The Power of Dumb Questions

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I was listening to a friend and colleague today as she described the course of a “CI event” (continuous improvement meeting) she was asked to attend. Her short tale struck me as fairly common and ordinary, but she made a very profound observation. I’ll tell the short version.

The event was focused to solve a process problem with a scheduling system. Fundamentally, team members and project managers all knew that the dates in the system were bogus and they pushed them back by a month or more almost as soon as they were published. Yet, they were expected to put resource allocations into the system. The whole scenario described complete waste of expensive man-hours to produce useless information.

After a long discussion identifying more than 50 different ways the system was broken, the group sat there uncertain how to fix it, but not yet willing to abandon it altogether either. Finally, my friend spoke up. She asked, “What is the purpose of the system?”

The answer is that the system was to track and monitor resource loads and capacity and also to produce a deadline for completion of a function’s task. OK, so her next question was, “Do we know what the capacity is?” The answer to that question was less certain. She went on, “Do we understand the process flow?” (The flow dictates the resource demand and schedule, naturally.) She received a simple answer. “No.”

Now the team had something to attack; a simple and root-cause kind of something. Also the next step was obvious. They needed to either find the process and

understand it, or define it. They mapped the process, established the flow, and suddenly the resource demand versus capacity challenge, and the schedule nonsense became solvable with simple math.

Her profound observation was made to me in the form of a teasing outburst question. “Why is it that the only person in the room without hours-and-hours of process improvement training had to ask the dumb question to get us going?” She of course was referring to herself and her question, and teasing me by association as a process improvement guy with lots of training.

So, I confess. Her rather obvious questions were the key to breaking down the problem such that it could be attacked and solved. Also, I admit that often it is not the person with all of the process improvement training that alights on the issue at the heart of the problem.

Bottom line, it’s the dumb questions that often strike the heart of the matter and you don’t have to be a process expert, or an improvement expert, or a genius, to ask them. Those of us who are good problem solvers often boast a talent for knowing how to ask the right dumb questions.

So, here are some dumb questions that we can keep handy for the next time that the means to solve an issue isn’t readily apparent. Some of them are mine, some my friend volunteered as a result of our discussion, and some have been around for longer than any of us can recall.

- Why are we here?
- What’s the purpose?
- Why is it this way?
- How *should* it be?
- How do you know?
- What *really* happens?
- What do we know for certain?
- When does it occur?
- Can you draw me a picture?
- What does that mean?

Yes, those questions all look obvious and you are probably thinking, “really, Alan? You had to write those out?” Yes. I’ve said all along they are the dumb questions. They are the ones that we all assume that someone, somewhere along the line has already asked and answered, so we don’t because we don’t want to be the one asking “dumb” questions.

However, I propose that if we want to be the one that breaks the thought-blocks and unlocks the barriers so the problem can be solved, abandon pride and start asking the dumb questions. What we find is that when we ask just the right dumb question it isn’t dumb, it’s profound.

If you prefer a little more guidance and a little less shopping list, consider this.

Chances are that if you ask and answer all of the basics, who, what, where, when, why, and how, you will probably land upon the root issue. Use those to create your own dumb questions in the correct context of the problem.

By and large, all of our process improvement training in tools and techniques doesn't necessarily teach us how to be better problem solvers. They do give us a great many tools and methods to help, but basic problem solving remains a talent. Problems are solvable only when they are understood. Many times, that understanding comes when we ask simple questions.

The next time you are challenged with a problem, start with the simple W's and H questions. Forego the fancy tools until you understand the problem and know what to do to attack it. Don't waste time discussing and recording all of the complaints if you can help it. Those are usually outcomes or results. To solve the problem we must find the causes.

The so-called "dumb questions" are the ones that often lead us to the causes. That is what makes them so powerful. Don't be afraid to ask them. Instead, be the one who asks them and then solves the problem without any fancy tools if you can. There's nothing that says we have to be wasteful about our problem-solving approach.

Stay wise, friends.

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