

How can Organizational Performance Be Improved Through Questions?

There's a television show called, "Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader?" On it, adults are contestants, and they are asked questions from grades 1 to 5, and then are challenged to come up with answers. To help the contestants, there are a few 5th grade students available.

While you would think that most adults should be able to answer anything from earlier years, none of the contestants ever make it to the 11th question. Most contestants don't get above the grade 3 level.

It seems to exemplify two things:

Kids are pretty smart

Adults are pretty stupid

Why are the kids so smart?

Children do one thing that most adults don't -- they ask questions. In fact, they ask a lot of questions.

What's an eclipse?

Why is Aunt Sally so angry?

How do you know there's nothing under my bed?

Can we go get ice cream again?

Where is Greece?

Can we go get ice cream again?

As we mature, we're supposed to know the answers, or we're supposed to know what questions not to ask. So our curiosity dims as we learn more.

This seems counter-intuitive. It seems that as we grow, and learn about more subject areas, we should continue to ask more and more questions.

Instead, people's curiosity wanes. Been there. Done that. Don't even go there.

This translates to the workplace.

Employees don't want to question policies. At my first few jobs, I would ask a lot of questions about processes and policies. The two most frequent responses to, "Why do we do it that way?", were:

- 1) I don't know
- 2) Because that's the way it's always been done

We live in a constant state of change, but many people believe the answers to their questions will remain the same. So they stop asking.

When people in organizations stop asking questions, opportunity for growth is reduced.

In order for organizations to grow, they need to ask a lot of questions. Product development people should be asking, "What are the customers looking for?" Sales people should be asking, "What are your objectives?" Marketing people should be asking, "What campaigns are working, and why?" Policy makers should be asking, "What has been effective in the past, and why?" Customer service people should be asking, "Are we effectively meeting customer needs?"

etc.

etc.

Even when you've been in the same role for a long time, the questions should not cease.

If no one ever questions policies, procedures and processes, then the company will not change with the times -- until they're forced to.

External circumstances are changing and evolving. If no one wants to change internal policies, then the policies will eventually become obsolescent.

Don't get me wrong -- most policies are good. Businesses continue to move forward because their policies are working. But everything has room for improvement. And in order to be proactive, you should be initiating change, rather than being a victim of change.

In order to be the most effective, ask questions on a continual, periodic basis. Here's a great process to get you started:

1. The first day of the month, look at one of the policies/procedures/processes you either follow, or are responsible for.
2. Ask yourself, "Does this policy make sense? If we were starting from scratch, is this the policy we would be following? What objectives is this policy trying to achieve, and is it achieving those objectives?"
3. Ask the same questions to others in your department.
4. After two or three months, take a broader view and select a policy that involves your department and a larger department.
5. Expand and contract your view on a regular basis.

Of course, you should feel free to take this a step or two further. Ask customers what they're happy with. Ask non-customers why they didn't choose you. Ask prospects what they're looking for. Ask co-workers what they think the company could do to improve. Ask peers at other companies what their best practices are.

What is the secret to business success?

Questions are the answer.

James Allan partners with businesses to improve human and organizational performance.

Contact James at:

e-mail: james@streethockeymillionaire.com

phone: (613) 733-3729

website: <http://www.shmconsulting.net>