



THE ART OF
ASKING

**ASK BETTER QUESTIONS,
GET BETTER ANSWERS**

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Preface: Corporate Inquisitions

The Not-So-Grand Inquisitor

He sat behind a desk holding a pitchfork, as all upper-level managers do when they are bedeviling their employees. Well, at least that's how many people picture the boss. This guy was actually holding one that resembled an implement of the devil—a long black handle with a red trident at the end. An appropriate accompaniment for a kid in a Halloween costume, it was out of place with the corporate blue suit of the middle-aged business director. But, as you will see in a moment, this was a manager who was out of step with his business.

Managing business development efforts for a major electronics company with worldwide supply chains is a daunting job for anyone. He had responsibility for overseeing a major growth initiative for the company—one that would likely determine the future of the division. His infrequent visits to the facility that housed the main business unit were as welcome as the arrival of bird flu.

The project he had come to review was beset with problems. The marketing organization criticized research, believing that the product design would not meet customer expectations. Every redesign that satisfied the demands of marketing added costs to the product that threatened to price it out of the market it was targeted to reach, thus making the salespeople very unhappy. And they all argued with manufacturing because no matter what design was settled on, no one in the plant had any confidence the product could be manufactured reliably. The project was woefully behind schedule and so far over budget that the likelihood of recovering development costs had become a major concern for management.

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The desk that he was using, as a physical barrier between himself and the team as much as anything else, rested on a concrete platform, about a foot high, in an old factory warehouse. He actually needed the desk because this particular group of employees was known to hurl chairs when they disagreed with each other. Who knows what they might heave at this guy? Although the original purpose of the elevated floor was to keep gunpowder dry, it now functioned as a stage on which the manager attempted to transform himself into an inquisitor. He had come to visit a business team that was producing a seemingly unending stream of problems rather than products.

This meeting was convened to find solutions to the problems the development team had been having so that production could be scheduled and the sales force could start to take orders. In reality, the director was holding an inquisition. He believed he knew the answers—he just wanted to ask the questions. So, with evil scepter in hand, he conducted an investigation, calling on his victims by pointing his pitchfork at them as if to skewer each respondent on one of the barbs.

He pointed to the engineering supervisor.

Inquisitor: What do you mean you can't get the boards to work? Who designed them? Who built the prototypes?

He paused here to catch his breath. No one was going to speak.

Inquisitor: What's wrong with you people? Can you explain this?

The silence continued. There was no answer to his bullying, except for one of the engineers who entered the room late. A particularly brilliant designer, "Doctor Doom" accepted the verbal challenge.

Inquisitor: The project is now overdue by six months. Not one part can be produced for the original forecasted cost. What is the final projected cost of the production model now?

Dr. Doom: About four times what we planned at the start!

Delivering bad news was Dr. Doom's specialty, hence the nickname. He appeared to enjoy telling managers the truth, as he saw it, and seemed especially pleased if it was very bad news that was not expected by management—and this was indeed, very bad news.

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Inquisitor: We're losing time, and now you tell me that we have lost any hope of having a price advantage? Do any of you think this makes sense? Can you explain this?

He pointed to one of the marketing people in the room.

Inquisitor: What's wrong with you people? How could you let this happen?

Although offensive by most standards, this particular inquisitor was a small *i* inquisitor in this company. He was threatening to lower-level people, but in reality, he had only a limited ability to dismiss staff or end careers. This company had an abundance of inquisitors in training.

The business director worked for a general manager who was the real "Grand Inquisitor" of the company. The GM was so good at inquisitions that careers spontaneously combusted under the intense pressure of his examinations during business review meetings. There was no need for any burning at the stake. He was known to extract resignations on the spot.



If you work in a company or any organization long enough, you might eventually attend or participate in an inquisition or two. I have seen a number of them, and I believe most if not all inquisitions are unnecessary. Although hopefully not commonplace, they do happen, and they represent many of the worst characteristics of inappropriate questioning conducted by managers in their daily work. One of the reasons that unsuitable questioning occurs is that the skills employed when conducting inquiries tend to be those that are passed on by example.

