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Terry J. Fadem

**UNASKED
QUESTIONS ARE
FOOLISH ONES**



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If I Ask a Foolish Question, I'll Look Foolish

If you do not ask the question, you will almost certainly be foolish—eventually. The only way to improve questioning skills is to use them. More often than not, others are also thinking about the same question and do not want to ask.

One of my former fellow managers was an ex-government administrator who had a tendency of allowing acronyms to slip into his conversation. Most of the time, they were easily discernible. On occasion, it was not possible to figure out what he meant.

I decided to look foolish in front of my boss and peers one afternoon when a particular acronym confused me.

Ex-military officer/manager: Our plan called for us to lead a price increase—get the announcement out to our customers before our competitors had a chance to react. That is OTE.

I had never heard this expression being used before, so I assumed that everyone knew what this had meant. But, that did not stop me from asking.

Foolish me: What is OTE?

Boss: Yes, what is OTE?

Ex-military officer/manager: Overtaken by events.

I learned three things. First, my boss had no idea what this expression meant, and he did not want to appear foolish. Second, I learned that I did not feel foolish after I asked the question, only before. Finally, I picked up a neat expression to use as a label on many of the files in my office.

Foolish questions are often neglected and should be asked.

Unasked Questions: If You Already Know the Answer, It Is Unnecessary to Ask the Question

The reasons this behavior should be avoided are obvious, but not to everyone. The most common are these:

- You might be wrong.
- Others may need to hear the answer.
- It may be important to instill confidence in the person to whom you are questioning by “getting one (answer to a difficult question) right.”
- Asking an obvious question may raise a nonobvious but vital answer.

The most comical performance by a manager I ever witnessed was of a person who would state the question, and then right after asking, explain that he already knew the answer.

When he also stated the answer, he was invariably wrong. Unfortunately for him and the people who worked for him, he refused to accept corrections. Even if his staff argued with him, he would simply state that he believed that he was correct. That was all that mattered to him.

In some situations, managers must recognize the need for others to draw the same conclusions or to learn for themselves what the

managers themselves have already discovered. Asking a question for the purpose of helping an individual or a team to draw their own conclusions is sometimes a great way of exercising managerial responsibility to strengthen the organization by avoiding the tendency to act as the authority figure.

Junior people in some organizations may also need the chance to develop confidence by being put on the spot with a question. They need practice to develop the skill of thinking on their feet. Questioning people to allow them to deal directly with difficult questions is one way to assist in their career growth. Using this as a management technique might occasionally lead to an unexpected answer.

What a manager may think is obvious might not be obvious to others. The only way to find out whether this is the case is to ask the question, and then ask yourself why wasn't this clear to the others in the group.

An old and well-practiced habit of lawyers is to avoid asking questions of a witness unless the lawyer knows the answer. However, good cross-examination practices do not always translate into good business practices.

Managers do not have to know the answer to a question before asking it, and even if they do, it may still be worth asking.

Someone Else (of Higher Authority or Greater Experience) Will Ask

If you have a question, and it is clear in your mind that it needs an answer, ask! Unless you are a mind reader, it is impossible to know whether anyone else is thinking of the same question or will ever think of the same question.

Of concern to first-level and mid-level managers is their position in the hierarchy. Many questions they hear senior managers ask are

good examples of the kinds of questions managers should consider. I have heard a number of mid-level managers express the opinion that they are in no position to ask tough questions.

They explain that their bosses often ask “those kinds” of questions due to their senior positions. The way to think about whether a “boss” kind of question should be asked is to consider this question: Is it important for the business to know the answer sooner or later?

If it is an answer that is needed sooner rather than later, you had better get it out of the way. Also, you need to keep in mind that the question might never be asked by the boss. And then what?

The credibility of the person asking is a secondary, but important issue. This is significant particularly in companies where deference is paid to people who have the battle scars of veterans, or “dirt under their fingernails” so to speak. Questions about sensitive subjects or a question that can produce a potentially embarrassing response should require younger or less-secure managers to pause.

Although important, is the question important enough to cause harm to yourself or to others? Or if your question will not be taken seriously in a public setting, such as a meeting, consider a private communication—by phone or in person. E-mail has a habit of being misinterpreted and should be avoided if possible under these circumstances.

