



Engaging Employees with a Beginner's Mind

By Francisco Gomez

Inspiring employees to engage in the behaviors that bring the most value to the customer is quite possibly the most essential leadership activity in any organization. There are several leadership skills needed in order to achieve this objective, but one of the more impactful ones centers on a simple and powerful practice—*asking questions*.

There is a principle in Zen philosophy that embodies this approach. It's called Shoshin or *beginner's mind*. One of the more important aspects of having a beginner's mind entails playing the role of the student in

**“Teaching is listening,
learning is talking.”**

– Deborah Meier

order to become a better teacher. It tells us to approach our daily activities and interactions with others with curiosity, an eagerness to learn, and to be *in-the-moment* with our full attention. It highlights that every interaction we have with someone is an opportunity to learn, as well as to teach.

This practice can serve us well in the workplace. Quite often, as leaders, we feel compelled to spend most of our time talking—telling people what to do and giving our perspective. Although there is clearly a time and a place for providing our insights and ideas to employees, we would gain a lot more if we invested time in asking for theirs, and listening with our full attention. The writer Deborah Meier says, “*Teaching is listening, learning is talking.*” Asking the right questions and listening is a more effective way to help others acquire information because people

learn more through dialogue and example than by listening to a talking head who is indifferent to their perspective.

Approaching your employees’ performance with curiosity about their ideas for improvement, what they have done and learned, and what they find important, is beneficial on many levels. It can expose you to the most critical behaviors driving your business. When done correctly, it can also contribute to higher engagement levels and improved performance.

It isn’t just about asking questions though. It’s about asking the right questions at the right time. The idea isn’t to constantly audit employees to ask whether or not they’re on track. That tends to be perceived as micro-management because it brings zero value to the employee and marginal value to you as their leader. The objective is to ask employees questions that will help them learn through self-discovery, share their ideas and talk about their accomplishments. In short, ask questions that bring mutual benefit and help them come in contact with positive reinforcement.

Here are **four categories of questions** to incorporate into your daily coaching that will help you achieve this shift in engagement.

1. ASK FOR THEIR PERSPECTIVE

Employees tend to appreciate when others ask for their input. They feel pride in their work and have ideas to improve the business. While you gain a great deal of valuable information from this conversation, they will see how much you value their experience and skill. Consider that your high performers are a gold mine of best practices you can coach others to adopt.



2. ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT OBSTACLES THEY FORESEE AND SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

Organizational change tends to be associated with difficulty. Whether you are launching a new initiative or facing a change in procedure, regulation, tools, etc., it's important to listen to employee concerns and address potential obstacles at the front end of the effort. Asking employees about obstacles or difficulties they foresee **and what can be done to mitigate problems** can get the group feeling empowered and build a proactive, action-oriented mindset. This can minimize the resistance often provoked by employees feeling voiceless and powerless to the change. Just make sure you balance asking about obstacles with asking about their solutions. You don't want to reinforce complaining. You want to encourage their full ownership of a process.

3. ASK FOR FEEDBACK ON YOUR LEADERSHIP

Think of your employees as subject matter experts on the effectiveness of your leadership. They experience it directly on a daily basis. Frequently asking them targeted questions about your effectiveness as a leader is one of the best ways to ensure continuous improvement in your skillset. For example, asking them how you could be more helpful during coaching conversations or clearer when providing direction can provide essential information to help optimize your leadership. Take notes on what they say and act on it when you find it helpful. Always reinforce their feedback whether it's positive feedback or corrective. This will strengthen their willingness to be candid with you.

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4. ASK QUESTIONS THAT HIGHLIGHT THE VALUE THEY BRING

An engaged employee is one who understands and is motivated by the impact they have on the business. Nobody likes to spin their wheels or feel like an unimportant cog in the machine. Employees want to know how their efforts make a difference. Asking them questions about how what they did affected the business, customer, or their peers, can help them connect their work behaviors with results because it encourages self-reflection. The busier they get, the less effective they are at paying attention to how their daily tasks impact others. Questions like these can help employees take a moment to reflect back on what they've done and how it mattered. For example, you might ask questions like

- “How did the customer respond to what you tried?”
- “How are your peers responding to your new approach?”
- “I see our results are trending well. What did you do to contribute to that?”
- “How did you get your direct reports to improve their performance by 10% last week?”

These are all general questions you can ask that allow employees to talk about where they're placing their efforts and thus getting good results. Talking about this with you can be a reinforcing conversation for them. But most importantly, these questions get employees to take a short break from what may sometimes feel like an organizational hamster wheel, and become mindful of how their behavior influences the business. When they stop for a minute and place deliberate attention on how their behavior affects results, those activities become intrinsically reward-

ing. Every time they engage in those behaviors they view them as an integral part of the organization's success. Over time, these new behaviors become sustainable, profitable habits.

Continuously identifying different ways to positively reinforce employee behavior is a fundamental pillar of a world-class organization. Cultivating a sense of humility from the leadership team and reinforcing their eagerness to learn and ask questions, opens up an entire category of reinforcement opportunities for the workforce and contributes to a culture of candid feedback and communication.

[About the Author]

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As a bilingual senior consultant, Francisco supports clients with large-scale behavior change and has a proven record of generating measurable performance improvements across a diverse set of industries and business needs. In his free time, Francisco enjoys cooking with his wife and daughters, practicing Brazilian Jiu Jitsu and playing jazz drums.

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