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Asking is Better Than Telling

Workbook Sample

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Asking is Better Than Telling

The Science and Practice of Leading with Questions

Katherine Rosback

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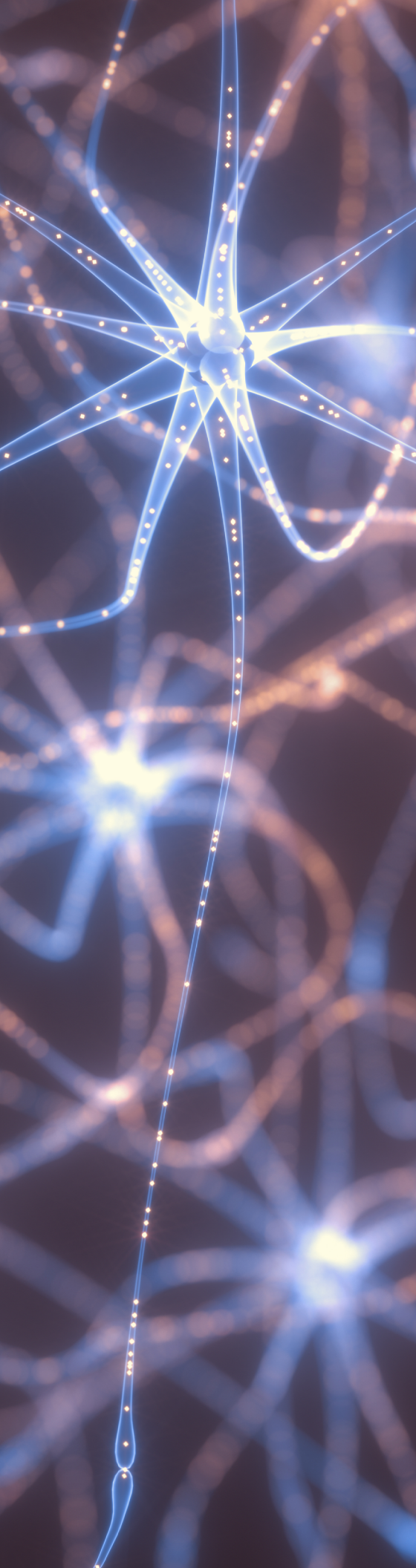


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Failure of Advocacy To Influence

If you're heading up a new initiative in your organization, the odds are not in your favor. That's one reason leaders fail to lead= they fear repercussions. But refusing to lead creates bigger problems.

Multiple studies completed over the past decade substantiate the rather dismal outcomes of well-intentioned initiatives. A 2013 Gallup Business Journal poll reported that more than 70% of change initiatives fail. Similar studies show that well over 80% of strategy initiatives are never fully implemented.

Research shows a top reason for failure is the inability to create or maintain commitment. Organizations too often rely on the act of telling. This results in compliance but not the engagement needed to overcome the challenges associated with any change initiative and the ownership needed to sustain it. The findings for why these well-intended initiatives failed to be successfully implemented can be summarized as follows:

- tasks associated with maintaining the bureaucracy become more important than the thinking skills that were needed to drive continuous improvement
- too much emphasis on tools and terminology
- losing sight of what the process was intended to do
- lack of alignment with the culture and,
- the inability to create or maintain commitment.

Too many programs viewed their mandate as one of a set of techniques rather than a fundamental shift in the organization's values.

- The hard skills of constructing statistically significant tests, correctly mapping systems, and the ability to model uncertainties overshadowed the critical soft skills of dealing with people. For example, in a 160 hour Black-belt program, only 6 hours were dedicated to handling people issues.
- Design flaws in the implementation occurred when total Quality Management (TQM) systems were not designed to fit the cultural circumstances of the organization.

Well-intentioned change leaders assumed their initiatives could be laid on top of the current organizational culture and systems and thrive. Yes, the technical, statistical, and analytical merits matter, but without involving people they can't sustain change. And that is what we will be covering in this course.

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EXERCISE

Reflect on Implementation Initiatives

Bring to mind a recent initiative or program that your company wanted to implement throughout the organization. What techniques were used to influence the uptake of that initiative?

What were the responses to these actions?

What resulted from your initiative? What contributed to each result?



Why Questions Work Over Telling

What's the basic assumption that is associated with a **tell**?

When someone **tells** you to do something when you already have given some thought on how to proceed, what's your reaction?

Does your reaction change when you have asked for the **tell** versus **tells** delivered with no request?

A common response for many people when they are **told** to do something when they have not requested the input, do not trust the deliverer, or have little respect for the person delivering the message is to move into a defensive mode.

Why is that? Why do we feel the need to push back by reiterating our point of view? Or perhaps we even simply reply with a "sure," hoping that will end the conversation with the know-it-all "teller."

The basic assumption with a **tell** is this: **I KNOW MORE THAN YOU.** Sometimes that assumption is welcomed. For instance, when we visit a doctor, we eagerly seek his/her **tells**. But many times it puts us—as the receiver—on edge. That flight or fight defense mode is kicking in as we feel the hair stand up on the back of our neck or the blood rushes to our face or our heart rate kicks up.

