

UNLOCKING SUCCESS

STEVE JACOBS

Clearing obstacles

The one question a business leader needs to ask — and act on

The questions you ask matter. And one of the most powerful, practical things a leader can ask is, “What’s getting in the way?”



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Few questions impact performance like this one. By understanding the obstacles, you can reconfigure in real time the actions planned to achieve key strategic priorities. And there is always something getting in the way, which means there is always something that can be improved.

Assuming the best

Many leaders don’t think to ask what’s getting in the way, nor do they encourage others to do so.

They either assume they already know the big answers, or they’re not inclined to ask, since identifying obstacles potentially means more work.

When leaders do inquire into the obstacles their employees face, they often fail to take meaningful action despite the best of intentions.

Collaborating with staff

At one large transportation unit, managers tried to get staff to schedule all runs two days in advance to maximize efficiency, but teams weren’t coming close to meeting the target.

When leaders explored the obstacles, they found many employees resisted the goal because they judged it as unrealistic — in some cases last minute scheduling of transportation saves money and is “smart business.”

After candid discussion, managers and employees agreed to 80 percent as a goal. Performance skyrocketed. Costs fell by a third over 12 months, resulting in \$250 million in savings.

Or, consider a manufacturing plant that struggled to get employees to perform

routine checks on machinery.

Leaders who asked, “What’s getting in the way?” discovered managers had historically reprimanded employees for “loitering” on the job. Employees now feared that stopping to listen to and observe the equipment would be seen as “standing around.”

Collaborative inspections accompanied by expressions of appreciation eased fears, encouraging workers to routinely perform the checks. The plant lowered the equipment failure rate, reaping significant savings.

Mitigating your obstacles

To identify and handle obstacles, try the following:

- **Pose the question.** Since you don’t necessarily know what you don’t know, ask.
- **Clarify responsibilities.** People tend to push the buck upward, assuming “someone up there” has the authority. Work to empower those at the lowest possible level to take action.
- **Follow up and follow through.** If you already have a project management tracking system, use it to monitor progress towards removing barriers. Also, get involved personally when appropriate.
- **Identify and remove obstacles regularly.** Work it into staff meetings as a standing agenda item.

Asking, “What’s getting in the way?” might seem burdensome, but it’s worth it. By seeking out and solving obstacles, you’ll boost performance and set yourself above managers who assume they already know the relevant problems.

It all boils down to this truth: Asking what others don’t ask lets you notice what others don’t notice, do what others don’t do and ultimately, achieve what others don’t achieve. ●



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