

BEWARE THE MAN WHO KNOWS



Leaders become more effective as they become more comfortable saying, "I don't know."

The three most frightening words for high achievers may actually be the three most powerful words in a leader's vocabulary: "I don't know."

The secret to success of organizations that sustain change and grow innovatively is that their leaders have an affirming curiosity, an open stance that makes them comfortable with action in the face of the unknown.

It may feel hard to say, "I don't know;" it takes humility. But it opens the door to learning and to understanding. As an old adage warns us: "Beware of the man who knows the answer before he understands the question."

I. Don't. Know. These three words relieve us of the burden of analyzing or processing, of feeling frustrated or impatient, of struggling to remember a technique or a formula for success. They mean, "Nothing occurs to me at the moment. The answer isn't in what I already know, but I have confidence that an insight will come to me or to someone else." These three words liberate us from being stuck in any sort of rut and set us on an adventure of discovering something fresh.

It is always true that innovation happens only when people are not afraid to explore a question, to look away from what they already know. This goes against our training; we've been taught since elementary school that it's important to know the answer. And it goes against our beliefs about work. After all, weren't we hired or promoted because someone thought we already had the required knowledge and skill for the position?

In fact, when the boss asks a question, we're apt to feel a twinge of fear. Our automatic assumption is that we're being tested, not consulted. Suddenly, what's at risk is our job. We've cringed in meetings where the boss has blown up because he couldn't get the information he thought he needed. Or we've watched others make stuff up out of thin air, rather than utter the words, "I don't know."

Yet how can we anticipate every question that might be asked? "Overwhelming" is not too strong a description for the task of knowing everything. We not only have to learn best practices, but also have to keep up with academics who are stroked to write about their concepts ("publish or perish"), consultants who package abstractions in multi-million dollar engagements, and journalists who look to turn lists of good ideas into best sellers.

Not only is the effort to stay "in the know" futile; it simply defies common sense. Which is more valuable in seeking resolution to a problem: researching past successes or discovering a fresh insight via a moment of reflection? Which is more reliable for tackling your challenges and finding the route to sustained accomplishment: applying someone else's answer or discovering your own common sense solution? Which is more likely to keep your firm on the cutting edge: copying a competitor's "Big Idea" or relying on the creativity of your own people?

Tried-and-true experience can be very useful, particularly in "routine" situations. But many business opportunities (in fact, many life decisions) do not fit neatly categorized answers. What they require is a creative form that is perfectly responsive to the moment; in other words, a flash of insight, of vision, that points to what needs to be done, leaping beyond accumulated experience to inspired yet pragmatic action.

We've all seen what happens when leaders are not willing to admit that they don't know it all; truth be told, we've been there, done that, ourselves. We become self-righteous, defending our view ever more loudly, as if volume alone could make something true. When our egos are pricked by someone pointing out an obvious fallacy in our "right answer", we become like children who are so convinced that they've lost a favorite toy that they continue to cry even as their parents point to where that toy is lying across the room.

Conversely, have you ever had a child ask a profound question that touches on the very core of what you are doing? Children are naturally curious and exploratory. They are completely unafraid to ask the "dumb" question that provokes a really powerful insight.

As a leader, you might be surprised by the energy unleashed when you adopt the habit of readily asking, "What do you think?" One of our clients once praised the strategic thinking of a team member. We found this puzzling because we couldn't recall a single idea or piece of advice that person had delivered; she hadn't done anything.

But the client said: "She asks great questions; she gets me to think about things I hadn't considered before." That's how "I don't know" works. Leadership is not about knowing all the answers, being able to make earth-shattering pronouncements. It's about seeing the right questions to ask and posing them in a way that is energizing, not discouraging.

Make the neutral query, "I have a question," instead of the more pointed, "Let me ask you a question?" In short, engage in the kind of dialogue that brings out insights, in ourselves and, more important, in our teams.

What is more likely to motivate people to keep working on a difficult problem: insistence that they pour more effort into existing systems and procedures, or confidence that there are possibilities beyond what they already know? If the answer to our problems could be found in what we already know, wouldn't we have solved them already?

How many times have you seen people fit the conclusion derived from their past success to the situation at hand, even though you can plainly see that the present

circumstances require something different? One famous example stems from the early days of the Ford Motor Company. It had achieved dominance by mass-producing the Model T, one model in one color. "You can have any color you want," Henry Ford said, "so long as it's black." His initial success validated its founding principle: "Not wandering from our own path, but doing one thing well."

As times and tastes changed, Henry Ford's stubborn attachment to the black Model T threatened to bankrupt his company. Unwittingly, he was trying to shape a future with too much reliance on an old answer. What eventually saved the company was Ford's courage to free his thinking from what he "knew." Ford took bold action: he shut down production for more than a year and re-tooled.

When we lack the strength or courage to change our minds, to admit we are wiser now than we were then, that something new, fresh might be better than what we already know, we embed ourselves in the past. We are, in other words, trapped by our old beliefs and assumptions. And, as Albert Einstein has been quoted, "Insanity (is) doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." You've probably experienced the chilling effect of such phrases as, "We've tried that before;" or "That will never work here;" or even, "I like things the way they are."

We've all seen how such thinking can cause promising new ideas to wither. No matter how much success skillful leaders have enjoyed, they retain the humility to cultivate feelings of curiosity. Thus, they help people let go of negative thoughts and free their minds. Such curiosity generates a palpable sense of enthusiasm, sometimes even more valuable to the organization than any particular accomplishment. We stride into the future with confidence, not because of past success, but because we are eager to see what new answers will appear.

What we are really talking about is faith. Normal business practice is to avoid that word in favor of less religiously loaded terms, such as "confidence" or "trust." But, in truth, sooner or later, all leaders find themselves acting on faith.

By faith we mean having certainty or conviction about something for which there is no proof. In business we call this "going on gut instinct." Ironically, the bigger the idea or decision, the more faith plays a role. Life, unlike a book, simply doesn't allow us to flip to the last page and know how the story will turn out. We have to let things unfold.

Part of faith is knowing that we have our whole lives to draw upon. This is not our first breath, not the first beat of our heart. We have with us all of our experiences, all of our life's lessons. Not to ponder over, but to remind us that we can prevail, that we are not without resources.

Faith is there when we have exhausted ourselves. When we have pulled tried everything we "know" and are shocked to stillness, what lies waiting for us is faith. We stand atop the cliff and leap into the void, confident that there are invisible wings under each arm. At worst, we will fall gently to earth and pick ourselves up again. At best, we will soar.

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