

DEAR Captains, most organisations are not failing because of poor strategy.

They are failing because people are busy but not contributing in the way that matters most.

Our first role as leaders is to remove uncertainty.

Either we clarify the confusion our people experience and move the organisation forward, or we allow them to become victims of guesswork and misalignment.

We do this by presenting a clear and identifiable goal, a future state that people can understand and desire, and by generating within them the willingness to follow.

As such, setting goals and expectations, and making them meaningful, is the cornerstone of leadership.

Every chief executive officer (CEO), leader and manager spends considerable time setting and explaining goals to their teams.

Yet, both research and practice show one consistent reality: goals and expectations are often misunderstood.

The truth is, even the most brilliant CEOs struggle with the "illusion of transparency", the belief that because a goal is clear in their mind, it is equally clear to everyone else.

Therefore, goal setting alone is not enough.

It must be accompanied by asking the right questions.

These two acts are inseparable if we are serious about avoiding this illusion.

But what is the right question to ask?

This brings us to the focus of the article.

What is the one question every employee must be able to answer, clearly and correctly, every single day they come to work?

It is not about what they like or want to do.

It is not about what they feel like doing.

It may not even be what is written in their job description.

And it is certainly not what they plan to eat for lunch.

It is this: What is my contribution to the organisation?

And more importantly: How can I contribute as effectively as possible?

When contribution is unclear, effort is wasted.

As such, every employee must know the answers to these questions clearly and own them.

This is goal alignment in action. It is how we avoid miscommunication and turn expectations into real, effective execution.

Because when people do not know what is to be done, they default to what they want or like to do, which may not be what the organisation needs.

Knowing the answers helps remove uncertainty.

It embeds the goals into how people plan and solve problems.

If they cannot connect these goals to their daily plans, the problems they solve and the opportunities they pursue, their work becomes disconnected from what should be done.

To know what and how they can best contribute, employees must agree on three things: where we are now, where we want to be by a given time, and what is to be done to get there.

Knowing where we are defines reality.



DEAR CAPTAINS

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■ People are busy but not contributing where it matters most

■ Leadership is ensuring the vision is clearly understood

Knowing where we want to go defines what good looks like.

Most importantly, being clear about what is to be done defines what the situation demands.

What the situation demands requires flexibility, adaptability, and a clear understanding of the results that must be achieved.

That is why it may not always be what is written in the job description.

Job descriptions are static. Contribution is dynamic.

This requires judgement, maturity, and ownership.

Once an employee is clear about how best they can contribute, only then do planning tools begin to make sense.

Without clarity of contribution, these tools become mechanical checklists.

They become efficiently ineffective: busy, but going nowhere.

With clarity, they become instruments of sound judgement.

Take the 5W1H - What, why, who, where, when and how.

What

Clarity of contribution defines what work should be done.

An employee may have 10 tasks on hand.

Without clarity, they may choose what is easiest, most urgent, or most visible.

With clarity, they prioritise what contributes most to the organisation's goals.

They stop asking, "What do I want to do?" and start asking, "What must be done?"

Why

Knowing how best to contribute clarifies why the work matters. When employees understand how their work contributes to the bigger goal, they are more

focused and committed.

They are not just completing tasks, but working towards meaningful outcomes.

Without this, work becomes routine.

With it, work becomes purposeful.

Who

Clarity of contribution helps employees decide who to work with. In sales, this means engaging customers who contribute most to results, even if they are tougher to manage, rather than spending time with easier, friendlier customers who bring less value.

The focus shifts from comfort and habit to contribution.

Where

Knowing how best to contribute guides where an employee should be.

An employee may have the option to work from home.

But the real question is not preference; it is contribution.

If the task requires deep individual work, working from home may be appropriate.

If alignment or collaboration is needed, being in the office may be better.

If the role requires understanding customers, then being on the ground becomes necessary.

The decision is not based on preference, but on where one can contribute best.

When

Knowing how best to contribute sharpens judgement on timing. Some tasks require immediate action, while others require careful timing.

Employees who understand contribution know when to act, when to wait, and when to escalate.

They do not just meet deadlines.

They move faster when contribution demands it and act at the right time to create the best outcome.

How

This brings us back to the most important question: How can I make the best contribution?

When this is clear, the other questions - what, why, who, where, and when, naturally fall into place.

Dear Captains, we must make it a habit to ask our employees this most important question: "What is your contribution, and how are you ensuring it is the best possible one?"

Our leaders and managers must be trained not just to ask but also to calibrate the response.

When answers are unclear or incorrect, we must view it as a coaching opportunity, reconnecting their efforts to the organisation's immediate needs.

Realignment is not about correction; it is about restoring the line of sight between their daily work and our collective success.

Do this, and you will see your people stay on track and your organisation perform better, because you have helped remove uncertainty and guided them to contribute in the best way possible.

Leadership is not just about having a vision.

It is about the disciplined task of ensuring that the vision is clearly understood by the people doing the work.

Purpose before productivity