If mentors or senior managers are particularly good at asking questions (and if they are also personally successful), their skills are passed on to those who want to emulate them. As in the case just discussed, however, if managers' skills are tactless and the company is still successful under this kind of leadership, the reverse happens. Poor habits are perpetuated. People are fooled into thinking that bullying, intimidating, or torturing by "elocutioning" employees can bring success just because they see these traits in managers of successful enterprises. Even when a business fails, if people had no other mentors to learn from, they have few positive skills to take forward in their career.

Unfortunately, as discussed in the next few chapters, not all successful managers, including those who possess excellent questioning skills, excel at asking questions all the time.

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Managers ask questions for a wide variety of specific reasons. For purposes of our discussion, I have boiled the reasons down to three general categories of inquiry:

1. Questions asked because the answer is important
2. Questions asked because the question is important
3. Questions asked because the process of asking is important

In the first category, the answer is more important than the question, so all questions need to be asked with that fact in mind. A manager might want to learn about an idea, or, as in the previously discussed case, the issue under investigation may be “what went wrong” (even though the management devil in this example had no real interest in the answer). In addition to asking questions effectively, managers need simultaneously to employ listening skills.

In the second category, the question is more important than the answer. A manager might want a particular line of reasoning to be used to evaluate projects, or perhaps other considerations should be addressed and the question is a tool to be applied to the situation. There might be no answer to some questions because they are designed to generate discussion rather than answers. This practice is common in many classrooms where questions are designed to get students to think about the question or sharpen their analytical skills rather than supply a correct answer. The business director in the short example mentioned previously actually didn’t care about the questions either.

For him, the process of asking questions—the inquisition—was what mattered most. So, the manner of asking seemed to be his overriding concern. He was intentionally making people feel uncomfortable by grilling them with questions and letting them know that he didn’t care about the answers. But, there are less-threatening circumstances where the process of asking is designed by the manager to instruct or to get a group or an individual to approach a problem differently. Mentors, professors, consultants, and advisors often play this role with their questions.

In other cases, the process of asking can be used to allow the group to develop new ideas. So, not all questioning that focuses on process is an inquisition.

For most managers, interest lies in the question as well as the answer. And, it’s the process of asking that establishes the importance of each question

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and answer. This book was designed to address the need for improving questions as well as the manner in which managers ask them—to thus achieve better answers, which are ultimately what is needed for a business to succeed in the long run.



The business management “devil” in the opening story eventually met his due. After months of delays, the development team finally produced a viable product, over a year behind schedule and well over budget—but it was completed. Fighting stopped long enough to get the job done, and everyone on the project team moved on to other assignments or left for jobs elsewhere.

By sheer coincidence, I happened to be present when this particular business director was making a presentation to the Grand Inquisitor—the general manager of the division.

The director’s business unit was not doing well. Errors in judgment coupled with poor forecasting had led to two straight years of underperformance. New products were delayed, morale was poor, and there was no end in sight. Under intense questioning from the general manager, he self-destructed.

Grand Inquisitor: Forget the numbers, what’s your analysis of the situation? Why do you have such bad news about something you should’ve fixed long before now?

Director: Exchange rates hurt our European margins, costs are up in our plants in Asia due to environmental concerns, and marketing forecasted a more aggressive return than the sales force was able to deliver.

Grand Inquisitor: That’s not good enough. And what else?

Director: Well, if my analysis isn’t good enough for you, you can find someone else to run this business.

Grand Inquisitor (rather triumphantly): I will.

And then, in a perverse twist of the pitchfork, which was now buried deep in the manager’s ego, he gleefully moved on to attack any self-esteem that remained.

Grand Inquisitor: But I’m still waiting for a good explanation from you for such a bad performance.

Turning red and gasping for air, the exasperated manager stalked out of the meeting and immediately resigned.

