

Moment of Truth

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A rosewood paperweight on my desk bears a sterling silver plaque declaring: *Great results begin with great questions.* It was a gift from a very special person in my life—Joseph S. Edwards—who introduced me to QuestionThinking, or QT, as he called the skills he taught me. QT opened up a part of my mind that otherwise I might never have discovered. Like everyone else, I believed the way to fix a problem was to go on a hunt for answers. Instead, Joseph showed me that the best way to solve a problem is to first come up with better questions. The skills

he taught me rescued my career and saved my marriage as well. Both were definitely in trouble at the time.

It all started when I was invited to take a management position at QTec, Inc. Just before I came aboard, Wall Street naysayers predicted the company would fold before the year was out. You might wonder why I took a position on a sinking ship. It wasn't an easy decision. Alexa Harte had recently been appointed CEO at QTec, and Alexa and I had worked together for years at AZ Corp. She invited me to join QTec, saying there were no guarantees but she believed the company could be turned around. It was a great promotion, and there were excellent stock options. If everything worked out, the risk would pay off in aces. If not . . . well, I tried not to think about that.

At first I was riding high, convinced I had the job wired. I had the answers and I was bound for success. Then things unraveled pretty fast. Suddenly it was as if a glaring spotlight had been focused on my shortcomings. The people on my team were going off in all directions. It was obvious they were avoiding me. I blamed my problems on Charles, a co-worker whom I saw as blocking my efforts to pull the team together. Things went from bad to worse when our production schedule fell apart. This was a big deal because the future of the company largely depended on getting our product to market ahead of the competition. I was in more trouble than I cared to admit.

Things weren't much better at home. Grace, my wife

of eight months, knew something was wrong. I'd tried to keep the truth from her, believing it was best to keep work and home separate. Grace didn't buy that. She insisted being married meant sharing both our challenges and our victories. She always wanted me to tell her what was going on at work. I told her she was asking too many questions and she should keep her nose out of my business. She was hurt, I was miserable, and I hadn't the vaguest idea what to do about it.

I didn't want her knowing how much difficulty I was having. I'd always taken great pride in solving problems that baffled everyone else. With any luck the right answers would turn up before Grace, Alexa, and my employees found out the job was way over my head. Meanwhile I kept to myself and did my best just to get through each day.

I'll never forget the dark turning point. Grace and I had an argument in the morning and there was a major crisis at work. Later that afternoon I called her office to say I'd be putting in an all-nighter to finish an important report. I spent the next fifteen hours alone in my office, still looking for answers, and reliving two of the most disastrous weeks of my life. The writing was on the wall. It was time to admit defeat. Just after six that morning I went out for coffee and then began drafting my resignation. I finished three hours later, called Alexa, and made arrangements to see her immediately.

The walk to Alexa's suite was less than a hundred

yards. That morning it felt like a hundred miles. When I got to the big double doors of her office, I stopped and took a deep breath to regain my composure. I stood there for some long moments, working up the nerve to knock. Just as I was raising my hand, I heard a voice behind me.

“Ben Knight, you’re here. Good, good!”

It was Alexa. There was no mistaking that voice, always cheerful, exuding a sense of optimism even when things were going badly. An attractive, athletic-looking woman in her early fifties, she radiated confidence. I told Grace I’d never met anyone quite like Alexa. She approached her responsibilities at QTec with boundless enthusiasm. It wasn’t that she didn’t take her job seriously. She did take it seriously, but she did it with such pleasure and self-assurance that she made it look easy.

At that moment, her mere presence made me acutely aware of my own deficiencies. I felt numb, barely mumbling a subdued good morning as she touched my shoulder and ushered me into her office.

The room was expansive, the size of a large living room in the best executive home. I crossed deep green carpeting, soft underfoot, and walked over to the large bay window where the meeting area was set up. There, two overstuffed sofas faced one another across a large walnut coffee table.

“Sit!” Alexa said, gesturing in a welcoming way to one of the couches. “Betty said your lights were on when she left

her office at seven-thirty last night, and you were here when she came in at eight.”

She sat down across from me on the other couch.

