Asking the Right Questions

Tips

***Do* ask open-ended questions** that invite your employee to explain her perspective on the issue you're discussing. Avoid questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no. Instead, ask questions that ask for more-descriptive information, and questions that begin with what, how, who, where, and when. Here are some examples:

- Help me understand.
- Tell me more about that.
- Let me make sure I understand what you are saying.
- What is happening?
- What is challenging about it?
- What have you done, tried, or considered?
- How will you prepare for that?
- How will we measure success?
- How will you communicate your goals with key stakeholders?
- Who will be affected—positively or negatively—by these potential changes?
- Who are exemplars or leaders you respect because they demonstrate those leadership behaviors?
- Who else could offer you feedback?
- Where or when do you feel you are at your personal best?
- Where or when do you feel most challenged or reactive?
- Where might you experience resistance from others?

Questions like these will give you a more complete picture of how your employee views her situation. And they'll force your employee to articulate that point of view to herself. The act of explaining may help her identify her options and consider what action she should take.

***Don't* put your employee on the defensive** by asking why questions. Asking "Why did you do that?" invites your employee to justify past behaviors instead of thinking about how she might respond differently in the future.

Scripts

DEBRIEF ON AN EVENT OR A PROJECT

These conversations focus on learning from recent events, so look for opportunities to initiate them on the fly. Ask questions that will surface a mistake or encourage a productive behavior.

DIAGNOSTIC	FORWARD-LOOKING
"How did the presentation you gave to this group on Friday go?"	"In an ideal world, how would things have gone?"
"How would you describe the impact you had?"	"What would you have to do differently during the presentation to have that effect?"
"What worked well? What didn't?"	"How would you prepare differently for the presentation in light of your experience?"

SHORT-TERM PROBLEM SOLVING

These conversations focus on a specific need in real time, and they're likely to be initiated by your employee outside of a regular coaching session. Ask questions that give you a more concrete sense of the issue and its impact so that you can guide your employee toward some immediately actionable tasks.

DIAGNOSTIC	FORWARD-LOOKING
"Tell me more about the situation. What are the requests being made, and what are the deadlines involved?"	"What courses of action do you have?"
"Which of these requests are tied to our department's highest priorities?"	"What trade-offs will we have to make to meet the high-priority requests?"
"What resources do you have to get this done?"	"What resources do your different options require? How feasible is it for you to pull these resources together?"

LONG-TERM DEVELOPMENT

These conversations focus on a goal that takes time and practice, so they're likely to take place in formal, regular coaching sessions. Ask questions about your employee's past experiences and current processes and about the impact she believes she has.

DIAGNOSTIC	FORWARD-LOOKING
"How would you describe your current level of comfort around this issue?"	"How do you want to feel about this issue?"
"When you have dealt with this issue, how would you describe your impact?"	"In an ideal world, what kind of impact would you have? What would success look like?"
"How do you prepare for this aspect of your work now?"	"How would you prepare differently to have that impact? What parts of your current preparation would you keep?"
"When have you been effective in this aspect of your work? Ineffective? What was different or similar about the times you were effective versus the times you weren't?"	"It sounds like in ABC conditions, you feel effective, and in XYZ circumstances, you don't. Which of these conditions do you have some control over? What could you do to make ABC more common and XYZ less so?"