

Psychological safety: Model curiosity and ask good questions as a leader

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Arguably the most famous management thinker of all time, Peter Drucker, famously said, "The job of a manager is not to have the right answers, "it's to ask the right questions." That advice is more true than ever today, and for creating psychological safety, there's nothing more powerful than asking good questions. Julie Morath was the chief operating officer of Children's Minnesota, and she led an ambitious patient safety initiative. Her aspiration was to make the hospital 100% safe for the vulnerable patients under their care. In the beginning of trying to get employees engaged with this journey, most people just really didn't believe they had a problem, and they weren't terribly interested in rolling up their sleeves and getting to work on the problem that they didn't believe existed. Morath quickly learned that there was a lot of resistance. Wasn't because they were bad people. They just by and large didn't think the hospital had a real problem. People weren't talking about errors. They assumed they didn't have any. Morath, rather than trying to double down and convince people there really was a problem, instead did something far smarter. She asked them a question. She said, "Let me ask you to reflect "on your experiences last week with your patients. "Was everything as safe as you would like it to be?" That moment was a light bulb moment. Hundreds of people signed up to help with the initiative. In that moment, with that good question, they suddenly became aware of the ways in which the care they were providing was not where they wanted it to be. It just generated awareness. Now, that question has all the attributes of what I call a good question. Good questions focus on what matters, invite careful thought, and give people room to respond. Questions like, "What are we missing? "What other options might we consider? "Who has a different point of view? "Do you have experiences with things like that?" Questions that instead say, "We're on the right track, aren't we," are not good questions. Questions that indicate the answer you hope to hear are not good questions. They're very human, they're very natural, so in order to take full advantage of the opportunity to ask good questions, pause. Give yourself room to think, and make sure you're asking something that's sufficiently focused and sufficiently open-ended to really invite the voices of your team.