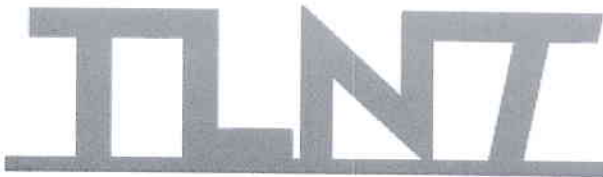


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HR INSIGHTS, LEADERSHIP

The ONE Question Managers Must Answer — Correctly

by  [Dianna Booher](#) on Apr 16, 2015, 7:00 AM | [0 Comments](#)

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As a manager, you hear questions every day.

Some are serious; some trivial.

“What do you hear about the merger plans?” “Is our budget being cut?” “Can we get an extension on the deadline?” “Are we going to have to work over the weekend?”

But the ONE question that you have to answer correctly every time is this:

“What are you working on?”

And it's particularly critical that you get the answer right when responding to your boss. Your reputation can also suffer when you blow that question with peers.



Why is this so difficult?

For the most part, you and your team need to communicate details to run your project, department, or division. For that, you need charts, graphs, slides, spreadsheets, meetings, presentations, proposals, metrics, or reports.

You accomplish things with these tools, and the associated data and details make perfect sense to

you. The abbreviations, acronyms, illustrations, and other shortcuts save you time and ensure a common understanding.

So you have a tendency to try to communicate with those same tools and in that same fashion to those outside your functional area.

But don't. That jargon, those communication tools, and that level of detail won't make sense to people on the outside. They'll likely conclude that you don't know how to synthesize, summarize, and interpret how your work contributes to the big picture.

Granted, habits are difficult to break. But they can hinder communication and halt your career growth.

So how should you answer that ONE question?

Put aside your complicated tools. Forget how much effort you've put into digging out the details. Time spent does not equal value created. Instead, focus on these few things to answer the big question:

- **Part 1:** We're working on solving X problem(s).
- **Part 2:** Here's why it matters to the organization
- **Part 3:** Here are the outcomes we're working toward
- **Part 4:** (Optional — depending on who asked the question) This is how the work may affect the budget and timeline where you're concerned....

How do you educate those outside your functional area?

You shouldn't, and you don't.

If you do, you'll be irrelevant. While coaching sales teams on presentations, I frequently hear comments like these, "*We have to educate our customers on our product*" or "*Our customers really don't understand how best to use our process and the services we provide, so our real challenge is to educate them on exactly what it is we do.*"

If you do that "education" thing, you're going to be labeled "irrelevant." As I put it to salespeople: That's like saying, "We need smarter customers." Very few customers are going to agree with you on that.

Ditto with internal customers. They don't want to be "educated" about what you're doing. They want you to be educated about what they're doing and then translate what you're doing for them.

So what's your REAL job as a manager?

Always be translating: “So what that means for you (for the organization, for our customers) is ...”

That’s relevance.

That’s your key responsibility as a leader. Sift through and analyze the details, data, and metrics that you need for your functional role. Then draw some conclusions. But never pass on the raw details.


Your real job as a manager is to communicate clearly an answer to this ONE question: “**What are you working on?**” And make them care.

This was originally published on Dianna Booher’s blog at www.BooherResearch.com.

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