People emerge into positions of higher responsibility, greater influence, or leadership over time. In many cases, their emergence is a direct result of the questions they ask. Answers are important, but the question plays a vital role. People who ask good questions are the people who learn to ask good questions.

Someone else may or may not ask. If the business needs to know now, now is the time to ask. If the circumstances are not quite right,

defer the question, but under no circumstances should you allow an important question to remain unasked.

Saved Questions: I Will Save My Question for Another More Appropriate Time

There is no more appropriate time to ask than when the question occurs to you. This is true even when you know the answer will be delayed, such as with voicemail. The rule of thumb that managers should adopt is to ask questions early and often.

But, the advice in the preceding section recommends putting a question off if the circumstances are not quite right. This is contradictory advice and something that all managers, when they arrive in any management position, quickly find out is all too common.

Yes, there is no time like the present—so ask now, while you still can. And yes, the question can also be put off, but not saved.

Saving a question implies that there is no real urgency for the use of that question. Questions are not like money. They do not grow interest in the question bank while awaiting withdrawal. Rather, their job is to produce a return on investment as soon as possible.

The previous recommendations suggest that a phone call or face-to-face meeting with the respondent is most desired, if possible. If not, e-mail or text messaging is the next best approach. This should be done as quickly as possible before events occur that might have been avoided had the importance of addressing the question been communicated. All businesses have inquisitors. Not all of them sit with business teams. Some are on boards or in research, but they are not always available to ask the tough questions so that others do not have to.

There is another exception to the “ask as soon as it occurs to you” rule: any question that might be asked in anger or with an intention to

do harm. These should be put off—for good. What kinds of question are these?

We all know them well.

“*What kind of an idiot are you?*” is one of my favorites. I witnessed a senior executive explode one afternoon at a business review. He screamed this into the face of a mid-level manager. The manager had just finished explaining that he had authorized the construction of a \$100 million manufacturing facility without doing any of the usual preliminary work to make sure the new process would actually work. Normally, the business built a small-scale pilot plant to prove out a new manufacturing process. But, these small plants could cost up to \$20 million, a significant cost penalty to a business with slim margins. However, to make a mistake bypassing the smaller facility could risk losing an investment of close to \$200 million.

“*A highly paid one,*” was the quick reply. This “wise guy,” a middle manager who risked the company’s money by building a facility using an untested process, was later promoted to vice president. The manufacturing facility never did open; the process didn’t work. If only more questions had been asked by the senior vice president, instead of venting anger and allowing humor to replace reason, the business might have avoided building a very large white elephant that was later sold off for about \$20 million—to another company that wanted to use it as a pilot facility.

Questions might grow into problems when left unasked, even though asking them is no guarantee of being problem free.

My Question Will Make Waves and Making Waves Is Bad

Your question, depending on when it is asked, could indeed make waves. However, if it is an important question with a solid business

purpose, it should be recognized as such and asked immediately. Of course, this is altruistic crap.

I would not ask anyone to sacrifice his or her career just to ask a question that can make waves. However, on occasion, a wave now is better than a tsunami later. Think about Global Crossing, Enron, and other companies that have ruined people, sent executives to jail, and hurt thousands of loyal hardworking employees.

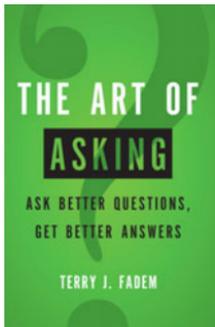
Where were all the questions? Who on their boards was responsible for corporate governance? Why did abnormal numbers (whether unusually high or unusually low) go unchallenged? Perhaps someone attempted to challenge them and make waves. Perhaps they did not. We can never know the answers, and someone will eventually write the definitive business cases of these incidents. However, we do know that wave making is necessary in some situations.

Once again, the question that is neglected might be the one that saves the business. Of course, it could also be the one that gets you fired.

Rule of thumb for asking questions that you know ahead of time will make waves: Ask what is at stake? Then, look at the size wave that will be generated and what could possibly happen if the question goes unasked.

Then ask yourself, “If making waves can or will save the company, prevent a catastrophe, perhaps result in the saving of careers or pensions, is that bad?” It might be. In this case, even if I had been fired as a result of asking the question, it would have made no difference. Almost all the people working on the new development projects lost their jobs—it was just a matter of time.

Ask questions the first time and every time, even when there are no answers.



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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