q: Is it or is it not correct?

- Questions asked in the negative

Q: Can't we get this done easily?

Q: Isn't there any way this can be done?

Q: What don't you like about (it, that, me, the dog, or whatever)?

These kinds of questions provide insight but are asked in a way that positions the respondent as a whiner, and no one likes a whiner. Better to ask what was liked, to avoid focusing on the negatives. Does it really matter?

- Questions that can potentially backfire on you

There are questions that can backfire on the person asking them. The rhetorical question, for example, might be answered in an embarrassing way.

Q: You really wanted to lose the Smith deal, didn't you?

A: Yes, I did actually. I really don't like Smith. He has monkey breath.

- Prejudicial

Asking questions that are prejudicial can result in an adversarial confrontation. These types of questions create fear in people concerned about their future. They are harmful to individuals and organizations. Do managers really ask deliberately detrimental or hurtful questions? Unfortunately, yes. I heard the following question asked of a high-level manager by his general manager.

Q: Why is it that all the incompetents ended up on your team?

- Too many questions at once

How many is too many? One question a minute for an hour is certainly too many. Each situation will differ.

- Constrictors

People can be influenced to “clam up” as soon as certain questions are asked. If a sarcastic tone is used at the same time, it can do serious damage to the relationships needed to smoothly operate the business.

Q: How can you possibly suggest *that*?

Q: Is *that* all?

- Ambiguous, misleading, and vague queries

How many times have questions needed to be rephrased? How many times have you seen someone try to answer the question he or she thought was asked, only to be interrupted by the questioner and corrected with the question that was intended to be asked?

Q: Do these long-term trends mean anything?

What the hell does this mean? This is the kind of question that usually requires a bit of narrowing down if the answer is to deliver any value.

- Complex, nested questions

What is it with some people that they feel the need to ask nested questions—two questions in one? Most business interactions are not presidential press conferences where the questioner has only one opportunity to ask a question. Ask one question, and then ask the other.

Q: When and where will the software package be introduced, and why is it not happening in the originally forecast timeframe?

Q: When you stated that the protein was to be purified first, do we need it for targeting drug development, or is the process of manufacturing made more difficult when we are

working with specialized solvents, and why wasn't this covered in your report?

- Negative, multiple nested questions

A combination of two kinds of questions is to be avoided. It confuses the respondent at the very least. These kinds of questions are difficult to answer clearly.

Q: It is correct, is it not, that your report shows your product line will not meet its objectives due to a delay of parts inventory because the product has developed problems for which you have no solutions?

- Questions that impute negative attributes to the respondent

Q: Can you give me your honest opinion? (As if they would give you a dishonest opinion.)

Q: Didn't you know that?

- Defensive, qualified questions

Avoid qualifying your question with any type of a defense. It detracts from the question, and the obvious conclusion is that the question is offensive.

Q: Excuse me for asking, but...

Q: I hate to ask this, however... (If you hate to ask it, don't ask.)

Q: This might offend you, but I must ask it anyway... (Find an inoffensive way.)

The rule of thumb is to ask yourself what the business value of the question is, and whether it meets the requirements cited earlier? Is it clear, simple, and so on?

Endnotes

- 1 Security and Exchange Commission—the mission posted on their website: “The mission of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission is to protect investors, maintain fair, orderly, and efficient markets, and facilitate capital formation.” You can understand how damaging this kind of managerial behavior can be to a company as a prelude to misleading people in an irresponsible and potentially damaging way.
- 2 Pick any one. Rehab is all about dealing with the reality that a person has been denying by use of a bad habit.



If you liked this Element, you might like the book by Terry J. Fadem, *The Art of Asking: Ask Better Questions, Get Better Answers* (ISBN: 978-0-13-714424-2).



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