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The Other Key Question

By Denis Stauffer

When you launch a new project, are you asking the wrong questions?

“Do we have the necessary experience and expertise?” is an important question to raise early on in any project. Or, to put it more bluntly, “Do we know what we’re doing?” The very discipline of project management itself is an area of personal knowledge and expertise – one that not everyone has.

Another question that is just as important but gets asked relatively rarely is, “What do we not know?” ... about the customer, the technology, the target market, the ultimate user, or any of a myriad of other relevant issues...along with, “And how can we find out?”

When we take on new challenges, or encounter obstacles along the way, for most of us the default response is to draw on our knowledge. We all have a tendency to focus on what we already know and understand and assume to be true of a situation. This tendency can cause us to overlook the vast number of things we surely don’t know until that unrecognized gap creates a problem for us.

The knowledge that team members bring to a project is valuable and important. It provides a range of possibilities and options and tools that can be used to solve problems and meet objectives. But too often we use our knowledge to determine what can’t be done, shutting down promising possibilities and new approaches prematurely.

That tendency to assume that we already have the answers not only hampers innovation, it leaves us vulnerable to setbacks that might have been avoided if we had been more curious and imaginative in the first place.

Research by noted psychologist Dr Robert Epstein demonstrates that someone with experience performing a simple problem solving task typically requires time to adjust when the nature of the problem changes. In an exercise Epstein, developed that I use in some of my workshops, those with prior experience take longer on average to solve the second

problem than someone who is only given the second problem to begin with. In other words, prior expertise can actually slow the discovery of new solutions. Knowledge as we commonly employ it has a tendency to reduce rather than enhance our mental agility. (Few of us find it easy to admit that we've been wrong).

Overcoming that tendency requires that we systematically maintain a dialogue that challenges each other early and often to:

- Examine our assumptions.
- Clearly explain our reasoning.
- Clarify objectives.
- Imagine new possibilities.
- Experiment with new ideas.
- Probe for potential flaws in our chosen course of action.

... and yes

- Raise lots of questions.

Finding ways to overcome our assumptions and varying from standard practice puts us on a path to high value breakthroughs. Unfortunately, we often encounter the greatest resistance when we challenge beliefs and attempt new approaches (usually from those who assume they already have the answers). A body of knowledge like the *PMBOK*<sup>®</sup> has great value but it can also be limiting, especially when we persist in using the same old solutions with new problems. We need to remind ourselves to stay flexible when we apply our skills and expertise. We all recognize the importance of leaning from our mistakes, but we sometimes forget that we can't learn much from the approaches we haven't tried.

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