“I presume that’s for me?” Alexa asked, pointing to the green folder containing my resignation that I’d placed on the coffee table.

I nodded, waiting for her to pick it up. Instead, she leaned back, looking as if she had all the time in the world.

“Tell me what’s going on with you,” she said.

I pointed to the green folder. “It’s my resignation. I’m sorry, Alexa.”

The next sound I heard stopped me cold. It was not a gasp, not a word of reproach, but laughter! It was not mean laughter, either. What had I missed? I didn’t understand. How could Alexa still sound sympathetic in the face of all I’d screwed up?

“Ben,” she said, “you’re not going to quit on me.” She slid the folder in my direction. “Take this back. I know more about your situation than you realize. I want you to give me six more weeks. But in this time, you have to commit to making changes.”

“Are you sure of this?” I asked, dumbfounded.

“Let me answer you this way,” she continued. “Long ago, I was in a situation similar to yours. I had to face facts. If I wanted to be successful I’d have to make some fundamental changes. I was pretty desperate. A man by the name of Joseph sat me down and asked some straightforward

questions, simple ones on the surface. But those questions opened doors I never even knew existed. He asked, ‘Are you willing to take responsibility for your mistakes—and for the attitudes and actions that led to them?’ Then he said, ‘Are you willing—however begrudgingly—to forgive yourself, and even laugh at yourself?’ And finally, ‘Will you look for value in your experiences, especially the most difficult ones?’ Bottom line, ‘Are you willing to learn from what happened and make changes accordingly?’”

She went on to tell me how Joseph’s work changed not only her life but her husband’s as well. “Stan has tripled his income in the past few years. He attributes the success he and his company enjoy today to what Joseph taught him. Joseph would tell you all about it. He loves to tell stories, especially ones about how people’s lives were changed by changing their questions.”

I must have looked perplexed because she added, “Don’t worry about what I mean by questions that change people’s lives. You’ll learn about that soon enough.” She paused. Then, in carefully measured words, she said, “I want you to work with my friend Joseph, starting immediately. I’m sure he’ll want to meet with you a number of times over the next six weeks. Work out the schedule with him. This is top priority now.”

“What is he, a psychotherapist?” The idea of seeing a shrink made me nervous.

Alexa smiled. “No, he’s an executive coach. I call him an *inquiring coach*.”

Inquiring coach! If I knew anything at all, it was that I needed answers, not more questions. What good could more questions possibly be to me?

As I left, Alexa jotted something down and sealed it in an envelope. “Inside this envelope is a prediction I’ve made,” she said mysteriously, handing it to me. “Put it in that green folder of yours and don’t open it until you’ve completed your work with Joseph.” Then she gave me his business card. I turned it over. There was a big question mark on the other side. It really irritated me. The idea that I’d be spending valuable time with a man whose logo was a question mark went against everything I believed.

Back in my own office, I collapsed in the chair behind my desk. My eyes fell on a small gilded frame on the wall. It held a saying, just two words long: *Question everything!* It was a quote attributed to Albert Einstein. Many rooms at QTec contained a framed placard exactly like this one. As much as I respected and appreciated Alexa’s leadership, this had always been a point of contention for me. Leaders should have answers, not questions.

I was still holding Joseph’s card with the question mark on the back. What had I gotten myself into? Only time would tell. I was grateful that I could put off my decision to resign. That was at least on hold. My attention then shifted

to Grace. How was I ever going to smooth things over with her? At least Alexa hadn't asked about Grace and me. I think that would have been the last straw. I knew Alexa was fond of my wife—she'd even come to our wedding. She wouldn't have been happy to find out we were having trouble.

I sat there for a long time just staring at Joseph's card. The fact that Alexa had refused to accept my resignation gave me a little hope. I was encouraged that she thought enough of me to refer me to her own mentor, this inquiring coach guy. The jury was still out on whether her trust was deserved, but I had nothing to lose by keeping an appointment with Joseph. Besides, even though I was skeptical, I was also curious about him. If he'd helped Alexa and Stan, maybe he had answers that would help me, too.



Question everything!