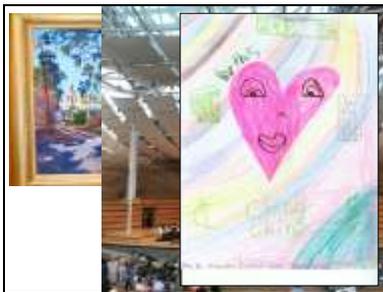


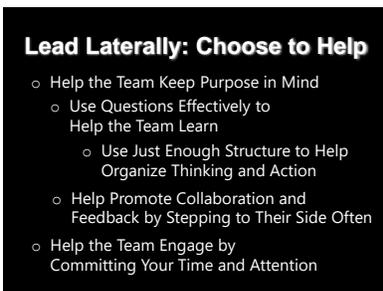
Practicing the Art of the Question



“Practice the art of the question” became one of two lateral leadership principles in my book, *Seeing Excellence: Learning from Great Procurement Teams* (2013). This presentation explains why.



Why “art” of questioning? Questions like more traditional art can evoke various responses, emotional and otherwise. The *Art in Procurement Manual* story from chapter 10 of *Seeing Excellence: Learning from Great Procurement Teams* ([and expanded on LinkedIn Pulse](#)) illustrates the power of art in an unusual context: kids competing in a Request for Posters project to have their artwork used in the county procurement manual. County commissioners sought it out!



When I completed my three-year project of writing *Seeing Excellence: Learning from Great Procurement Teams*, effective use of questions became one of the principles of lateral leadership and a recurring theme throughout the book. These principles built on another terrific book that introduced me to lateral leadership: Roger Fisher and Alan Sharp, *Lateral Leadership: Getting It Done When You Are Not The Boss, 2nd Ed.* (London: Profile Books, 2009), originally published under the title *Getting It Done: how to lead when you're not in charge* (New York: Harper Business, 1998).

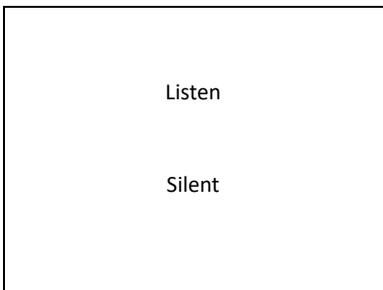


Keeping purpose in mind cemented itself as the central principle. The gyroscope became my visual metaphor for purpose and the need to keep at continuous improvement. Like a gyroscope, teams that don't continually focus on purpose lose their orientation.



I once heard, we were given two ears and one mouth for a reason. Listening is the critical companion to questioning. "Ask, don't tell" was the personal motto of Frances Hesselbein, former CEO of the Girl Scouts of the U.S.A.

But you can't just listen. Like Peter Senge said, team or organization execution requires a healthy balance between advocacy and inquiry.



I credit this slide to my sister, a primary school counselor. What do these two words have in common? Is there a lesson here?

How will we know we succeeded?

I heard this question used effectively in a planning meeting involving various stakeholders, government and community. It is a powerful way to focus both on purpose and possible measurements or other indicators of progress and success.



What was a procurement experience that worked well?
What from that experience can we learn about the procurement system today?
What would the procurement system be like if it were perfect?

Apart from purpose, the second thread that weaves its way through *Seeing Excellence* is the importance of using effective questions. This story was about the use by the City of Longmont, Colorado, of Appreciative Inquiry to improve procurement. The secret: use of appreciative questions. What was a good experience in the past? How does that inform the present? What would perfection look like in the future?



In 2007, Oregon encountered unprecedented flooding. The story of Marscy Stone and the Oregon Disaster Preparedness Work Group is told in *Seeing Excellence*. Marscy asked, “How can we do better in emergency response?”



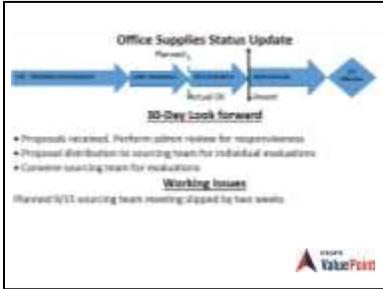
The team went through the typical Tuchman phases of forming, storming, norming, and performing. Their initial enthusiasm threatened to get them off track until they used a “parking lot” approach to up-channel ideas not in procurement’s area. They talked about team commitment, shared meeting leadership, and put the purpose on the agenda. This project was awarded the Cronin Award for Procurement Excellence by the National Association of State Procurement Officials. It all started with a question.

Do you put ‘?’ on your agendas?

Marscy Stone put the team’s purpose (from its charter) on the agenda to help stay on track. Meetings sometimes become routine, with recycled agendas and little variation. Try putting a ‘?’ on an agenda to signal that you are open to discussion and ideas.



NASPO ValuePoint, the nonprofit that supports the states’ cooperative procurement program, has special challenges in managing projects. The [story of the ValuePoint process improvement team](#) was told in the December/January 2017 edition of Government Procurement magazine.



