

“Why Young Managers should Question!!”



Weekly Learnings 20 / 2024

Last week I was in a meeting where senior managers were asking all kinds of unrelated questions. After the meeting I spoke to a few of the younger managers and asked them why they didn't speak up when they could have. They had a wide range of answers and I looked back at various situations to draw learnings on this:

1. Young managers are hesitant to question because they lack what they see as 'experience' effect of senior managers. This is something that comes from school and college where our method of teaching is top down experience led. Anyone who has studied in the US will remember that the first principle in a US class is to question or challenge the teacher and the class.
2. Young managers don't question because they are rarely asked for their opinion. The CEO according to them invariably chats with his direct reports even in a meeting. I remember in one company, a young manager asked a good question of the global CEO and believe it or not, he got a posting to the global HQ, just on the strength of that one question he asked!
3. Young managers are scared of being judged and want to phrase and ask the right 'intelligent' question. In a sense they want to ask the perfect question. There is no such thing as a perfect question. This holds them back.
4. Asking questions is a question of a curious mind. Journalists are taught to ask Why, What, Where, When, Who and How all the time. Asking questions is between two extremes - What if this happens and what if this doesn't happen? In between these two scenarios is a range of questions.
5. Going with the group flow is another reason for no questions. Robert Mc Namara the former secretary of defense, and ex World Bank head said that everyone in the US administration assumed that Vietnam will go the communist route and hence wanted to stop that. No one paused and asked, "Why should Vietnam become communist?"

So, what could young managers do?

a. Ask Clarification questions vs challenging questions. Sadly, people will see challenging questions as non-commitment. So, ask, "what will this mean for us?"

b. Seeking direction questions vs challenging direction questions. Senior management assumes direction is set in stone. so, ask, "what would you like me to do?"

c. Phrase it in the interests of the company and the team and not a "what's happening to me here" question. A 'me' question is read as 'insecurity" So, ask how this will impact the company and its position?"

d. Ride on the back of a question that someone else has posed with your data/ take on it. So add " I like the point made - my data on it is .."

I encourage young managers to ask more questions, but do it in a manner that shows that you are doing it in the best interests of all concerned. This is never easy in large organizations.

Asking good questions is a great way to build your personal brand, but you must come prepared!

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