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The Power of Questions

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The Power of Questions

Abstract

[Excerpt] “When you are tempted to make a statement, ask a question instead.”

That valuable advice came from Fred Ross, Sr., the veteran organizer who was a mentor to the legendary Cesar Chavez, a founder of the United Farm Workers union. Ross was teaching the power of questions to provoke people to action, gather needed information, share knowledge, and focus their attention.

Stewards would be wise to include this tactic in the chest of tools they use when advocating for their co-workers.

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The Power of Questions

When you are tempted to make a statement, ask a question instead.”

That valuable advice came from Fred Ross, Sr., the veteran organizer who was a mentor to the legendary Cesar Chavez, a founder of the United Farm Workers union. Ross was teaching the power of questions to provoke people to action, gather needed information, share knowledge, and focus their attention.

Stewards would be wise to include this tactic in the chest of tools they use when advocating for their co-workers. Here's the how and why:

The best questions are open ended, meaning they can't be answered yes or no, but rather require a detailed answer. You also have to ask clear questions to get good results, of course, but there is more to effective questioning. Stewards also need to learn about timing, tone and knowing which type of question to use for different situations.

Timing: When to Ask Questions

If a member comes to you with a problem, let the member talk and express emotion before you start asking questions. Otherwise the member may not be able to focus and give good answers or will keep getting distracted and going back to talking about how he or she feels.

Other times, like the TV detective *Columbo*, you want to ask a question when someone is not expecting it and doesn't have his or her defenses up. For example, when you are interviewing a supervisor about a potential grievance, you might say just before leaving, “By the way, what were the words you used to ask John to do that assignment?”

When you want people's feedback on an idea or whether they will volunteer for something, you want to make sure they have all the information they need before asking for their response. If you ask too quickly, they may give feedback that's not useful or give you a no because you didn't make a good enough case.

The Tone of Your Questions

Before asking questions make sure the person you are interviewing is comfortable and ready to talk. Don't start firing questions before you've done some relationship building.

In most cases your question should have a tone that conveys that you really want to know what someone else has to say.

Don't come off like a prosecutor or police interrogator—you won't get people to open up to you. If you seem in a hurry or not all that interested in what the person is saying, you will also not get good results.

But if you sound sympathetic and caring and use a gentle voice and nonaccusatory language, you are likely to learn a lot more.

Often we don't realize how we sound to others when asking questions, so it's good to get feedback from others or listen to yourself and gauge the reactions you are getting so you can adjust your tone.

Questions that Provoke Action

Let's say you are trying to get members to come to a meeting to discuss how to correct safety problems where you work. Which do you think will engage members more effectively: “Please come to a meeting about a very important safety issue” or “Do you feel safe knowing that some of our equipment has caused several accidents?”

Someone once said that what organizers do is “point out the spot” as in, “did you know you have a spot on your sleeve?” This makes the person with the spot very aware of it and most likely concerned enough to try to hide it or clean it or change clothes.

In that same vein a question such as “How do you feel about the way our supervisor talks to us?” might stimulate more action than making a statement like “We don't have to take being spoken to like children.”

Once people express themselves about the issue, then ask, “What do you think we should do about it?” to get every-

one focused on solving the problem.

Questioning in Grievance Investigations

When dealing with a member who's approaching you with a potential grievance, start by asking, “What happened?” and let the member talk without interruption. Follow up

with questions that are increasingly more specific and guiding. For example: “You said there was a lot of time between the first and second times the supervisor spoke to you. About how many minutes would you estimate that was?”

When questioning management, take a different approach. You should be very understanding and let it be known that you only want to know what happened and whether a grievance is filed depends on that information. Do not argue the case or disagree with the supervisor. If you want information that might be helpful, just ask questions and give lots of encouragement to keep the supervisor talking: “I know you must have had reasons for what you did. Please explain those to me.” Do a lot of head nodding and say “I see” and “What happened next?”

Questions as Teaching Tools

Using questions to help people learn goes back at least to the time of the Greek philosopher Socrates. Rather than telling people things, ask questions like “In negotiations, why would you want the other party to make the first proposal?” Through discussion of possible answers people figure it out together. That way they understand it better, remember it longer and in the process learn how to learn.

One last thought. As a steward, how can you apply what you just read?

—Ken Margolies. The writer is senior associate at Cornell University's Worker Institute.

