

A glowing lightbulb is positioned on the left side of the page, resting on a dark, textured wooden surface. The lightbulb is illuminated from within, casting a warm, orange glow. The background is a close-up of the wood grain, with the lightbulb's glow creating a soft, circular highlight on the surface.

The Question is the Answer

By Bill Mills

Steven Covey is credited with saying, “The problem is not the problem; how we think about the problem is the problem.” This is a great reminder to all of us. It’s easy to develop a blind spot or a cognitive bias that prevents us from getting to a best solution and, of course, by definition, our biases aren’t visible so we can’t deal with them.

So what shapes the way we see, or think, about a problem?

It’s difficult to observe your own brain thinking. It’s almost like saying, “Where did that thought come from?” and seeing a shadowy movement over your shoulder. The more you try to see your brain thinking the more silent it becomes. However, Carl Jung’s research about how our brains process information and make decisions suggests we are unconsciously asking ourselves questions and then consciously offering answers. Concrete-specific questions produce detailed, data-focused answers. Abstract, conceptual questions produce intuitive, pattern-focused answers. Analytical questions produce logical answers and principle-based questions produce values-based answers. Change the question and you

change the answer.

This suggests our bias and blind spots are due to our unconscious habits of asking the same questions over and over. Armed with this information we can become better leaders by asking and evoking better questions of the people we lead. Perhaps the following example will help.

A production manager named Lucinda (I’m using her real name because she was really cool and I love the music of Lucinda Williams) shared in a room full of other leaders that she faced a structural problem. Her company’s estimating system was consistently underestimating the actual time it was taking production to make certain types of parts, often missing by a factor of two. I asked the question of the 30 managers in the room, “If you were Lucinda’s manager, what would you do?” We fielded a handful of answers about how the managers would round up accounting, estimating and other departments to figure it out. To their credit, they were all thoughtful and reasonable solutions. However, it was a trick question.

It was the unconscious, trick question managers al-

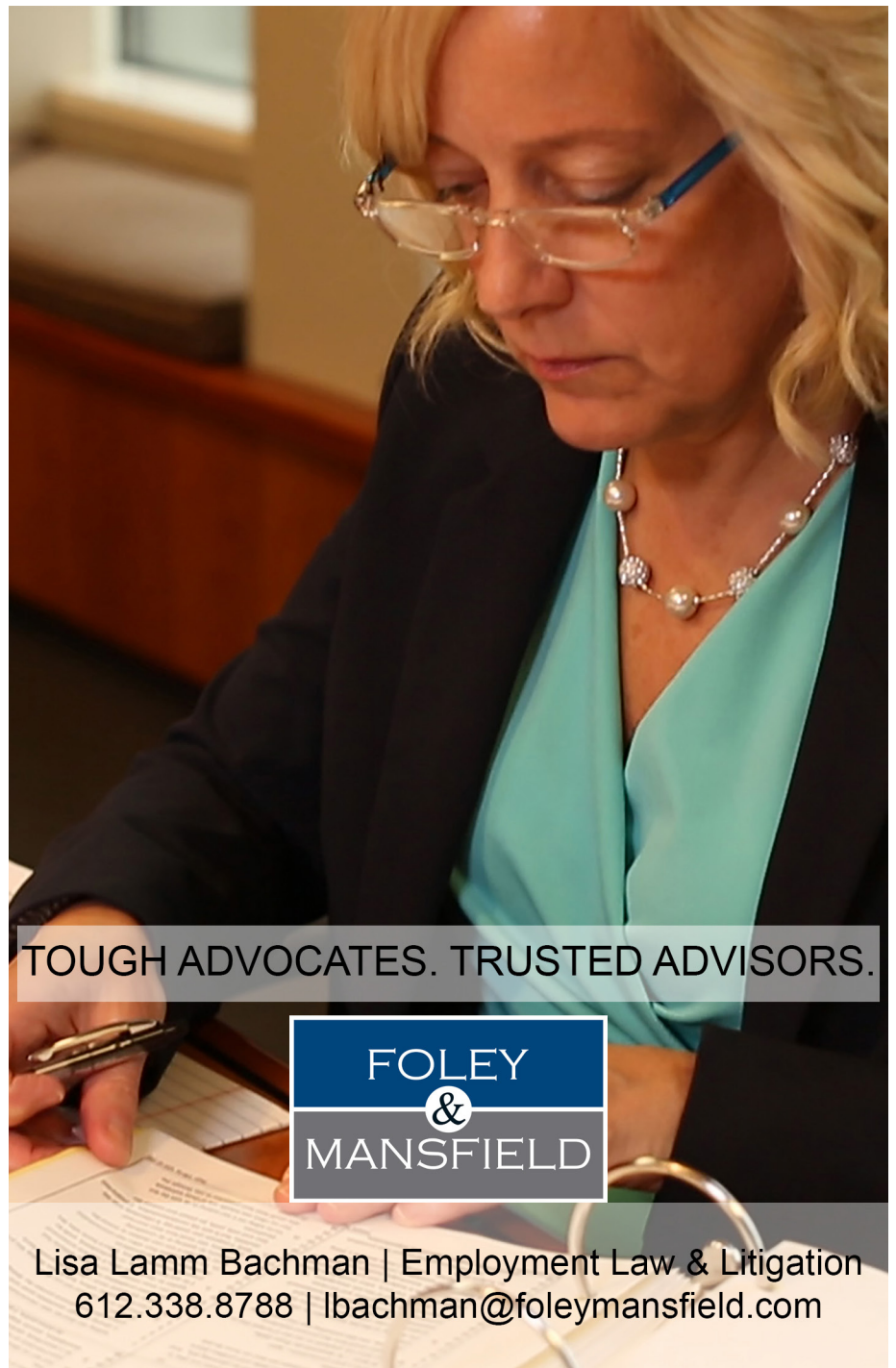
most always ask – “What should I do?” I would have gotten a completely different response had I asked “How could you help Lucinda solve her own problem?” This, I believe, is one of the tenants of a leader mindset. Leaders need to ask themselves, “In this moment, with this person, what is my purpose? How can I help this person grow?”

So we asked Lucinda, “If you had your way, what is the end state you’d like to create? When do you think you could realistically achieve that? Who do you need to include in your process?” and “What is the first think you’ll do?” Lucinda had an answer for every question and reported she was eager to get started. She went from frustrated to motivated in 60 seconds.

As leaders, isn’t our highest priority the development of our people? And if it is, what are the conversations that leave people equipped and motivated to solve problems on their own?

Statements are not the answer. Telling people what they should do or doing it for them leaves them dependent on us for the next solution. If we rightly discern that our purpose allows others to be successful, we’ll find ourselves unconsciously asking, “Which questions will help my people find their own answers?”

Bill Mills is the CEO of Executive Group, a CEO and leadership peer group grounded in proven processes for success. Visit www.mnexecutivegroup.com to learn more. To purchase his book, “The Power of Conscious Conversation,” email Bill at bill@mnexecutivegroup.com.



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