



The One Simple Question That Fixes Your Virtual Management Problems

Description

A few weeks back, we talked about what to do when employees who are working from home aren't meeting your expectations. Click [here](#) to refresh your memory. This week's topic is sort of a follow-up to that one.

Working virtually really is a different kind of challenge for most of us. Under these circumstances, as a leader you aren't able to directly manage employees. Likewise, employees don't have direct access to you. This can be frustrating for all involved.

Keeping up with what employees are doing can eat up most of a leader's time. It's possible to literally spend all day making and updating to-do lists. That's a huge problem, because most leaders do a lot more than manage others. They have their own job to do, too. And in times of uncertainty, like right now, they really need to be focused on strategy and other big-picture thinking.

So, wouldn't you like to end the tyranny of the to-do list? There's one simple question that can change everything. Ask employees to send their supervisor an email at the end of each workday that answers this question: *What actions did I take today to move the needle?*

The email lists the steps they took that showed value and moved the company forward. It also includes the next steps to be taken so that leaders can stop them if they veer off track.

(Employees can do the same thing after a training session: listing what steps they'll take to put the new things they learned into practice.)

Teaching employees to answer this one simple question daily can have extremely powerful results. It puts the onus on the employee to determine what happens next, rather than passively waiting for instructions from the leader. That changes everything about how they (and you) work.

Here are just a few of the many benefits to this approach:

It gets people focused on the most important things. When we think of our work through this lens, we're more likely to zero-in on "A" items rather than wasting most of the day on "B" and "C" items.

It frees leaders up to do their own work. This is especially important in times of great challenge. Leaders need to be constantly rethinking strategy to stay competitive.

It creates a culture of ownership and personal accountability. At the same time, it discourages Park Ranger Leadership. That's my name for the attitude that leaders will swoop in and rescue folks if they get "lost in the wilderness." Business has become far too complex for any one person to have all the answers. Now the pandemic has added another layer of complexity. More than ever, we need people to own their work.

It makes employees happier and more engaged. Most people (especially high performers) don't like being micromanaged. The more control they have over their work, the more likely their heart will be in it.

It promotes creative thinking and allows innovation to thrive. Rather than just following orders, people are free to come up with their own ideas. You might be amazed by the wellspring of creativity you tap into when leaders back off a little.

You're more likely to get people's best work. Employees know this is their moment to shine. When it's their idea and that they (not the boss) are driving it, they're more likely to give it their all.

It develops employees. As they push themselves out of their comfort zone, they tend to master new skills and get better and better at their job. This is great for them and great for the company.

Ultimately, it creates a better customer experience. I discovered long ago that customer satisfaction and employee engagement are connected. If your employees are thriving and happy, they'll be more focused on the wants and needs of customers.

Before employees can work this way, of course, leaders have to set them up for success. There are a lot of things you can do to make sure the "one question" method is successful. For instance:

- Communicate clearly and often what's most important to the company. People need to know the mission and goals before they can "move the needle" in that direction. Repeat and reinforce these big-picture items as often as you can.
- It might take a few weeks for people to get used to this style of reporting. Give lots of feedback. Coach people who are struggling with the new system. Some will catch on faster than others. Some will thrive with more freedom while others may be less confident at first.
- Harvest and cascade best practices so that everyone can learn from the success of their teammates.
- Share results often. Transparency motivates and keeps people on track.
- Provide plenty of reward, recognition, and public praise. Say thank you often. What is recognized gets repeated.

Once you implement the "one simple question" approach, you may be amazed by how quickly the

dynamics change inside your company. It's likely that all of your relationships will shift, performance may take a quantum leap forward, and everyone will be happier and more engaged.

This is just one example of a new leadership practice brought about by the pandemic that will end up making things better in the long run. Sometimes we don't make changes until we are forced to. Then, when we look back months or even years later, we wonder why it took us so long to embrace a better way of working.

Date Created

May 4, 2020

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