

Being comfortable with "not knowing" at work

Two-work-related questions:

1. When was the last time you were engaged with a work-related issue and said, "I don't know."?
2. When was the last time you were engaged with a work-related issue and said, "I don't know.", and felt completely comfortable and at peace with "not knowing"?

We think we're supposed to know

In our life at work, we're expected to have the competencies, skills, "know-how" and capacities to carry out our jobs. We're expected to be able to perform well at what we're hired to do. We expect others to be able to do what they're hired to do.

But, what happens in instances when we're facing a dilemma, a conundrum, a challenge, a problem, an opportunity, or a circumstance when, in fact, we don't have an answer, when we "don't know"?

Most Western-culture workplaces operate as a function of the manta of "saving face", of having the "appearance of knowing" even when we don't the intention being that we need to demonstrate we are in control, we can prevent a disaster, we can do our job, we are capable. In our culture, we overemphasize how much we know.

So, the conflict often in our workplaces, "not knowing" is unacceptable; but, often in our workplaces, we actually don't know from time to time. Hmmm.

Defending against "not knowing"

When we don't know, however, most often our knee-jerk reaction is to "defend" ourselves in some way, shape or form - engaging in jargon or techno-babble to mask our unknowing, erecting a facade or fake image of knowing, inundating others with facts and figures to cloud the issue and muddy the already-murky waters, hiding out and avoiding the problem, feigning "exclusion" to justify our not knowing, seeking allies to support our unknowing, blame someone else all to mask our discomfort, fear, insecurity and uncertainty. To be in control and protect ourselves.

The upside of "not knowing"

In Eastern cultures, "not knowing" is a self-supporting, personal-developmental practice, even at work. In fact, "not knowing" is a practice that can actually bring one to be ever more effective at work. Welcoming a disturbance or a problem at work with a sense of "not knowing" is an opportunity for creativity and insight. The darkness of the unknown supports us to access our inner strength, our inner wisdom and higher self. Asking positive (not-fear-based, reactive) questions from a place of true curiosity at such times supports us to overcome our fear, uncertainty and doubt.

From a place of "not knowing," rather than allowing for fear, reactivity, and becoming defensive, "not knowing" allows us an opportunity to consciously slow down, "take a deep breath", delete our assumptions, misperceptions, misconceptions, misunderstandings, expectations, and personal "world-views" in order to "be" present in the moment, right here and right now without the intensity, irritation and agitation to "get somewhere else". "Not

knowing" is the difference between "allowing" something to happen and "making" something happen. "Not knowing" allows us to relax into our bodies and minds, to focus on the foreground and the background, to "see beyond our eyes", to jettison "my knowledge" and be curious about what I don't know. "Not knowing" is all about curiosity, the adventure of "finding out" from a place of "Hmmm. That's interesting. I wonder what that's all about."

"Not knowing" is about "punctuation", that is, more question marks and fewer periods. It's about curiosity, about being inquisitive not about ego, personality, blaming, judging and "being right." When we "don't know" we invite. We are open. We ask and observe. We watch and listen. We slow down. We give up our need to be "the expert." We "allow" life to unfold; we don't "make" life unfold.

So, rather than defending against "not knowing, we can now relax into "not knowing" as a part of who we are, knowing that it's a part of our everyday life at work and an opportunity to grow and learn something new about ourselves in the process.

So, two sets of questions:

Examples of questions one might ask when coming from a place of "not knowing:

- If there is a deeper reason for me/us to be here, what is it?
- What's important to me about this situation and why do I care?
- What's our/my intention here? What's the deeper purpose - the "big why" - that is worthy of our/my best effort?
- What question, if answered, could make the greatest difference to the future of the situation we're exploring here?
- Can we bring our full essence to this discussion?
- What stands in the way of each of us being fully present in this gathering?
- At what level do we want the conversations to begin?
- What draws us together?
- How much does the first person who speaks set the tone for the ensuing conversation?
- Can we/I by-pass some of the trust issues that normally keep us/me from opening up and move more quickly to deep conversations?
- Our team/unit/department/organization is lagging behind -- what might move them to a shift of awareness or consciousness?
- Can we/I step into the unknown?
- What images, symbols, key phrases (such as "I have a dream") might cause a shift?
- To what degree might it be possible for me to see the world/issue/problem through your eyes?
- What is keeping us/me from the necessary conversations?
- What am I hiding?
- Do I give myself permission to be fully myself?
- Does our "expertise" distract us from exploring the essence of the issue/question?
- Collectively, what are we letting go of?
- How comfortable are we (am I) with not knowing?
- What opportunities can we/I see in this situation?
- What would someone who had a very different set of beliefs than we/I do say about this situation?
- What's taking shape here? What are we hearing underneath the variety of opinions being expressed? What is in the center of our listening?
- What have you heard that had real meaning for you? What surprised you? What puzzled or challenged you? What question would you like to ask now?

- What is missing from the picture so far? What are we (am I) not seeing? Where do we need more clarity?
- What would it take to create change on this issue?
- What could happen that would enable you/us/me to feel fully engaged and energized in this situation?
- What's possible here and who cares about it?
- What needs our immediate attention going forward?
- If our success was completely guaranteed, what bold steps might we choose?
- How can we support each other in taking the next steps? What unique contribution can we each make?

and

questions for self-reflection:

- Is it OK, to "not know"?
- How do you feel when you "don't know" at work (at home or at play)?
- What behavior(s) do you engage in when you "don't know?" Do you ever "pretend" you do know?
- Do you feel you are always needing to "get somewhere" at work every day?
- Do you ever "allow" things to unfold at work as opposed to "making" things happen?
- Do you ever see "beyond your eyes"? (observe what's around you that you've never noticed before...crack in the ceiling, color/shapes of plants in the office, another's tone of voice, color of lights in the elevator, a client's usual way of talking or their body-language, softness of the carpet in your office, others' email signatures, pictures in the taxi, etc..)?
- What in life are you curious about? Have you explored further?
- Do you ever consciously "slow down" during your workday (your weekend?)
- Do you resist "not knowing?"
- What is one upcoming opportunity where you can practice "not knowing?"

In the interest of sustaining the life of your organization, which, after all, is not some nebulous entity, but rather, a living organism consisting of living and breathing cells, i.e., individuals like you.

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