



# Collaborations

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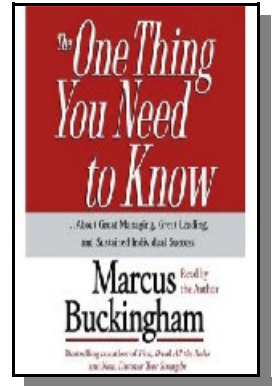
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## Book Corner—*The One Thing You Need to Know*

Marcus Buckingham's newest book *The One Thing You Need to Know* is terrific! His focus is to simplify what it takes to be a great manager, a great leader, and to have great sustained individual success. I won't give away the "one thing" for each of these, but I will tell you that Buckingham does an excellent job making the case for what he has determined to be the "one thing."

In addition to the "one thing," Buckingham shares the four skills for managing and the three disciplines for leading. For those who are individual contributors, he helps with solutions for dealing with a job you don't like.

The link to both *First, Break All the Rules* and *Now, Discover Your Strengths* is clear. The premise is to focus on talents and build from there. In addition to the good content, Buckingham's writing style is fluid and easy to read!



## Asking Good Questions

**Question:** *I often feel that I am still not hearing the "real" facts, situation, or what people are really thinking. I appreciated the "Collaborations" article in the Winter 2006 issue titled "Ask The Right Question." Do you have any other suggestions as to how I might improve my communications skills with the people at work?*

**Collaborations response:** In the Winter 2006 issue we discussed some aspects of asking questions that lead to better communications and dialogue. We said that listening, more than telling or questioning, is essential. Asking good questions must precede good listening. Good questions pave the way for good communications.

What makes a good question? How do we ask a question that will open up discussions, create learning and sharing, and result in productive communications? The truth probably is, most of us don't know how to ask good questions, or when we do ask a really great question, it is by accident.

We have all encountered problems with bosses and colleagues (and probably with spouses) from asking the wrong question at the wrong time. We scratch our heads and wonder what went wrong? After all, we were just asking - right?

The problem is that most people (parents, teachers, etc.) have asked the wrong questions for most of their lives. Parents ask their children questions designed to teach them something. Teachers also use questions that are rhetorical or Socratic, designed to make us think and come up with the right answer, as *predetermined by them*. There is usually only one right answer, the one they are looking for.

Here's a clue: these people—parents and teachers—aren't really asking questions. They are trying to *tell* us something. They do not ask questions to *learn* something, but to

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## Asking Good Questions

*teach* what they determine is important. We learn from parents and teachers the wrong way to ask questions in the adult world.

### What do real questions do?

Real questions are designed to learn about the other person's way of thinking and to gather information. A truly neutral question is rare. Most of us ask leading questions designed to influence others to our way of thinking, just as our parents and teachers did.

Instead of gathering information about the other person's perspective, our questions are designed to lead someone down a thinking path of our choice. That's what it means when in the TV courtroom dramas the attorney jumps up and says: "Object, she is leading the witness."

When you ask leading questions, you are holding your own agenda in sight, and designing your questions to arrive at a predetermined answer. The person asking the question is focused on getting to this result, and, therefore, is not really listening to the responder with an open and receptive mind.

While this can be a very effective teaching method, it is not a way of developing true and meaningful communications, because the listening is cut off by predetermined goals on the part of the questioner.

### Different Kinds of Questions

Managers overuse this leading style of questioning, and then wonder why they don't fully understand the actions of their employees. They don't have a grasp on what is really going on because they aren't asking open questions designed for information exchange and learning.

People in relationships, including spouses, often fall into the "leading question" trap in persistent attempts to influence the perspective of the other person. People communicate better when they start asking neutral questions to learn about the perspective of the other.

Some authors define questions as being empowering or disempowering.

Empowering questions are positive ones, such as:

- What works best for you?
- What are you doing right?
- What is your favorite part of this?
- When are you most effective?

Disempowering questions are also called judging questions. They bring up negative feelings and focus on what is wrong:

- Why did you do that? (In the U.S. culture "why" almost always provokes a defensive response.)
- What went wrong?
- Who caused this?
- How could this have happened?

Notice that these disempowering questions can appear to be neutral. They resemble information-gathering questions. It depends on the source, the context, and tone of voice. It also depends on who is asking the questions, their position of authority, and their prior history of being judgmental and blaming. There is a fine-line between information gathering where one is exploring causes in order to find solutions, and questions that judge and blame.

In order to frame questions in a neutral, exploring context, it may be necessary to qualify questions with statements such as:

- Help me to understand this situation...
- I just want to clarify the sources of this problem so we can solve it...
- Without blaming anyone, can we identify where we went wrong?

Questions are clearly the way to create open discussions, deepen relationships, and create a learning environment necessary in any relationship, at work or at home.

We all fall into the trap of trying to influence through our questions, mainly because it is so ingrained in us from early childhood. It is hard to ask truly neutral, non-leading questions without influencing. However learning how to do that is critical to our ability to tap "the real" situation.

### Build on strengths

Clearly there is much that goes into asking good questions at the right time. There is a body of research designed around *Appreciative Inquiry*, in which people are taught the effectiveness of keeping discussions and questions positive. We live in a culture that readily diagnoses what is wrong and focuses on how to fix things, without adequately investigating what is right.

Research shows that people learn better when

## Asking Good Questions... cont'd

reinforced positively rather than negatively, yet we continue to focus on what is wrong, gaps in performance, and areas for improvement.

We have asked clients and client groups over and over. "What percent of the time do things go very well in this department, division, organization?" The responses consistently are an extremely high number! However, that is not where we generally focus.