That set of responses is understandable from the perspective of social neuroscience researchers. Social situations such as being excluded from organizational discussions, being asked to perform a task that seems menial, having someone consistently oversee your work, and a host of other common organizational actions all trigger the limbic systems that control the fight or flight response. Those same systems that alert us that a bear might be following us while we are hiking in the woods (threat) or drive us towards getting a tasty morsel of food (reward) are at play in our social systems.

As shown in multiple imaging of the brain using fMRI studies, the brain equates social needs—having status in a group, being in control of one's situation, having some degree of certainty as to what will happen next—with physical survival.

So what happens when someone receives an unwelcomed **tell**? Their sense of status has likely been challenged and their emotional centers are lighting up, evoking the emotional system responses while shutting down access to the rational parts of the brain.

The Better Question creates a different response. The basic assumption with a question is, "You know more than me," which has the effect of CALMING the defense systems.

That's why **ASKING IS BETTER THAN TELLING.**

NOTES

FACILITATIVE QUESTIONING



Leading with questions is an amazing confidence builder for employees.

JIM HENGST, PhD

Knowing when to ask a particular question is just as important as the question itself. As top interviewers, negotiators, and coaches, proper sequencing vitally important to the successful use of questions. Start with easy questions to grease the wheels for the harder questions to follow.

To assist with sequencing, I developed a model, shown below that shows the four phases of a typical questioning process. You will find details about each phase in this chapter. Notice how the questions synthesize what you need to know about your business's processes and how to apply what you discovered.



FIGURE 1: The Facilitative Questioning Process



The Facilitative Questioning Process

1. ENGAGE: Building the Conversational Bridge

Identify the catalyst.

Who or what is it? Why now? How urgent is it?

Understand the relevance of the situation.

Why does this matter? If this issue is not solved, how do they articulate the consequences of that outcome?

Clarify and Validate the initial perspectives.

What is their current view of the situation? Have they dealt with something like this before? What does this remind them of? What metaphors do they use to describe the situation?

2. EXPLORE: Articulating the Question to be Answered and the Objectives to be Met

Articulate the key stakeholders and decision-makers.

Who else is involved and how will they be impacted by the choice to bring you in? Who might resist the changes to the system? How? What should you do about each?

Identify the Measures of Success.

What is the client or stakeholders definition of success? What is driving that goal?

Finalize the Strategic Question.

What question needs to be answered? What will answering that question achieve? In what different ways can the question can be framed?

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The Facilitative Questioning Process

(continued)

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3. ENVISION: Developing a Resolution

Identify possible alternatives.

What are the possibilities? What is our set of answers to the question, "How might we...?"

Apply articulated values.

What have they said is most important? How can that input be integrated into a possible solution to increase acceptance?

Understand trade-offs for a given pathway.

What are the trade-offs between the various choices? How might the trade-offs be mitigated? In what context is a given option more favorable than another?

4. ENACT: Make it Happen

Agree on the next Small Specific Steps (S³).

What is one S³ that could be done easily, tomorrow? How fast and how far?

Identify key milestones.

What will we watch to know things are progressing? What will we see? Measure?

Determine the "Routines for the Rough Patch."

What will you do when things don't go as planned? What, specifically, will you do?

FACILITATIVE QUESTIONING: **ENGAGE**



Language
is a way to
simplify and
organize our
experience.

STEVE ANDREAS



We'll now do a deep dive into each of the four Facilitating actions. Here are questions for the **ENGAGE** element.

- What's the catalyst? Why now?
- Why does it make perfect sense?
- What do you want to have happen?



NOTES

What is your first response when your supervisor, internal consultant, external consultant, or subject matter expert declares walks into a room and declares, “Okay. Here’s the process we will use and you need to trust it.”

- » Do you feel yourself bristle?
- » Do you wish it had been done differently?

Masters in the world of natural horsemanship share this excellent counsel for getting ready to ride a horse, counsel that needs to be considered by any leader entering into an engagement:

“First, you go with the horse, then the horse goes with you, and then you get together. A person [rider] needs to operate from where the horse is, rather than operate from where the person is.”¹

In the horse world riders too often walk up to their horses with their heads full of everything they want to accomplish, their plans for the ride, their goals for the day. They remain oblivious to where the horse is. (Unfortunately for the rider, horses have a jolting way of letting you know when what you do does not fit; it ends up with you hitting the ground.)

How might this counsel apply to you as a leader or process consultant? When has your head been so full of everything you wanted to accomplish—your plans for the day and your goals for the project—that you clutched your process and way of thinking, rather than first understanding where the team was at?

I recall this cowboy wisdom I every time I hear a process consultant express frustration that the decision group won’t follow the steps, or the Org Development lead fumes that the employees just won’t get on board with the new direction.

If these horsemen watched some of these organizational leaders, they would likely comment that leadership cannot happen when those in front work from where they are without considering where the group is. Too often those leaders are oblivious to or incorrect about the perspectives of the group. Subsequently, it’s no surprise when the group does not engage, fights the “tell”, or (metaphorically speaking) throws the leader to the ground.

