



Management and Performance Associates – Newsletter - July 2013

To be, or not to be, that is the question

Hamlet | William Shakespeare

MAPA Consulting training programs very frequently use role playing so that participants may practice their newly acquired skills. Although some participants don't exactly love the methodology, most do see its benefits. When done in "fishbowl mode" (two participants role-playing as their colleagues observe), the audience acts like a mirror, reflecting the scene. In these situations, we have found that participants—regardless of hierarchical level, geographic location, industry or function—consistently face difficulty asking quality questions.

We decided to write this newsletter as if we were being interviewed on the radio show "To be or not to be." This is a transcript of the interview.

In your professional practice you emphasize the importance of asking quality questions. What brings quality to a question?

The quality of a question is not related to a specific technique. It is related to the curiosity of the person who is asking it, curiosity about the person who is going to answer, curiosity about the topic being discussed, curiosity to not only skim the surface but to dig to the bottom of the issue. This curiosity will keep us interested in what is being said, will force us to listen and probe. Without curiosity there are no good questions.

In addition to lack of curiosity, why is it so difficult to ask good questions?

The main reason is that we do not listen to others. We do not – empathetically – dive into their frame of reference in order to capture their ideas and feelings. We interrupt. We have no patience. We are more concerned

about how to respond than about listening. How can we ask a good question if we are unable to listen to what is being said?

We have not developed adequate techniques to ask good questions. The pressure for instant results forces us to act fast, without thinking, without quality. The worst part is that most of the time we do not realize how incompetent we are at asking quality questions. That's one reason why this role playing in public can be so enlightening.

What are the characteristics of a good question?

Well, it depends. We could say that questions starting with "who," "what," "where," "when," "how," or "why" have a high probability of generating thoughtful answers and more information. If our questions start with "could," "would," "should" or "do you think that..." then the answers we get are going to be more limited. Of course, if all that you are looking for is a "yes" or "no" answer, then these questions are OK.

Could you give us more 'good question characteristics?'

Yes (laughing).

(laughing) I see I fell into the trap! Let's try again... What other characteristics can you share with our audience?

Very good! It is really worth trying. Let's talk about four techniques that lead to success. First, do not ask multiple questions at the same time. If you want to know how this month's results compare to last month's, well, ask exactly this, and then wait silently for the answer. If you keep asking "Is it



better?”, “Do you think we are doing poorly?”, “Have we achieved our goal?” you will confuse the other party. If you are asking, then do not speak. Better to be brief and wait for the answer – in silence.

Next, learn to be comfortable with silence after posing a question. Give space to the others to think without putting words into their mouths two seconds after your question. If you keep talking, nobody can answer.

There is a third technique, which is wonderful to focus on what the other is saying: paraphrasing. As the other person finishes speaking, you summarize what you heard by saying “in other words, what you are saying is...” It can be that you understood it correctly....or not. If the latter is the case, you have an opportunity for clarification.

In other words, you are telling me that if I summarize what I heard it provides focus to the conversation.

Bravo! I see you are a fast learner (Laughing). Speaking of focus, please allow me to add a fourth technique. We call it “no fishing.” When you are fishing for an answer you are suggesting what you want to hear. For instance, it is OK to ask “what do you think about John’s presentation?” However, you will be on a fishing expedition if you ask “What is your opinion about the lousy presentation delivered by John?” If you are looking to validate your opinions, say it directly. If you already know the answer, why do you ask?

Our show is called “To be or not to be.” Please tell our audience who is recognized as an expert in the art of asking quality questions.

Socrates, not Hamlet. The great philosopher was known by his excellent ability to ask questions. The Socratic Method is about

searching for answers, not providing them. It is not about the interviewer’s opinions, but the other person’s. This involves a relentless application of all previously described techniques – and many more.

I don’t want to let you go before asking who you admire and why.

Larry King, a journalist with 55 plus years experience. Instead of telling you why we admire him, we invite you to see why by watching the attached YouTube video clip: “Larry King on his interview style”. In it, Larry validates the Socratic Method.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYF1MJ90-So>

Would you like to ask me anything?

No. You have done fantastically well. Thanks for the invite.

See you next time. We welcome your feedback.

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