

Reach Out and Ask Someone

By nature, leaders are decision-makers. The more influential the leader, the more consequential their decisions will be. Leaders are out in front because they have proven their ability to choose the appropriate course of action when faced with big decisions.

However, when a leader begins to rely solely on personal observation and intuition, that leader is headed for trouble. Even the wisest among us has a limited perspective, and we will miss important decision-making clues if we become entirely self-reliant.

In this edition of LW, I am indebted to the brilliant thought of Dr. Saj-nicole A. Joni in her book, *The Third Opinion*. An extremely well-written text, *The Third Opinion* makes the case for the value of outside insight to the performance of a leader. In her book, Dr. Joni identifies four signs that the time is right to consult decision-making advice.

- When multiple decisions need to be made, and you don't have the required amount of time to focus fully on each one.
- When the implications of the decision are far-reaching, and you know your organization will be in serious trouble if you don't do the right thing.
- When you lack the expertise to tackle the issue on your own, regardless of whether you have the time.
- When you are capable of taking action, but you know the decision will be better off if you consult the experiences and insights of someone else.

As a leader, once you've determined to seek advice, how do you go about doing it? How can you most effectively glean insights from the thinking of advisors?

To Successfully Engage Others to Gain Insight Requires ...

1. The Security of the Leader
2. The Credibility of the Process
3. The Quality of the Questions
4. The Ability of the Team

The Security of the Leader

Advice is seldom welcome, and those who need it most like it least.

-- Dr. Samuel Johnson

Leaders can be stubborn when it comes to seeking advice. Insecure leaders who worry about their status, position, or power tend to reject the ideas of others, protect their turf, and keep people at bay. It takes a secure leader to admit their assumptions may be wrong, or to defer to the expertise of another.

Secure leaders routinely practice simple, but essential exercises to benefit from the advice of others. They create an environment where it's safe to voice any opinion, regardless of its popularity. They listen, and they consult others with a genuine desire to learn and to broaden their vision. Secure leaders are willing to be wrong. They defer to the strength of an idea regardless of who the idea came from. Finally, leaders share the spotlight when a decision is successful and take the blame when it fails. By doing so, they earn the trust of advisors and keep the channels of communication open for future dialogue.

The Credibility of the Process

He that is taught only by himself has a fool for a master.
— Ben Johnson

The decision-making process unravels when the leader gravitates toward either of two extremes: refusing everyone's advice or accepting everyone's advice. Ignoring the advice of others results in a dictatorial leader who is limited by the confines of their own perspective. Accepting all advice leads to paralyzing groupthink, devoid of the critical thinking necessary to weed out poor or unrealistic ideas.

A wise leader builds a climate of shared thinking in which all opinions are welcome, but each is closely scrutinized before being accepted. Such a leader buys into the slogan, "none of us is as smart as all of us." Shared thinking sparks innovation by opening multiple avenues for creative ideas rather than locking into ideas in the mind of a single leader. Shared thinking also gives ideas a chance to mature as they are polished and expanded in the sphere of team discussion.

The Quality of the Questions

When you stop wondering you might as well put your rocker on the front porch and call it a day.
— Johnny Carson

Perhaps, the hardest part of leadership is to keep sustained focus on essential topics and data above the urgent, immediate needs. When too much of the workday becomes urgent, leaders are sidetracked from following a central vision and career aimlessly from crisis to crisis.

Leaders devote their most precious resource—unscheduled time—to the most important issues affecting the organization. They purposefully reflect and inquire about opportunities that hold the greatest potential to yield highest returns over time. The gravitational force of the workday gives immediate tasks too much pull. In the absence of careful planning, leaders will become starved for time.

The Ability of the Team

In seeking someone for advice, one of the biggest temptations is to assume that a person who verbalizes well also analyzes well. It's not true. Good talkers aren't always good thinkers.
— Fred Smith

Wisdom isn't in the multitude of voices – it's in listening to the right one. To maximize the value of shared thinking, leaders place people around the table who bring something to the table. As you prepare to ask people to participate in shared thinking, use the following criteria for the selection process. Choose...

- People whose greatest desire is the success of the ideas.
- People who can add value to another's thoughts.
- People who can emotionally handle quick changes in the conversation.
- People who appreciate the strengths of others in areas where they are weak.
- People who understand their place of value at the table.
- People who possess maturity, experience, and success in the issue under discussion.
- People who will take ownership and responsibility for decisions.
- People who will leave the table with a "we" attitude, not a "me" attitude.

Too often, leaders select brainstorming partners based on feelings of camaraderie, circumstances, or convenience. To discover and create ideas of the highest order, the people invited to the table of thought make all the difference.

Let's recap. Leaders remove the lid of limited perspective from their leadership when they consult the insight of others. To successfully engage others to gain insight requires...

1. The Security of the Leader
2. The Credibility of the Process
3. The Quality of the Questions
4. The Ability of the Team