

Want to Be a Better Lean Leader and Coach: Listen to Yourself

BY: David Verble

What do others hear when you talk to them about problems? You are trying to create an environment in which staff, peers and coachees are engaged in thinking with you about problems. But what do they hear when you speak? Does what you say invite others to think with you or does it mostly tell them what you think – and by implication what they should think? If this makes you curious about your own impact as a leader or coach how do you find out? Here is a self-check you can try:

The next time you are at a tier meeting or project review as a leader or the facilitator in a huddle or problem solving team meeting, audiotape yourself (you don't need video, just audio.) And you don't need special equipment. You can get an audio recording app on your phone. Most recent edition phones come with one installed. All you need to do is tell those in the session you are going to be recording yourself as a self-check, open the app, hit the start button and set you phone on the table near you or put it in your shirt pocket (you only need to record yourself) and forget about it until the session done.

Or, if someone comes to you to talk about a problem or you are coaching an employee or peer ask if it's okay to record the discussion. Be sure to explain it is for you to listen to later so you can be a better listener or coach. And you can learn even more by going back to the other person after you've listened to the recording to ask her or him how he or she experienced the discussion. If you are having trouble remembering the last time someone came to you to report a problem or to get coaching that may be data worth considering right there.

If you do get a record of recording of your questions and comments what do you listen for? Here are three questions you can ask yourself:

1. Do I ask questions?
2. What kind of questions do I ask?
3. What do I ask questions about?

Let's consider what to look for as you answer each question.

First, Do I ask questions? Of course you do, or you mean to... But do they come out as questions or statements. Do you tell when you mean to ask? We all do. It's simply in our nature. We tend to tell rather than ask in our rush to get to the answer or do what we "know" needs to be done even though we want to engage the other person and share the connection of accomplishing something together. We often state what we are thinking rather than ask what she or he knows or is thinking. That's how we are and we have to work hard at asking (and listening) rather than telling.

Second, let's say you do ask questions. What kind are they. Are they open-ended or closed and leading to what you believe is the situation or think ought to be done? Again our fundamental nature has a powerful influence. We want to share understanding with another person but rather than asking what he or she knows or thinks we end up trying to lead him or her to agreeing with what we

know or think. That's how a closed or leading questions works. It the other person's options for answering and forces him or her to react to the opinion, observation or idea we have in mind.

Sometimes we are completely upfront about and ask exactly what we want to do know, "We don't have time to complete this project do we?" Sometimes we're sneaky and cue or lead the person to the answer we want, "With so little time left I don't see any way we can complete the project on time, do you?" In both cases we're setting the other person up to react, to agree or disagree with what we think – not really asking what he or she think.

Third, let's go a step further and take a look at our "motives" when we do ask questions, even open questions. It's a matter of intent. What are we trying to learn when we ask question? Are we trying to confirm what we already know or think or are we sincerely opening the door to learning things we don't know or believe? Why is this important? Why does the intent behind our questions matter? The distinction is important because the other person can sense what we're doing. They can tell we are not sincerely interested in what he or she thinks. They understand we are just looking for agreement to what we think so we can get on with what we want to do.

Consider how that feels. It basically says your role is to agree and I don't have enough respect for what you might know and think to want to hear what it is. That comes through, it is sensed by the other person whether that's what we intended to communicate or not. It reduces the other person to an object we are using for our purposes. If you are in position with power (a leader) or with expertise (a coach) the other person will usually not disagree with you. But that does not mean they agree or are engaged or you are going to get willing support for what you want to or their best effort for what you want them to do.

When you are by yourself later listen to the recording and write down the first 15 to 20 (or more if you want) things that you say or ask. Then go through the items and consider the following about each one (you can code as you go if you want.):

1. If an item is a Statement, code it, "S." If it's a Question, code it. "Q."
2. If the item is a question, code it "O" if it is open-ended. Code it "L" if it is leading or closed (examples below.)
 - Leading or Closed Questions usually require a Yes or No answer – even if the person goes on to explain in his/her response.
 - Example: "*Have you seen how the blood samples are placed on the pickup cart?*" "Yes, I think some were lying down.
 - Open-ended Questions do not focus the other person on a specific aspect or idea about the Actual Place.
 - Example: "*What have you noticed about the cart where lab samples are left for pick up?*"
3. If the Question is based on what you think or assume about the situation, code it "M" (for me.) If it is seeking to learn what the other person knows or thinks, code it "H" (for her or him.)
4. Take a moment, step back and look at how your items are coded overall, then respond to the Reflection Questions that follow.

To help you reflect on your current habits as a leader or coach please estimate each of the following (*Mostly* means 60% or more.)

- Were your items mostly *Asking* or *Telling*?
- Were your questions mostly *Open-ended* or *Leading* (yes or no)?
- Were your questions based mostly on *what you were thinking* or *what you want to learn* about what the other person knew and was thinking?
- Did you mostly *confirm* things you already knew or thought or did you *learn* things you did not know?

If you are not entirely pleased with what you have learned don't be too hard on yourself. First, all it proves is that you are normal human beings. We tend to be "knowers" and act and interact with unquestioning faith in what we believe we "know." (And if we know what we need to know why would we seek to learn what others know?) Second, you can repeat the self-check process. This is just one sample. Try again paying attention to when you ask and when you tell and see how you do.

And third, if you want to try to shift your balance between telling and asking remember what you are dealing with. Habits might be called habits because they inhabit us. They are deeply engrained in our brain pathways and have minds of their own. They are a combination of default response and automatic pilot. They are useful because they don't take up conscious mind-share to operate. They are annoying when we want to change them because it takes a lot of conscious effort to "deprogram" ourselves by overriding the old automatic responses and creating the pathways for new ones. But it can be done. For some insight into the challenges and some possible techniques you might look at a 2012 book, **The Power of Habit**, by Charles Duhigg (Random House).