First, you get with them.

That is the much-needed wisdom in organizations, and is essential in the **Engage** phase.

¹ SOURCE: Tom Dorrance, *True Unity: Willing Communication between Horse and Human*. Fresno: Give-It-A-Go Enterprises, 1987, 20-21.



NOTES

QUESTION STRUCTURE

Scaling Questions

If you have heard a medical professional ask, “On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your pain?” you’ve been asked a scaling question.

Scaling questions assess the severity of an issue or situation. They serve as an invaluable tool for envisioning solutions. Rather than, “My organization struggles with managing projects,” scaling questions identify the person’s perspective of the urgency of the situation.

Someone who rates their organization as a 5 on a 1 to 10 scale requires an appreciably different action plan than someone who reports their organization functioning as a “1.”

Once you determine a current level, scaling questions can then determine the degree of progress a client or team needs: “So if we are currently at a 5, what would a 7 look like? What would we need to get there?”

Scaling equips leaders to play with degrees of improvement, rather than be sidelined by the big win—the all-or-nothing mindset that hampers solutions.

Multiple solutions are the real value of scaling questions. Scaling questions help us diverge on solutions by forcing us to describe what the different levels of change might look like.

Scaling questions are wonderful brainstorming tools, each rung acting as yet another possible option. Rather than a “What can be done?” question, leaders use “What might a 7 look like? An 8? What moves us up the ladder?” question framework

In still another advantage, scaling questions engage participants’ imagery functions. This deepens their what-is-possible mindsets.



NOTES

QUESTION	PURPOSE
"What would you like to have happen today?"	Presuppositions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Puts the client in the active role.• Creates ownership for the outcome.• Preserves status for the client.
"So, as I listen to you describe your options, I am wondering what question you are trying to answer?"	Creates reflective thinking, as people are not generally aware of the questions through which they interpret situations and make their choices. Summarizes and specifies.
"Why now? What's the catalyst?"	Uncovers motivation and/ or underlying drivers to taking action.
"What questions would you like to have answered?"	Presuppositions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• You have questions.• We'll uncover together the underlying drivers to taking action.• Preserves status for the client.
"On a scale of 1-to-10, how would you rate this issue?"	Scaling questions give insight into how urgent the issue is to them.
"What have you been thinking about trying?"	Preserves status by voicing that they are capable of handling the issue. Also gives insight into the question.
"How important is it to make this change? Why?"	Identifies desired outcomes



What has to be going on in that person's world for this to be true to them?

TOM DOTZ



Remember we are doing a deep dive into each of the four Facilitating actions. Here are questions for the **EXPLORE** element.

- Why does it make perfect sense?
- What is the strategic question?
- What is the desired outcome?



“

Don't ask them what they want, ask them why they want it.

MAX BAZERMAN



Value-Eliciting Questions

Imagine everything is said and done and you're looking back from the future. What measurable outcomes will tell you if you pursued the best set of ideas today?

What are specific outcomes that will indicate success to you?

What would be specific indications of failure?

Imagine a solution, and tell me why you picked it.

What concerns you most about the alternative?

What are you thinking about when you say that absolutely won't work?

FACILITATIVE QUESTIONING: **ENVISION**



Innovation
ends with the
answer and
begins with
the question.



Remember we are doing a deep dive into each of the four Facilitating actions. Here are questions for the **ENVISION** element.

- Why...? What if...? How might...?
- What would we attempt if we knew we could not fail?
- What are our underlying assumptions that block the needed step-changes in our organization?



If people work for something concrete, they have a visible opportunity from which to draw confidence.

KARL WEICK



Remember we are doing a deep dive into each of the four Facilitating actions. Here are questions for the **ENACT** element.

- What are the easy steps to set a positive momentum for change?
- How fast and how far?
- What events or observations will tell us this is not progressing as we hoped and how will we respond?



About the Author

Katherine Rosback earned a B.S. in Chemical Engineering and a M.A. in Organizational Communication, both from Purdue University. She earned her certification as a Certified Quality Engineer in 1989 and was trained Decision Analysis facilitator. In 1993 Her experience includes working as a Supplier Quality Engineer with a manufacturing firm, as a Project Manager and Director of Quality with a medical diagnostics firm, and as a lead facilitator with a strategic planning consulting firm.



Katherine currently works as an independent consultant and has facilitated over a thousand must-succeed meetings, critical organizational conferences, workshops, and leadership retreats. Her clients include the oil and gas, pharmaceutical, airline, and medical diagnostic industries, as well as many other not-for-profit and educational organizations.

Katherine has taught her highly acclaimed workshop, “Designing and Leading Must Succeed Meetings” throughout the US and around the globe including China, Norway, the UK, and Canada. She has taught technical personnel, team leads, project managers, process facilitators, Decision Analysis facilitators, HR personnel and other leaders.

Katherine has presented at numerous conferences on the topic of facilitative questioning. Her recent publication, *Asking is Better Than Telling*, is receiving accolades as an insightful, unique, and practical book on the topic of how to ask better questions to reshape team thinking and achieve better outcomes.



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