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The business eventually failed and was sold off by the parent company. It's now doing better under different management. I lost track of the not-so-grand inquisitor, but the Grand Inquisitor general manager went on to be an even more overbearing boor of a manager as the CEO of another company, where he was eventually awarded a golden parachute for leading yet another crop of business managers to extinction. There was little in his record of leading businesses that demonstrated the kind of good performance expected from a true business leader. A mythology followed him around with vague references to how he saved a business with his great insights fresh out of school with his MBA. I never met a witness to this history. He just always seemed to appear on the scene when the business conditions were failing just enough to blame previous management, impress people with excruciatingly tortuous questioning sessions, and then leave the business right before it crashed. To this day, I cannot understand why he was never held to account for years of poor performance, not to mention ruined careers. This lack of accountability is a troubling aspect of business management visible in a number of places in the market.



Improving a manager's ability to ask a question is no guarantee that business performance will be improved, but it should help. It is possible that both the project and the business of the manager cited in the preceding example might have performed better if the manager had been better prepared to ask questions of the people who worked for him. This book offers an opportunity for managers at all levels to improve one of the most basic aspects of their jobs: asking questions!

3. How Good Are Your Skills?

The numbers of brain workers, or nonproducers, as they are called, should be as small as possible in proportion to the numbers of workers, i.e., those who actually work....

—Fredrick Winslow Taylor,² father of modern management

“Brain workers” was the original concept of scientific management pioneered by Fredrick Winslow Taylor. His theories produced the foundation for management portrayed as “modern” in the twentieth century. Think about how much has changed over time. Brain workers are now the producers in today’s world of business.

Historically, managers possessed the knowledge, experience, and skills necessary to perform the tasks relevant to the daily operation of the business. They could function as both bosses and employees. This competency was the primary reason business owners promoted their employees to management. The complex needs of the modern business have changed this model.

Such diverse knowledge is now required in business that an individual manager is rarely expected to be knowledgeable enough to run all aspects of the business successfully without employee specialists. So, what do generalist managers have to know to maintain the progress of their enterprise? *They must know how to ask questions.*

How Good Are Your Questioning Skills?

While I was traveling around the world on a business assignment that I discuss later in this chapter, I noticed that many managers asked similar questions and got amazingly different results. The way questions were asked appeared to be as important as the question itself. I looked around for a book to serve as a good training guide for myself on how to ask questions. The resources I found fell into two categories: professional training guides (such as for lawyers, teachers, and market researchers) and self-help books designed to enable the individual to get ahead (such as with interviewing skills, or improving a person’s thinking processes). These are all excellent resources. A number of them

are referenced later. However, my goal was to find a basic skills book. I was unable to find one that met my criteria.

When I started studying questions, I started with the assumption that I knew nothing about them. So, I built this book as a personal reference because I was unable to find what I needed.

After I embraced my own ignorance about questioning, I started to see questions in a new light. I found that even experienced, successful managers run into problems with their questions on occasion. They fall into traps such as habit questioning, posturing, or putting answers in their questions. Other managers, particularly new ones, commit a number of errors, such as asking prejudicial questions or leveling complex questions about interesting but unimportant or even unrelated details. Fixing these mistakes early in a person's career can lead to better personal performance over time. Fixing them among all managers can often lead to improved business performance.

The bottom line for all of us is that we need good questions because we want better answers. There was a need, at some point, at Enron, for example, for someone to ask the tough questions—*inquisitor's questions*. Investors needed someone to ask serious questions of the people at Global Crossing and at many other firms where damage occurred. It is not the job of any government agency to clean up these messes by asking business questions; that is the responsibility of management. *Management* is an inclusive word to mean anyone in a position of authority/responsibility—from line supervisors to board members.

Lives and careers have been ruined, not by questions, but by the lack of questions. As managers, we either do not know how to ask, what to ask, or are unable to ask the question for a variety of reasons. Sometimes we avoid certain questions because we believe that by asking them we risk our job, our status, personal embarrassment, or perhaps we are just being polite.

If managers at all levels were empowered by improved skills to ask questions sooner, better, and with an eye on what is best for the business or for their organization, disasters could be reduced and in some cases perhaps avoided altogether.

Management needs questions before it gets answers.