



The Most Important Question a Manager Can Ask

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When is the last time you asked the group you manage, and the individuals in it, this simple question:

What can I do to help you be more effective?

What question could be more central to being a good boss (<http://hbr.org/product/being-the-boss-the-3-imperatives-for-becoming-a-gr/an/12285-HBK-ENG?Ntt=being%2520the%2520boss>) ? If you want to manage and lead successfully, you've got to know what the people doing the work need. So why not ask them? But the truth is, this question is not asked by bosses nearly enough.

You'll get a variety of answers, especially in the beginning — including non-answers ("Gee, nothing. Keep doing what you're doing.") and requests you can't do much about — personal problems, company policies you can't change, complaints about colleagues who make this person's work life miserable, as well as personal requests you can't or won't address (such as "Raise my pay" from someone whose performance is mediocre). Take everything under advisement, if you can't respond immediately. Promise to take action when you think it's warranted but resist efforts to "delegate up."

(<http://www.appraisaltoday.com/delegati.htm>)

You will also get answers that are implicit or even explicit criticisms of you. Respond to these by explaining yourself, but don't argue or react defensively. Admit mistakes (<http://hbr.org/2006/04/when-should-a-leader-apologize-and-when-not/ar/1>) , if appropriate. At the least, respond with, "Let me think about that. Thanks for telling me."

Discuss, listen, explain, educate, and, above all, understand what the person or group is saying. Be caring but candid. If you can't change company policies or pay grades, explain that. If you disagree with what you're hearing, talk about that respectfully. These are opportunities for both or all of you to learn.

Beyond such answers, however, you will hear ways you really can make people more effective. Finding that may require discussion, careful listening, and respectful probing, and a willingness on your part to hear hard things and to change. Perhaps you really do need to step back and let people do their work; or, perhaps you should get more involved. Perhaps some group work processes need to change. Perhaps you need to talk to a colleague who heads another group about how uncooperative her people are. These things are often easy to do and can make an immediate difference.

Once you start these discussions, you'll find they don't take much time, except when they deserve more time. And they pay dividends. They build trust (<http://hbr.org/product/can-people-trust-you-influence-begins-with-trust-w/an/7315BC-PDF-ENG?Ntt=trust>) , they help people work together better and do better work, they identify and remove obstacles.

They also make you more effective because they reveal what's on people's minds. Like it or not, what people think is what they think, and you need to know what that is. Above all, you need to know what people expect from you, the boss. If you don't know what they expect, and their expectations are unreasonable, you can't negotiate new ones and you'll go on disappointing them.

In many organizations, expectations are assumed to flow in only one direction — down. In fact, they flow up as well, though few organizations pay much attention. Too bad. Being a boss is a two-way street. People are more likely to rise to your expectations if you try to understand and rise to what they expect of you.

