

# CEO's success lies in questions, not answers

**The issue:** Need quick primer on managing people.

**The scenario:** I am the CEO of a small business with 11 employees. I'm the first to admit I am not great at managing people. Frankly, I haven't had the time to learn how. What practical techniques do you have that are simple to implement?



Doyle

**Coach:** Kelley Doyle.

Being an entrepreneur can feel isolating. Who do you go to when you have a question?

Borrow something from forward-thinking companies – ask questions rather than give answers to bring out the best in employees.

Asking good questions is a base skill for business and personal coaching that helps clients problem-solve and tap their own potential. While the skills of a professionally trained coach take years to master, you can learn the fundamentals to use questions with your employees, customers, vendors and partners to

strengthen the relationships and bring about better results.

The next time an employee comes to you with a question or problem, resist the urge to give an answer. Instead, ask good questions with three traits:

- Open-ended. Not a “yes” or “no” question. The question requires thought and explanation.

- Begin with “What.” “What” questions tend to look at the future while “why” questions point to the past. For example, “Why isn't this done?” is replaced with, “What do you need in order to complete this?”

- Silence. If you ask a good ques-

tion, expect a long pause before you receive a response. Resist the urge to break the silence.

Laurie Leonard is president of Suitel000, a Charlotte-based inbound sales and customer service call center for other companies. She is also a board member at Entrepreneurs' Organization. It was at her new-member training at EO where she learned the skill of asking good questions. She learned important lessons:

- Giving advice can be condescending. It can come across as an “I know better than you” attitude.

- Good questions = Insight. Questions led her to identify areas that needed operational improvement because she didn't jump to conclusions in her communication with employees.

- Employees can become self-directed when you ask a question versus telling them what they should do.

Leonard credits the “questioning” skill for increasing her sales-close ratio by 50 percent. “People need to come to their own conclusions. It is a process. You cannot pick them up at the beginning and drop them off at the

end,” says Leonard. People need the time and space to mentally get to their own conclusions to be genuinely “bought in.” It's human nature, so it's part of managing and selling.

Turn to a network of entrepreneurs, such as the EO in Charlotte ([www.eonetwork.org](http://www.eonetwork.org)). These owners or majority stakeholders have companies with gross sales exceeding \$1 million annually. It makes sense that entrepreneurs learn from other entrepreneurs.

The late management guru Peter Drucker told clients, “I'm not going to give you any answers, because there are always many different ways to approach problems, but I'm going to give you the questions you should ask.”

Scenarios addressed in the Career Coach column come from questions posed by members of the public, or from clients the coaches have advised.

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