

Asking the Right Questions

Andy Stanley

I have a friend I spend a lot of time with, but he doesn't know me. If you asked him what was going on in my life, he would have a hard time answering. The reason is simple; he doesn't ask questions. I know all about him. I could tell you about his hopes and dreams, because when we're together, I ask him questions. And that simple tale of a somewhat disinterested friend embodies a valuable principle.

In our lives, in our families, in our churches, questions accomplish two critical things. They reveal values and they reinforce values.

They *reveal* what matters. Questions tear through all the clutter and get at the heart of what we care about, what's crucial to our day, and what we're ultimately invested in.

They *reinforce* what matters. They keep us focused on what's critical. They keep us talking and monitoring the core values on which our families and churches are built.

But how do you know which questions to ask? How do you move beyond, "Did it get done? How did it go?" As leaders, one of the greatest things we can do for our teams is to attach the right questions to the things we do. Why? As great leaders have noted for decades, what gets measured gets done, and what gets rewarded gets repeated. It's impossible to measure or reward if you're not asking the right questions and getting the right information. We all need to develop questions we ask repeatedly.

When it comes to asking the right questions, there are three areas in particular that leaders should focus on. As you read the following, ask yourself what questions *you* need to be asking your team members.

Organizational questions

- *Which gauges should we be watching?*

We're all familiar with gauges. Gauges are designed to help us anticipate and avoid breakdowns. In our cars, they show us how much fuel we have or if our engines are overheating. And although we might not stare at them when we're driving, we keep our eyes on them and understand the role they play. Same with your church; you have to determine which gauges to monitor.

You need to identify three or four gauges to watch. Attendance is an obvious one. As a church, there will always be a need to know that particular number. But if we laser in on attendance and ignore everything else, we'll get such a small picture of the real health of our churches. I encourage you to dig deeper and think about things like: *How many leaders vs. apprentices do we have in our ministries? How many seasoned leaders are helping vs. newcomers that need help?* As you find the correct gauges, you'll discover that they help monitor health as well as growth.

- *Where are we manufacturing energy?*

Is there a ministry area where you have to pretend a little bit? An area where the excitement has died and although you're still doing it, you're not really invested in it? This question quickly exposes dying or dead areas in your church, giving you the opportunity to fix them or kill them. It's that simple. Don't continue to ignore them. The attitude of "we do it that way because we've always done it that way" doesn't benefit anyone.

Staffing questions

- *Who needs to be sitting at the table?*

You make better decisions when you have the right people at the table. Period. Cut through the red tape and the org chart and ask, "Whose input do I need to make the best decision possible on this issue?" Who is going to feed valuable input into the decisions you're facing?

As you ask this question, you'll learn that all people are not created equal. We all have different skills and experiences. I can't dunk a basketball, and I've accepted that. I've found that there are two broad groups of people: initiators and completers. There are people you'll want to brainstorm with, but they would be horrible participants in the "get it done" meeting. Other team members thrive on completion. Understand who on your team fits within those groups and make sure they are at the right tables at the right times.

- *Who is not keeping up?*

This is a painful question to ask. I don't like to ask this question. This isn't about bad people or spirituality. It's just that, every once in a while, as your organization hits 60 mph, you'll have to ask who is still moving at 45 mph.

As painful as this question is, the truth is that other people in your church already know the answer. They are wondering if you know. If you don't identify the problem, you'll work around those 45 mph people and maybe even keep them locked in positions that are wrong for them.

Professional questions

- *Where do I make the greatest contribution to the church?*

Where do you add the most value? How do you get to a place where you are only doing what only you can do? The goal is to spend the majority of your time doing the things that add the greatest contribution. The reality is that as your church gets bigger and more complicated, it will be harder to ask this question and more difficult to deal with the answer. As organizational layers expand and new positions are added, more time and energy will be required to identify the areas where your contribution is most needed.

- *What should I quit doing?*

Are there things you're doing that you need to stop doing—right now? Things you're not good at? Things that other people are better at? There might even be things you're doing just because you enjoy doing them, but they don't add value. And you have to make the tough decision to quit doing them.

Asking these questions or your own questions that get at the heart of your leadership and church are really about doing a check-up. They're about finding out and fixing what's really going on. Sometimes, the temptation is to not ask these questions, and instead simply add more people or more processes to what you're doing. But if you can ask the right questions, if you can get the right people at the table, and if you can make sure you're doing the things individually that add the greatest value, you and your entire team will be better for it.