

Navigating the Hardest Leadership Transition

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Much has been written about transitions that are the most difficult to navigate over the course of a leader's career. From my experience, one transition has proven to be the hardest.

To illustrate, within the past couple of months, I have been coaching a young leader who is brilliant technically and mechanically, but he failed when he began supervising others. Another young leader at a different company struggled with this same transition and admitted, "I'm way too quick to solve everyone's problems and step in with a solution."

What is this most difficult leadership transition? It is the critically important shift from being "The Answer Guy" to becoming "The Question Guy." Over my 30-plus years as an executive coach, I have declared more often than any other statement, "You need to stop being the Answer Guy and start becoming the Question Guy!"

Who is the Answer Guy? Most leaders within an organization start their careers with a technical foot in an area like Engineering, Marketing, Human Resources, Operations, Finance, etc., and they become increasingly successful by generating answers to problems that they face. The more consistently effective they are at answering questions, the more quickly they are promoted to become a specialist in their area, and then a lead person, and then a supervisor. How do they continue to receive these promotions? By being the Answer Guy.

Being the Answer Guy becomes the foundation to their formula for career success and the approach continues to be effective right up to the point where they supervise their first direct report. Then, it starts to become a weight around the neck of their career. The weight stays there until either they recognize it and cast it off, or someone helps them realize the reason for the drag on their career progression. This is when the leader must transition to become the Question Guy.

Who is the Question Guy? Well, the Question Guy is the leader who has learned to ask good open-ended questions. What do open-ended questions accomplish for the new leader? When they ask a direct report questions like, "How do you think we should approach this problem?" or "What do you think is causing this bottleneck?", the response they get helps them recognize where the gaps are in the thinking of their direct report. Once they recognize the gaps, they can help them become more effective problem solvers, thereby fulfilling their most important role as a leader of others—to grow the people on their team.

What stops leaders from leaving the Answer Guy behind like an old article of clothing that no longer fits? They are too familiar and comfortable with the old approach and not at all sure how to be successful with a new approach. Like a floundering person adrift in the ocean, they cling to a familiar anchor, rather than set out in a new direction.

Once they let go of the old anchor, what causes leaders to fail in their transition to the Question Guy? Here are several stumbling blocks:

- Asking the wrong questions. When leaders ask questions like, "Why did you do this that way?" or "Didn't you see that this approach would lead to disaster?", these do not elicit dialogue. Instead, they come across as a new way to criticize and blame, and they shut down further thinking and growth in problem-solving.

- Asking the right questions, but then making people feel stupid for their answers. Though open-ended questions usually elicit lengthier responses, which help a leader understand how the direct report is processing and solving a problem, a sarcastic or blaming comment following a response will quickly teach the direct report that this is not a 'learning experience'.
- Asking an open-ended question, but not listening to the response, and then shifting back to the Answer Guy with the "right answer". Some leaders learn how to ask "how" and "what" questions, but jump in with the right answer immediately afterwards.

Whether you are new to managing others or a seasoned veteran, you probably could be more effective at being the Question Guy with your direct reports. Very few leaders ever make this transition completely. This is especially true when they are under stressful conditions, as there is a tendency to regress to the Answer Guy in such circumstances. If you're not sure you have successfully made this transition, ask your direct reports something like, "How am I doing at helping grow your problem-solving skills?" or "What could I do to better help you grow in your career?"...and then listen.