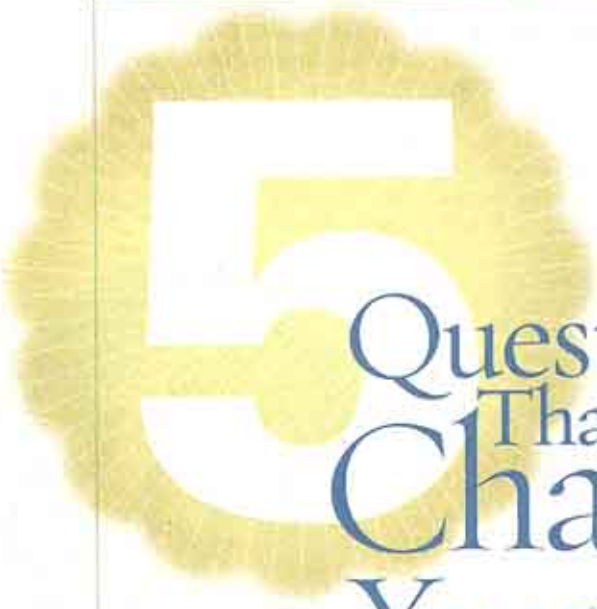


Guideposts

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YOU CAN'T AFFORD NOT TO ASK YOURSELF



5 Questions That Will Change Your Life

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I'VE SPENT THE PAST 20 YEARS OF MY life working as a consultant to corporations that want to run with more efficiency and harmony. I meet with executives and tell them the key to success—in life as well as the workplace—is personal responsibility. And, I tell them, I learned the hard way. A long time ago, when I'd just started my career, my boss called me into his office.

"Sit down, John," he said. "I know you've been expecting a raise, and I wish I could give you one. But, honestly, your performance has been, well, mediocre."

I left his office disappointed. But when I'd thought about it, I found myself wondering, *Well, was he right? Did I really deserve a raise?* Soon that question led to others, and before long I began to peel back all the layers of my thinking. It was

true. I had done a mediocre job that year. Now the issue was how could I do better. Eventually, that led me to discover the questions that ultimately changed my life, and can change yours—by helping you take personal responsibility not just for your failures but more important, for your successes. Are you willing to change? If so, then ask yourself these five questions.

How can I be a good leader?

I HAD JUST FINISHED A PRESENTATION for a Fortune 500 company. The CEO shook my hand, then took his turn at the microphone. He made some opening remarks, then started his PowerPoint display. Splashed up there on the screen in huge letters was **Personal responsibility begins with YOU!** Uh-oh. He'd missed my point by only one word, but he'd also missed it by a mile. Personal responsibility does not begin with you. It begins with me. That's why it's *personal*.

There was a company president who happened to look out his office window one day at quitting time. He saw an employee go out of his way to pick up

some trash. It wasn't one of the maintenance staff. The president took note of his car and found out who the employee was. Then he called the employee in. "Anyone who's willing to pick up trash so that this company's parking lot looks better has our best interests at heart," the president said. In that simple act of picking something up, he saw a potential leader. That employee was promoted to management on the spot.

Baseball fans know that when the first baseman comes in to field a ground ball, the pitcher covers first. Why? It's not his job. He's there to pitch the ball! But a good pitcher doesn't think like that. As



soon as his teammate is drawn away, it *becomes* his job to cover first. A company where people think like that won't say, "Oh, that's so-and-so's job" or "You need to talk to Marketing about that." Instead, they tear down the walls be-

tween divisions, saving time and energy. And creating a happy workplace. Actions *do* speak louder than words. Good leaders are people who set a good example. They lead by doing, not just telling.

What can I do to make a difference?



MOST OF US WANT OUR LIVES TO count for something. Face it, none of us have the answers to all of the world's problems. But it is in our power to, as Mother Teresa used to say, "Do small things with great love."

One time, for example, I ducked into a busy restaurant for lunch. There wasn't a single table available, so I sat at the bar. A waiter rushed by with a tray full of dirty dishes. He saw me and said, "I'll be right with you." He came back and told me, "This isn't my section, but I don't want to keep you waiting." He took my order, which included a Diet Coke. "We don't carry that, sir," he said.

