

# Questions Hold the Key

## Unlocking Better Decisions and Performance through Asking

By Joe Whitefield

“If there is something you don’t know, ask someone.” Does that sound like advice you have received at sometime in your life? It sounds simple enough. And yet, we see a plethora of faulty decisions being made that appear to be absent of important information that could/should have been readily available if only someone had asked. Decision making involves process-

to be collected, *it must be verified* as to its accuracy and applicability. This article will address the old fashioned method for information collection and verification: asking questions.

Questions are powerful things. More than simply eliciting answers and information, they can reveal the intentions of the one asking, influence thought, and motivate people to action. Most of us answer questions seemingly all the time.

They come from political polls, sports polls, business surveys, health forms, and personal inquires from friends and family.

Who wants to know and why are logical questions people often ask before freely answering many questions asked of them.

When trust is absent, skepticism abounds. That said, let’s look at a couple of areas in facilities management where we are prone to ask questions.

### SOLICITING FEEDBACK

Soliciting feedback on the performance of an individual or a project/service can be a wise thing to do. Without feedback it is difficult to make necessary improvements for the future. One method that is common here is the use of surveys. While I like surveys in general, I rarely find them that useful. Often the questions ask about customer satisfaction levels but they seem to be incomplete. Simply asking skeptical individuals about *satisfac-*

**C** Completion  
**O** Organization  
**I** Innovation  
**N** Being Nice

*tion levels alone* can be counterproductive. Here is where it can go awry: satisfaction is a comparison of the level of service (performance) with the anticipated level of service (expectation). Basically, satisfaction = performance/expectation ( $S=P/E$ ). When performance exceeds expectation,  $P/E > 1$ , customers are very satisfied. When performance is less than the expectation,  $P/E < 1$ , customers are not satisfied. Surveys often ask about performance without asking about expectation. So, if someone is unsatisfied, it could be a matter of expectations being too high, as easily as it could be a matter of performance being too low. Surveys often don’t make this distinction.

Here are a few suggestions. First, find customers with whom you have a healthy relationship (where trust is present) and ask them for feedback that addresses their satisfaction based on their expectations and your performance. If your motive is to improve, they can be most helpful. So the obvious question is “How many of your current customers could you approach on this basis?” Second, when asking questions, provide some context and the intentional use of



ing all kinds of information, often from numerous sources, to assess the trade-offs (costs and benefits). Given the vast amount of data that is available today, one would think that useful information is so abundant, that decisions could practically make themselves. This has not proven to be true in my experience in facilities management. Sometimes the overabundance of data and information can impair the process, as much as lacking information can. Not only does information need

the information in advance. We have all had the experience of being asked “What are you doing Saturday?” That’s when we withhold the answer until we know what the person has in mind. The answer may depend on whether we’ve been asked to attend a party, or to help move a piano. Finally, if you can’t get the information any other way, put out a survey. But, you have to ask the right questions. Make them relevant and thoughtful—addressing satisfaction, performance, and expectations.

**SHARING INFORMATION AND MOTIVATING OTHERS**

Questions are essential components to conversations and dialog in general. They have other uses than simply seeking answers. Soliciting information offers the ideal opportunity to also share information. Putting questions in context, directing the question, and reveal-

ing your intentions to use the forthcoming answers allow others to learn about you or your organization naturally. For example, “We are working on a project to improve our custodial services, do you mind if I ask you some questions about our service?” There are questions that display humility and build trust—What information am I missing? Have I captured the salient points adequately? Use these character questions liberally.

Questions can also be used to motivate. In December 1941, following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Winston Churchill was addressing a joint session of the United State Congress. After describing the how difficult it was to “reconcile Japanese action with prudence or sanity” he asked the rhetorical question, “What kind of people do they think we are?”<sup>1</sup> Churchill may be difficult to emulate, but he is a great reminder of the power of dialog, and how challenging questions can expose

reality and inspire action.

Decisions are not made in a vacuum. In order to have effective decisions, it is important to have information that is useful and timely. Since college and university campuses are still places where relationships matter, personal contact and interactions are imperative. Improve your relationships by engaging in healthy dialog that asks questions to seek better understanding, convey intentions and character, and ultimately produce better decisions.

To get started, you just have to ask. ☞

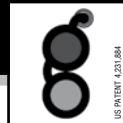
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