

Leaders Often Shun Advice from Staff

By Michael Laff

Employees at the bottom rung will wait a long time before being asked for an opinion about solving a problem, according to a recent survey.

CO2 Partners, a Minneapolis-based executive coaching organization, found that one-third of 599 employees surveyed are seldom or never asked their opinions about how to handle a problem in the office.

At first glance, the results appear more encouraging than expected. Gary Cohen, president of CO2, acknowledges that if the survey question was more direct, the results might have been more daunting.

According to Cohen, if the question had specified how often supervisors ask their staff for advice on significant problems, even fewer would have answered "often" or "occasionally."

"Intuitively you know it's not happening. It's sad because the isolation runs both ways," he says.

Managers' failure to consult staff members is symptomatic of a larger flaw: Leaders are failing to ask questions regularly. Cohen calls it a "John Wayne syndrome," whereby managers are afraid to show the slightest sign of uncertainty or weakness for fear that it leaves them vulnerable to a challenge or might lead to a lack of trust.

As expected, the lower one's education or salary status, the less he was asked for advice by the boss. Women were ignored slightly more than men. Age did not register as a significant factor regarding the frequency of being consulted.

"They think someone's brain dead just because that person is doing a manual job," he says. "Part of it is stereotyping, but it also demonstrates a lack of understanding of human capital."

When Cohen asked a class of entrepreneurs about consulting staff members,

many class participants reasoned that staff members who do not possess a college education could not possibly offer constructive direction about how to complete a task.

"My response was: 'They spend eight hours a day doing something and you know more about their job than they do?'" he says.

Cohen also forecasts a potential clash between the current generation of managers who believe that what they don't know isn't worth exploring and the next generation of information carnivores, bred on the Internet, who will go from being completely unaware about a particular subject to experts simply by devouring all available online information.

Using prominent executives as a case study, Cohen conducted the survey in preparation for a book he is writing about effective leadership.

When interviewing one of former GE chairman Jack Welch's direct reports, Cohen learned that Welch was relentless in questioning his own staff members and never told them what to do. His aim was to get that employee to see possible solutions on his own. When Jeffrey Immelt, Welch's successor, was asked what he learned most about the job, his reply was "asking really good questions." The primacy placed upon asking pointed questions illustrates how Welch "moved the culture at GE," Cohen says.

Another executive Cohen profiled was Mike Harper, former CEO of food giant ConAgra. In similar fashion, Harper questions staff members in rapid fire without giving direct orders because he wants the employee to take accountability for her decision making.

Michael Laff is an associate editor for T+D; mlaff@astd.org.

The BIG Number

33%

of employees surveyed say their bosses seldom or never ask them for advice.

>>How often does your boss ask for your advice on solving a problem at work?



Seldom/Never	32.6%
Often/Occasionally	62.6%
Don't know	3.9%



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