At one of the sourcing team meetings, the Lead State Contract Administrator was called by her supervisor and asked, “Where are you?” The ValuePoint process improvement team developed this model project status update as a way to help answer the question, “What information is needed by your stakeholders?”

What information is needed by your stakeholders?

Project management is one of the 10 team disciplines discussed in *Seeing Excellence*. Chapter 5 has questions useful for managing a project. Identifying stakeholders and their information needs are critical parts of effective PM.

What measurements help reduce uncertainty in decision-making?

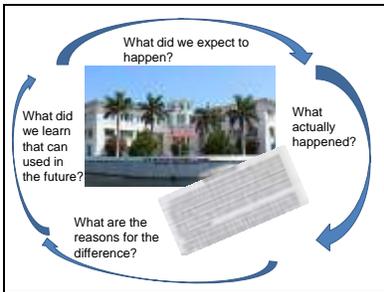
Face it, metrics have risen in importance. Measurement at its core is intended to assist in decision-making. It’s important to involve stakeholders (who will use measurements) in deciding what to measure. Customer satisfaction surveys have been used in performance-based budgeting to help identify the impacts from other measures, like workload metrics. Chapter 6 of *Seeing Excellence* dives into measurement in some detail.

First ask how? Then why?
Then decide

Five why's?

Among the team disciplines I identified in *Seeing Excellence* was process analysis and decision-making. This slide came from my observation that too often teams dive into the 'why' of steps in a process (to determine value-added) before they fully understand how the process works. Only then—in my judgment—should you be assessing the 'why' of the steps in a process. Then, a team is in a better position to make recommendations and decisions.

Five-why's is a well-known tool for finding root causes of failures or problems.



The story of Port St. Lucie's award-winning neighborhood stabilization project was used to illustrate the power of team after-action reviews. Note the four questions. "What did we expect to happen?" "What actually happened?" "What are the reasons for the difference?" "What did we learn that can be used in the future?"

From: David Nash
Sent: Friday, September 29, 2017 5:15 AM
Subject: ? of the day - Sep 29 CPPO

1. What is the difference between a specification and a scope of work?

Learning theory emphasizes spaced learning, as well as a concept called elaboration. Elaboration means stating a learned concept in your own words; it helps you retain learning. Self-quizzing builds on the concepts. David Nash, a retired procurement professional, has emailed "[question of the day](#)" that helps certification candidates learn important concepts for their exam. It has been very popular and is a splendid example of the use of adult learning principles—and the effective use of questions.

Onboarding and Mentoring in
Cobb County School District, Georgia



- What experience have you had?
- Would you be willing to review my work?
- How about joining me in the pre-bid?
- Would you like to give us a mini-training about the NIGP session on RFPs?

This story, “Blended Learning and Mentoring” in Cobb County School District, can be found in the [April/May 2017 edition of Government Procurement magazine](#). Note the kinds of questions that promote informal learning and mentoring.

What if?

What if? The question is featured in articles and books about creativity and innovation. “A steady stream of what-ifs” is key to simulating the future and illuminating possibilities, write Anthony Brandt and David Eagleman in *The Runaway Species: How Human Creativity Remakes the World* (New York: Catapult, 2017).

What-if is a great question for creating options in negotiations where the parties seem to be at an impasse.

What did you do when you were at your personal best as a leader?
– Kouzes and Posner

James Kouzes and Barry Posner’s *The Leadership Challenge* is in the fifth edition. The book is full of wisdom, but this question may be among my favorite quotes in the book. “Ask purposeful questions daily . . . questions develop people,” they counsel. And, “Asking good questions also forces you to listen attentively to your constituents and what they are saying. This action demonstrates your respect for their ideas and opinions.” (p. 82)

How can I help?

In the final chapter of *Seeing Excellence*, this question became the central question for exercising lateral leadership in teams.

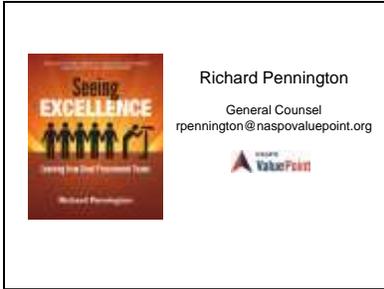
What's one thing I can do or stop doing to help you succeed?

Here was my final challenge:

1. Find a colleague who will go to a customer's office.
2. Make an appointment and go there; don't just call.
3. When there, ask this question, "What's one thing we can do or stop doing to help you succeed?" [guaranteed the discussion won't stop there . . .]
4. On the way back to the office, talk about the gap—the one between where the customer thinks you should be and where you are.
5. Talk to your supervisor about the gap, maybe put it on a staff meeting agenda.
6. Take one step to start closing the gap.

"The moment we ask a question, we begin to create a change."

—Diana Whitney & Amanda Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change*, p. 52 (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2010)



Use effective questions to help the team learn.
Go put some art in procurement!