

The Transforming Power of Asking, “What’s Your Job?”

By: Pat Lynch, Ph.D., President

What would your employees say if you were to walk around your organization and ask people at random, “What’s your job?” Most likely they would respond by describing their occupations or their tasks. For example, “My job is to sweep floors, empty the trash, and clean the bathrooms,” or “My job is to sell baked goods,” or “My job is to deliver packages,” or “My job is to pick up the trash at the park.” What if, instead of these answers, you heard responses like: “My job is to help put a man on the moon” (NASA custodian in the 1960s) or “My job is to make people happy” (bakery counterperson in 2006) or “My job is to ensure delivery absolutely, positively overnight” (FedEx courier in the 1980s) or “My job is to ensure our customers have an enjoyable recreation experience” (park attendant in 2005)? What a difference! The “wow” factor emerges when employees have a clear line-of-sight - i.e., they see where they fit in the big picture and they know clearly the contribution they make to the organization.

Let’s consider the difference that having clear line-of-sight makes in terms of motivation and performance. Think of the motivating power created by the conviction that your efforts will help to put a man on the moon vs. that resulting from the knowledge that you have fifty offices to clean. Can you see how this difference can have implications in terms of quality of work, attendance, productivity, commitment to the organization, job satisfaction, creativity, and retention? In terms of performance, consider the customer service provided by a bakery clerk who defines her job as making people happy vs. that provided by one who views his job as selling pastries. Early in my career at FedEx I heard the story-turned-company-myth about the courier who, when unable to drive to a mountaintop residence to deliver a package by the promised time because snow from an avalanche blocked the way, took it upon himself to rent a helicopter to ensure the company met its service commitment - and was rewarded and recognized companywide for his initiative. Which of these two orientations - to the job’s tasks or to the big picture - best describes the perspective of employees in your organization? You can find out by simply asking them, “What is your job?”

If you find that your employees list their duties or cite their titles when asked, “What is your job?” here are six steps you can take to change their answers in ways that will transform their views and, by extension, your organization’s performance:

1. Begin with yourself. How would you respond right now if I asked you, “What’s your job?”

2. Create a vision for your organization.
3. Communicate the vision at every conceivable opportunity in a variety of ways such as in staff meetings, during performance evaluation meetings, and in organization newsletters.
4. Communicate to each employee clearly how he or she specifically contributes to the vision.
5. Ensure that all of your systems support your message that each job makes an important contribution to the organization. For example:
 - Individuals’ goals are aligned with their managers’ goals, which are aligned with the department’s goals, which are aligned with the organization’s goals.
 - Behaviors that are consistent with the vision are identified and measured.
 - Desirable behaviors are recognized and rewarded.
 - Managers are held accountable for communicating the message and reinforcing the desired behaviors.
 - Job descriptions articulate the link between the job duties and the organization’s vision.
 - The focus is on outcomes, not activities.
6. Publicly celebrate and communicate behaviors that demonstrate support of the vision.

Imagine that you going to work three years from now, after you have made a commitment to ensure that every employee sees how he or she contributes to the organization’s success. Picture the excitement and energy that result from a highly motivated and engaged workforce. Envision the annual reports that have shown solid increases in results from year to year. Remember that all it takes to begin this transformation is asking a simple question: “What’s your job?” ➔

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