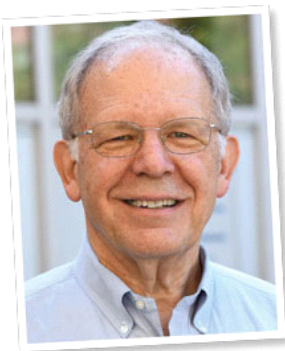


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## Three Powerful Words

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History will judge the autocratic decisions to invade Ukraine or overnight end China's COVID lockdowns. One person drove each decision, with minimal input from advisors who could have foreseen the disastrous results. These leaders had different motivations and goals from those they led. Autocratic rule got immediate action and a focused "workforce," but at what cost to their respective populations and future credibility?

Autocratic execs, like Bill Gates or Elon Musk, have taught us that leaders must be all-knowing and committed to their vision. To them winners neither waiver nor hesitate. Those who show caution or consensus are seen as weak or uncommitted.

Leaders who drive their organizations by sheer will power and personality may build interesting organizations, but only time will tell if they've built long-lasting and resilient teams.

When needing more information, effective leaders use these three powerful words, "I don't know." Rather than showing weakness or ignorance, this phrase acknowledges that leaders aren't the only ones with insight and begs input from the team.

Successful leaders build teams that can carry on when the leader departs. By seeking input, the leader builds confidence in the team to produce the right questions and the best answers. "I don't know" isn't an admission of weakness; it's a statement of the leader's desire to make the best possible decisions.

The first step in solving any problem is defining that problem, consistent with stated visions and values. This requires fully open minds. What's the underlying problem with a lack of sales? It isn't the sales dip. It's the factors that caused below-expectation sales. This could be myriad factors—parking, staffing, product availability, pricing, competition, etc. Defining the challenge(s) is the first step. Asking the wrong questions delivers the wrong answers.

"I don't know" might be followed by three other powerful words, "Will you help?" Leadership encourages and requires the team to respond in a non-threatening and conversational manner.

It's critical to keep the conversation civil and non-judgmental. Basic brainstorming technique includes the free flow of wild concepts without condemning the idea or the speaker. A leader ensures the extrovert doesn't overpower the conversation so the introvert's ideas can be heard.

It's also critical to make sure "groupthink," where everyone agrees to the first idea presented, doesn't take over. You're looking for the best solution, not necessarily the first one offered. A mix of ideas and perspectives will craft

the most ideal result. No one should take any comment personally. A criticism of the current culture or practice is one person's observation. Respect it. Don't attack it.

Frequently a new team member asks, "Why do we do things this way?" New eyes may see problems we don't. By creating an environment where new hires are uncomfortable asking "dumb questions," we lose the ability to see ourselves through fresh, unbiased eyes.

Time is the enemy of collaborative decisions. Too much discussion can lead to "paralysis by analysis." The leader must set a schedule and follow it so the company can continue to function. Carefully select which topics need input. Which are best to decide now and move on?

Sometimes group sessions require tough love. Businesses aren't democracies. Even employee stock ownership companies (ESOPs) don't vote on corporate decisions. ESOPs elect a board of directors who hire management and give advice when asked, but they expect management to make the final decisions and direct implementation.

Solutions must be practical and implementable. Everyone could have great ideas individually, but not every idea can be in the final product. No person is right or wrong. It's a question of how the overall solution can be effectively and efficiently implemented.

When you're faced with a new challenge, consider saying, "I don't know" and "Will you help?" When you're open to innovative ideas, you'll find there are options you overlooked. As a bonus, the education your team gets from the discussion will build their confidence in themselves. **GP**

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*Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at [wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com](mailto:wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com) or (609) 731-8389.*