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INVITING DIALOGUE

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This month's coaching conversation is with a leader who genuinely wants open dialogue with his direct reports but finds he's been unintentionally limiting his conversations.

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"Is that clear?"

Arlen worried he wasn't making his points clearly with his direct reports.

When I asked him to tell me more, he said, "I'm always asking them, 'Is that clear?' and they say yes. But later, it becomes obvious it wasn't clear at all. I don't know how much is me and how much is them!"

"And is that what you ask them? 'Is it clear?'" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. "'Do you want me to explain it again or was that clear?' Something like that."

I asked, "What does 'clear' mean?"

"Do they understand. Do they know what they're supposed to do so they can go off and do it."

"Really? If they answered you, 'Yessir, Arlen, sir! Clear as a bell, sir!' Would that put your mind at rest?"

"Sure would!"

“Oh, that’s interesting. It wouldn’t for me,” I said.

“It would for me. They’re grown ups. If they say yes they should mean yes.”

“Maybe they mean it at the time. Look, if you’re my boss, and you ask me if I understand you, it’s reasonable that I might think the right answer is yes.”

Then, holding up my hand to stop the conversation, I said, “I don’t know if you want to get me started. I can get really geeky about what happens in our brains when we hear open- versus close-ended questions.”

He looked a little blank.

I said, “Your spidey-sense is telling you that your conversations with your direct reports could be better. I’m wondering if it’s connected to the question you’re asking. Do you want me to go down this road?”

“Sure, go ahead!” he said.

The power of yes/no

I considered where to begin. After a pause, I said, “Being a coach has taught me so much about how to be in conversation with people about very specific things. Like right now, you and I are having this specific conversation about the power of questions.”

He gave a laugh. “Wow! Meta!”

“Suppose at some point in this conversation, after we’ve talked about a bunch of things, I want to know what you’ve understood. And I ask, ‘Hey, Arlen, is this clear? Does this make sense to you?’ What do you imagine you might say?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I might say yes.”

“Right. I think that’s most people’s first answer when they’re asked a yes/no question. I think we learn it as

kids in school. When the teacher asks the class, ‘Do you understand?’, who’s going to say no!”

“Someone might,” he said.

“Yes, someone might. But it takes some courage.”

He smiled and agreed.

I said, “Even if you’re able to muster some guts and say no, I still think my yes/no question – ‘Do you understand?’ Or ‘Is that clear?’ – puts a chain around your imagination. And around mine, too!”

“In what way?” he asked.

“Suppose I ask you, ‘Do you understand?’ If you’re open to my question, you start scanning your ideas to see if you understood. My question has sent you on a very specific search that forces the conversation into a small little corner. I’ve asked whether you understood what I said, not what you think about it. That’s a chain on your imagination.”

I stopped talking while he thought. After a minute, he said, “It’s never occurred to me that yes/no questions might be restrictive, but you know what? I just realized, I use them with my son for exactly that purpose.”

He continued. “There’s a certain time of night when he can be tough to talk to. It’s like he sinks deep into some bat cave. I’m lucky to get a grunt out of him. So I throw questions at him that are intended to restrict the conversation. These are grunt-worthy questions. ‘Are you getting ready for bed or do you have more homework?’” Arlen gave a bear-like grunt. “’Homework!’” He laughed. “In that situation, it works!”

“Absolutely! Yes/no questions aren’t inherently bad. But I think they’re misused if you want to prompt an open conversation.”

“Okay,” he said, giving my ideas some consideration. Then he asked. “What did you mean when you said that when you ask a yes/no question you put a chain around your own imagination?”

Yes/no's restrict

"Ah," I said. "Okay. As soon as I form the question 'do you understand' as a way of checking your understanding, I'm in essence inviting you to match me. The question is like a little test. I want to be sure your ideas align with mine. So I'm not really open to your ideas. I have a box in my head and I'm trying to fit you into it. I've limited my own thinking."

He pondered that a moment.