Research indicates we would do well to focus more of our time and energy on positive reinforcement.

Additionally, within complex systems, where most of us work, the progression quickly, sometimes instantly, goes from: "What's wrong?" to "Who's wrong?" – and because the answers aren't easily found – to "Blame someone." It is an easy trap in which to be caught.

The art of asking the "right" questions and asking "good" questions is well worth the practice. Otherwise we will always have the feeling that "something more is going on here."

\* \* \* \* \*

## Customer Service

Recently I (Susan) had some experiences that reminded me about three critical elements of customer service. The elements are:

- **Being responsive**
- **Being proactive**
- **Recovering in a positive way**

While I believe we all know these things, a review of them now and again can be useful to help us refocus our own service skills.

We remodeled our kitchen this Spring. New window coverings were part of the remodel. The company we used provided a beautiful product that we love. We'll never use that company again and will never refer them! What's the problem? We never knew what was going on with our order.



They didn't return our phone calls, and they never let us know in advance when they were coming -- whether it was to measure or install, and they didn't inform us when backordered material delayed the process. In the final analysis, we didn't experience any of the above three critical elements.

### Being Responsive

As part of our remodel, we replaced all of the appliances and ordered them from one store. Two days after we placed the order, we received a call from our salesman,

Tom, informing us that the fan for the cook top was being built to order and would arrive a week later than the other appliances. The appliances were delivered on schedule and that day Tom told us the fan would arrive in a week. Our contractor needed the fan the following Friday, so that sounded fine.

That next week, Tom called to say they had received the fan and would deliver it to us on Friday as promised. Friday morning Tom called and told me his truck driver called in sick. Before I had time to be concerned, he promised to personally deliver the fan by 10:00 am. Sure enough at 9:45, Tom drove up in his convertible with the large box sticking up in the back seat!!

Among all the different things we were coordinating for the remodel, it was wonderful to not ever worry about the status of the appliances. Tom recognized our needs and responded to them by keeping us informed at all times. It's not that difficult to make follow-up phone calls -- do you keep your clients informed?

### Being Proactive

My husband, Dave, and I went on a 9-day cruise in July on a small ship known for its service. On the 3rd evening, our dinner service was far less than we had come to expect. While we complained to each other and the friends traveling with us, we didn't say anything to the staff. By coincidence, when we returned to our cabin that evening, there was a letter from the ship Hotel Manager asking if we had any concerns. He wanted to be able to fix any issues rather than hear about it on the survey at the end and not be able to meet our needs.



We wrote a note about our dinner experience and turned in the form. Later that afternoon, we received a personal phone call from the Hotel Manager. He thanked us for our input, apologized for the problems and promised to fix the service problem. Not only did our service improve at the very next meal, we also received an invitation to dine with the Hotel Manager.

The moral of the story -- Be proactive. Ask your clients if their expectations are being met. Studies show that only 4% will complain, so you rarely have a chance to fix a problem. When you fix a problem immediately, 96% will do business with you again! It's worth asking!

### Recovering in a Positive Way

A few months ago a Napa Valley winery offered a special wine tasting at a very nice hotel in Santa Monica. My husband and I went expecting to enjoy good wine, a nice setting and to interact with the wine makers.

The event was held in a room that would comfortably

## Susan Gerke

is the president of Gerke Consulting & Development and "helps people work better, together." Susan's focus since 1989 has been in designing, customizing and implementing leadership and teamwork programs meeting the needs of executives, managers, and employees in a wide number of companies and industries.

Application of her skill and knowledge has been in facilitation, consulting, curriculum development, and coaching. Susan has developed and delivered experiential programs in the areas of *group dynamics, team basics, mentoring, and facilitation skills*. She has worked with global teams and has certified facilitators around the world to deliver management, leadership, and team offerings.



A recognized expert on remote leadership and teaming, Susan is the co-author of *The I in Team ... Accelerating Performance of Remote and Co-located Teams*, and *Quick Guide to Interaction Styles and Working Remotely*.

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## Dave Carey

is a sought after motivational speaker, organizational consultant, and coach. As a motivational speaker, Dave relates his experiences as a P.O.W. with intensity and humor, inspiring others to overcome seemingly insurmountable difficulties and gain a renewed sense of purpose, satisfaction, and control over their circumstances.

As a consultant and coach he focuses on *helping people work together more effectively*. He is an expert in team building, organizational & leadership development.

A graduate of the United States Naval Academy, Dave is a retired Navy Captain. As a Navy pilot he was shot down and spent 5 & 1/2 years as a POW in North Vietnam. His book *The Ways We Choose: Lessons For Life From A POW's Experience* is in it's third printing.



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## Customer Service... RECOVERING IN A POSITIVE WAY

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hold 50 people. 125 people attended. We could hardly get to the tables to get wine in our glasses, let alone visit with anyone from the wineries. It was stuffy, crowded and far from relaxing. We left very soon after we arrived. We sent an e-mail to the winery the next day expressing our disappointment in the event.

Their response? They returned our money and invited us to a private tasting on our next trip to Napa. A week later we received a lovely bottle of wine in the mail with an apology. Talk about recovery!! We love this winery better than before!

When you fail to deliver, what do you do to recover? A positive recovery can not only erase the problem, it can engender more loyalty!

So -- how are you doing on responsiveness, being proactive and recovery? It doesn't take much, but it makes a significant difference to your clients!!



### We'd Like to Hear From You

If you'd like to contribute to Collaborations or if you have a question or topic for us, we'd love to hear from you. Send an e-mail to [sgerke@sbcglobal.net](mailto:sgerke@sbcglobal.net) with your ideas or questions. We will respond based on topics of most interest.