I told him that a glass of water would be just fine.

Minutes later he appeared with my food, then rushed back to his section.

He showed up again with a surprise. An ice-cold bottle of Diet Coke! "Where did this come from?" I asked.

"There's a grocery store around the corner," he told me.

"But you're running around like crazy. How did you find the time to go get it?"

"I didn't, sir," he said. "I asked my manager to go!"

What terrific service! It would have been easy for him to grumble and think, *Why do I have to do everything around here?* But he hadn't.

I went back to that same restaurant two months later. I asked for my favorite server. "He doesn't wait tables anymore," I was told. "They promoted him to management." I wasn't surprised. He'd been willing to do the small things that often lead to big results.

How can I help others achieve their goals?



IN 1986 A MAN NAMED JIM STRUTTON hired me to recruit people for courses in leadership and sales. My first assignment: Round up 20 sales managers for a five-hundred-dollar, two-day workshop. I only managed to get nine people to commit.

The first day of the workshop, we set up the room and waited for our students. Jim turned to me. "You know what, John?" he said. "I see twenty."

"Twenty what?"

"Twenty people in this class."

Why was he sticking a knife into me so cruelly? "Jim, you know I only sold nine."

"I know," he said. "But I see twenty because I know *you* can do it."

Our next workshop was held two months later. Again, Jim insisted I would be able to get 20 people. Instead, I sold 16. "I see twenty, John," Jim said again. "I know *you* can do it."

And I did. Over the next two years I never had a class with fewer than 20. Sure, I needed to believe in myself. But I needed more. Someone who would transfer his belief *in me to me*. Jim didn't say, "I doubt you'll do well, but give it a shot." Instead of being negative, he encouraged me. And, in so doing, he ensured I would succeed.



How can I do my best?

NOBODY IS A FINISHED PROJECT. I learned that thanks to David, a fellow I met a few years back after I spoke to his company. He came up to me before the banquet and awards part of the event and said, "Great stuff! Have you written a book?" I told him I had one in the works. "I can hardly wait for that. If I could

reread your ideas, I could apply them to my life even better. I've got lots of room for improvement!"

An hour later I watched as David was presented with an award for being top salesperson of the year. I knew why. He'd shown me that he was constantly trying to improve himself.

Let me take you back to that restaurant where I got my Diet Coke. The waiter-turned-manager was named Jacob. He'd gone to his manager and asked her to go

get me my drink. She said yes right away. The important thing is what she *didn't* say: "Wait a minute, buddy. Who works for whom around here?" The restaurant was packed, Jacob couldn't leave, a customer needed satisfaction. She went to the store and bought my soda. She and Jacob had worked *together* to do their best.

How can I change me?

ONE DAY MY WIFE, KAREN, SAID, "I'm going to a marriage counselor, and I think you should come."

Whoa! Three days later we sat in the counselor's office, looking like two boxers in opposite corners. *Who is this guy? What could he teach me?* Then he introduced himself and talked a bit. I found myself relaxing, and thought, *He could really help Karen.*

No wonder my wife dragged me into counseling. I'd fallen into that trap of thinking my marriage would be better if my wife tried harder. But what about me? Sure, I was on the road a lot. Okay, the rare occasions I was home, I was preparing my next presentation or too exhausted to do anything. "I'm just trying to make a good living for you and the kids," I'd say. But that's a tired old dodge. My job wasn't to make a living; it was to make a life. For my family. Which meant changing the way I did

things. As Jesus taught, we'd be better off removing the beam from our own eye than worrying about the speck in someone else's.

How can I change me is the toughest question of all. But the most important step in embracing the concept of personal responsibility is the willingness to change how you think. And thinking about others first is the ultimate act of personal responsibility. Of all the questions we can ask ourselves, this is the most important because we're all more willing to change others than to change ourselves. I have my own version of the Serenity Prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change, the courage to change the one I can, and the wisdom to know...it's me."

It's been a long time since that day my boss didn't give me a raise. He gave me something better—a chance to ask myself what I was willing to do about it. ■