"Plus," I continued, "I've come to think of 'Do you understand?' as a false question."

"False how?"

"I've come to believe that no matter what you heard me say, you have *some* understanding of it. It's probably not the same as mine, but you have *your* understanding. So the question, 'Do you understand?' begins from a false premise."

"So what would be a better question to ask?"

I said, "'What's your understanding?'"

He nodded, then made a note.

I said, "I loved the story you told about your son. I learned a lot about asking questions with my girls, too. I always wanted to hear what they had to say, but it can be hard to get a kid to talk. So getting them to talk was great practice for me. And, no surprise, the same questions that kept my clients talking worked with them, too."

"Sneaky dad!" he said.

I laughed. "What can I say? But it's not like there's manipulation going on. I just wanted to hear what they had to say."

“Oh, yeah?” he said with a grin. “Then what was that about something going on in our brains? You were doing that with your daughters! A little puppet-master-ish, don’t you think?”

I laughed. “It’s not like I was going to get them to cluck like chickens. I just wanted them to keep talking. And, with all that practice, I’ve gotten pretty good at keeping people talking.”

“Do you have go-to questions?”

“I do!” I said.

“And you’re thinking I should use those with my direct reports?”

“Well, I wonder, if you did, would it create different conversations? Broader conversations, more like the ones I have with my clients.”

“And with your daughters.”

“Them, too!” I said.

“What’s that sound like?” he asked.

Inviting dialogue

“Suppose I tell you some information. A process, or a concept, or an upcoming event, or a deliverable. When I’m done, I want to know how you think about it. I’ll ask, ‘How does that sound to you?’ Or, ‘I wonder what that sounds like to you.’ And then I stop talking. I use ‘How does that sound to you?’ a lot. It’s a complete blank slate. The person can start their answer wherever they want.” I smiled. “The way people answer that question always surprises me.”

“Why?”

“Because whatever they say, I could never have imagined it.”

He repeated the question quietly. "'How does that sound to you?'" He smiled fondly. "That would've been the perfect question for me to ask Mark this past weekend." Mark was his husband.

He went on. "I told him an idea I had about some travel we have coming up, and I just couldn't tell if he was on board or not. I kept asking him, 'Do you like this part? Do you like that part?' But asking 'How does that sound to you?' might have been a better question to ask. What are your other go-to questions?"

"Well, sometimes I'll see someone thinking about an idea, and I'll just ask, 'What are you thinking?'"

"How can you be sure they're telling you the truth?"

"I can't. And if, for some reason, what they say doesn't feel right to me, I say something like, 'That's interesting. I thought you were going to say x, y, z.' And they can respond to that."

"So you're not asking about people's feelings?"

"No, I do sometimes," I said. "What made you think of that?"

"I've gotten feedback that I avoid talking about people's feelings. And I think I do. It feels kind of personal to me. I was wondering if maybe that would be another way to open up the dialogue."

"It might be. In my book, asking how someone feels about something is pretty much the same as asking how they think about something."

"Do you ask about both?" he asked.

"Not usually. I tend to ask about one or the other."

"How do you know which one to ask about?" he asked.

I smiled. "I follow the person's lead. Usually they will have said something like, 'Here's how I feel about that,' or 'Here's how I think about that.' I just use their language back to them."

He thought about that, then seemed to have a new thought. He asked. “Is that why they call them close-ended questions? Because when you ask one, it tends to close down the conversation?”

“And open-ended questions open a conversation up? Hm! That sounds reasonable! I don’t know if that’s the actual case, but I’m willing to go with it!”

At first Arlen was frustrated. Forming open-ended questions was much harder than he expected. But as he got better at it, he discovered they were powerful tools for achieving *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.

Core Concepts:

- Open-ended questions are not “better” than close-ended questions
- Close-ended questions land in our brains differently than open-ended questions
- Close-ended questions often prompt knee-jerk responses
- Forming open-ended questions often requires mindful attention
- Close-ended questions tend to limit the thinking of the asker and answerer

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