



Leadership Moments: Why Companies Avoid the "What" and "Why" Questions

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Adam Bryant  [influencer](#) | [+](#)

Over more than three decades in business, [Howard Bubb](#) has held numerous roles as CEO, president and chairman, as well as serving as a corporate vice president at Intel Corporation. He is also a colleague of mine at The ExCo Group, a senior leadership development and executive mentoring firm that I joined after 18 years at The New York Times, where I created the "Corner Office" interview series. In "Leadership Moments," I'll be focusing on key lessons that executives learned during their careers. Here's the conversation I had (edited for space) with Bubb. Follow me here on LinkedIn to see future interviews.

Q. What are some of the most common trouble spots you've seen over the years?

A. The surprising thing to me is how many people, as they describe their company or their problem set, are focused on the "how" of it – how we're approaching it, and here's how it's going – instead of really questioning what they're doing in the first place.

Q. Can you elaborate?

A. Are they heading in a direction that their customers and employees agree with? What are their decision criteria? If things aren't going well, then the how of what you're doing isn't going to be successful. Many people are reluctant to back up to that more fundamental question, so they're purely in execution mode instead of going back to first principles of

what and why.

There's nothing wrong with focusing on “how” when you have a winning direction. There are some great cases, like Intel, which ran with a playbook for 30-plus years in a well-defined market. But that's the exception. More companies are faced with nonlinear disruptive thinking, which means you have to question your goals, what you are trying to achieve and who your customers are.

Q. In some companies, that can be a tough conversation. People might be reluctant to point out such a fundamental problem.

A. Whether an executive is able to bring those messages forward says a lot about a company's character. In some companies, the light bulb goes on very quickly that the goals need to change, and people adapt quickly. In others, there's a strong top-down culture, and an executive feels completely unempowered to question the direction.

They're told to take the hill and that's all they can do. One of the more challenging things as a mentor is when your client is going after the wrong hill and they know it.

Q. What's the toughest conversation you've had to have with somebody you're advising?

A. Some people simply expect their employees to follow them and the direction they've set. They don't understand their responsibility to set culture. They'll say the right things about things like transparency, but then you find out that they don't let people ask questions in open forums. Then they're surprised that they have a culture where people feel disengaged and disempowered.

You'll never engage people's hearts unless you talk about your own values and be explicit about them. You can't just let the culture happen.

Q. What other challenges have you seen?

A. You can learn a lot about someone by looking at how they spend their time. And very often senior people are still working very hands-on – they're not empowering others, they're not communicating, they're not leading. Once you point it out to them, a light bulb goes on that they are spending the majority of their time in operating meetings instead of setting direction.

Q. Once they understand that, do they shift their focus quickly?

A. There's a recognition that they need to put more time into it, but in many cases, they don't know how. They haven't had an example of how to be a leader. Let's face it -- most people come up through a functional expertise. Some people have not seen a positive example of general management, so that's where, as a mentor, you can help model that skill.

And that's why strategic alignment is so important. If people aren't in agreement on where they're going, their ability to be successful is pretty much zero. In some cases, it's as simple as clearly articulating the strategy – you ask to see their strategic documents and often they don't exist. So they haven't written it down, and yet they will say everyone knows what it is.

In big companies that have always done things a certain way, people just assume that's the strategy. Because it's a difficult dialogue, people avoid the dialogue. I would say the majority of companies that I've experienced, either up close or as a mentor, do not have a very well-defined strategic alignment process. They say they do, but really ironing out the alignments is hard. Good leaders know how to do that.

Q. If you were to teach a leadership course at a business school, what would it be?

A. To be an effective leader, you have to decide who you are and what are your values. And that's a deep exercise. It's not a 3x5 card they do one night. When I do values work with people, they typically write out many different values. But condensing that list into five with supporting points is an intensive process. You tie those values back to their life stories. Do you really believe in this? How have you practiced that? How did this value come about? Talk to me about your parents. It boils down to “who are you?”

The second part would be, do you really respect the people around you? And if you do, the best way to respect them is to ask them questions. In our society, the way we educated people focused too much on the answers and not enough on the questions. Answers only teach a person how to do something one way. A question makes them think about all myriad ways and challenges. Behind every good hard answer is one really good question, and we don't teach people questions.

We know that people need to feel empowered to create high-performance team. How do you do that? It's about shared values and getting people aligned around sharing a common goal, and creating an environment where people feel empowered to ask tough questions. When you can capture their heart and mind, then you have passion.