The Power Question

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I woke up at 4 a.m. one recent morning, feeling like an elephant was standing on my chest, with a sense of despair and hopelessness. I tried for another couple of hours of sleep, then got up to face the day. One foot in front of the other, show up, put the face on, do my best, right? I know many of you can relate. I fumbled through the day trying to focus and keep the work moving along and the darkness at bay, often just wishing something would happen that would make it all better.

Nothing did. But two people did make a major impact that shifted my whole perception of the day. One was a call from my co-worker Erin who asked for my help with a project. Note**: it's life-enhancing to be needed and used for something that you have to offer**. It is the best antidote to a bad day.

The second turning point inspired this writing. It was a question posed by Robbi Bos, VP at Sauk Prairie Healthcare, during a call we had discussing leadership development ideas. We were brainstorming ways for managers to help themselves and their employees get through this marathon that is the pandemic. She suggested that instead of jumping in to fix, leaders ask themselves:

"What is within my power to address?"

This is such a good question on so many levels:

For my struggles – as I face my own demons (with COVID 19 fears, loneliness, anxiety, etc.), what is within my power to address? What is NOT? This is an important distinction and I have to make it multiple times each day, but this question helps me make it consciously. Asking it helps me recognize quickly when I am in the wishful thinking mode and shift to taking action on my own behalf. It is within my power to reach out, make a phone call, turn off the news and social media, and ask for-and offer to-help. *(Try this. When you notice yourself struggling, ask yourself this question and see what comes up for you. Don't stop at what you DON'T have the power over. Stick with the question until you find the open door to your agency).*

For someone you supervise who wants you to make something better – hire more staff, cover for a shift they don't want to work, talk to a co-worker they are upset with. Often leaders are so quick to start explaining, covering for, or taking on others' problems. But the first thing we need to do in many cases is reply with this question: **what is within *YOUR* power to address** (with the staffing situation, the barriers to working the shift they don't want to work, their relationship concerns with that co-worker)? The desire to deliver the "answer" makes us forget that more often, the question is what is needed. Asking this question turns the power for solving back to where it belongs.

For your limitations – what beliefs do you hold that limit you? If examined carefully, what liberation awaits? Listen for when you think or say, "I could never…" or, "I can't…" (speak up to my intimidating colleague, disagree with my manager, say no, leave work at a reasonable time, talk in front of a group, etc.). If you were to think of one small action that was within your power to address, you will make progress toward those things that you believe are your limitations. Who knows what you might achieve if you claim the power that exists.

For the gargantuan problems of the world – it's easy to feel hopeless and small. But what is within our power to address? I can't fix racism but I can speak up as an anti-racist when I hear comments that are racist. I can't heal the great political divide but it is within my power to listen to an individual who sees things differently than I do and try to understand instead of shutting down discussion.

It is within our power to:

- Ask ourselves this question several times a day until it becomes a habit to recognize the power we do have.
- Commit to taking action on something that is important to us, and to recognize that it probably is not in our power to commit to every single important thing all the time.
- Make choices. We make thousands of them each day without even thinking about them, and this question makes some of those more deliberate and thoughtful.
- Do something good for our body, mind and spirit at least most days. It adds up.

Where have you forgotten that you do have power? How might claiming this kind of power change your leadership and encourage growth in those you lead?