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Yeadon-Lee, Annie

Book Review: Leading with questions- How leaders find the right solutions by knowing what to ask – M.J Marquardt 2014

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Leading with questions- How leaders find the right solutions by knowing what to ask – M.J Marquardt 2014, Jossey-Bass.

Revans postulated that the essence to learning was not about finding the right answer, but finding the right question, thus, illustrating the power and importance of understanding how and what to ask, when attempting to obtain a deeper understanding of any particular issue. This book does exactly that; it directly addresses the concept of questions and our ability to both ask and avoid asking questions.

The book is structured in three distinct, but interconnected, parts. The first two sections address the notion of questions in a very broad sense. The final section considers when and how to ask questions, taking both a very contextual and practical stance. The section is concluded with a discussion of how action learning fits into this process.

Section one explores the powers of questions, seeing questions as an underused management tool for a number of differing reasons. Notable examples from history, essentially the both the Titanic and Challenger disasters and the Bay of Pigs are discussed here. The examples serving to illustrate both the power and complexity of asking challenging questions that often run counter to dominant thought. Questions of this nature, should someone be brave enough to ask them, risk disharmony often resulting in the questioner being viewed unfavourably. However, ultimately, in the examples cited, these questions have the potential to avoid the disastrous consequences of group think, organisational politics and individual power struggles. This leads into a discussion of the benefits of a questioning culture within organisations, underpinning the preceding message.

Section two addresses the issue of how to ask questions effectively. Here the author discusses why individuals have difficulty with asking challenging questions, citing a variety of differing examples that range from a lack of skills in asking the questions to corporate cultures that positively discourage questions, especially those that challenge existing assumptions and policies. The examples cited will resonate with most readers. Building on section one, Marquardt then illustrates how to develop a questioning culture within organisations, offering practical examples.

Section three is a very comprehensive section that offers advice on when and how to ask powerful questions in differing organisational contexts. Contexts include managing people, building teams, solving problems and finally, shaping strategy and enabling change. It offers pragmatic advice and illustrates differing perspectives through the experience of notable leaders in industry. The latter part of this section takes a very practical stance. This section includes the biographies of the leaders interviewed throughout the book, crafting a strong connection with action learning and illustrating the importance of asking the right question in the action learning set.

One of the strengths of this book is the practical perspective taken, which is aptly supported by the theoretical domain. Marquardt is able to demonstrate the differing facets of questions, in particular the notion of questioning insight and insightful questions that empower individuals to reflect critically on their actions. Through the use of vignettes from interviews with thirty differing leaders, the author is able to offer richness to the debate. Each chapter culminates with questions for reflection, reminding the reader of the specific knowledge that Marquardt sees as being important, presenting a real contextual benefit? Not sure - for questions or for the reader? Finally, each chapter is supported by a very comprehensive bibliography that demonstrates a range of differing resources and perspectives used in that chapter.

The only down side of the book is that the leaders interviewed are more recognisable to a US audience. However, this does not detract from the richness of the dialogue and the subsequent opportunity for learning for a non-US audience.

The book is useful for differing audiences for managers and leaders it acts as a form of contextual advice that facilitates vicarious learning through self-reflection on action. In the case of the action learning practitioner, it offers a 'how-to' approach to questioning in the action learning set. From the presenter's perspective, 'what should I ask and know of myself?' From an enabler's perspective, 'what can I ask the presenter that will bring clarity to their issue?' Finally, from a facilitator's perspective, 'what types of questions encourage individuals to think deeper about themselves and their actions?'

In summary, the book is a worthwhile and very engaging read.