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YOU JUST HAVE TO ASK

By Valerie Neff Newitt

Strategies for asking questions in the workplace can give you a leg up.

There's no harm in asking. Really.

With reduced workforces, longer shifts and individuals covering ever-increasing job duties, it's wholly understandable that questions will arise on the job.

So why do we hesitate and regress to a grade-school fear of admitting — in front of peers and authority figures — that we, um, don't understand? What we didn't know in those schoolhouse days of lurking dunce caps were the strategies that could turn questions into golden opportunities and teaching moments.

MAKE A SMART MOVE WITH SMART QUESTIONS

In fact, asking a question in the professional arena can be interpreted as an intelligent thing to do. Not only does seeking answers increase your job performance and work IQ, it also allows you to connect and collaborate with other providers.

"Asking for help, in theory, sets you up for success," said Jodi Glickman, author of *Great on the Job, What to Say, How to Say It, The Secrets of Getting Ahead* and a faculty member of Cornell University's Johnson School Leadership Program. "Asking for help the right way can show that you are very smart and thoughtful."

When faced with a dilemma on the patient floor, the downside of asking for help is maybe not appearing up to snuff — just maybe. On the other hand, the downside of not asking for help is possibly doing something wrong. "And when you are talking about healthcare, you are also talking about lives and outcomes," Glickman said. "You tell me, which downside is far greater?"

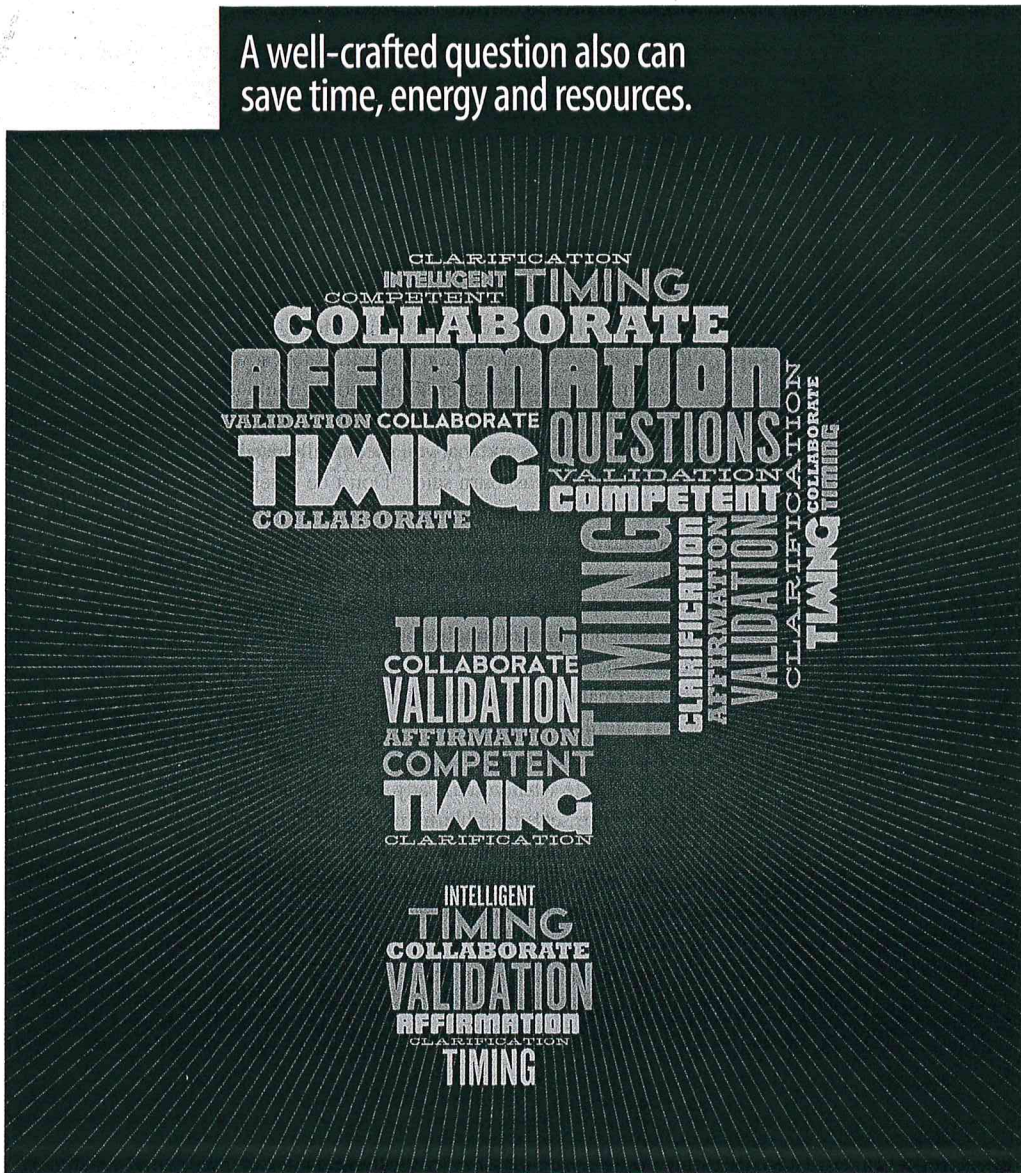
In addition to helping you avoid making a mistake, a well-crafted question also can save time, energy and resources. "Five minutes up front asking for help can save you 15 minutes on the back end in terms of wasted time and effort, not to mention wasted materials, equipment, labor and more," Glickman said.

ASK AT THE RIGHT TIME

So how do you launch a question in the workplace without looking incompetent?

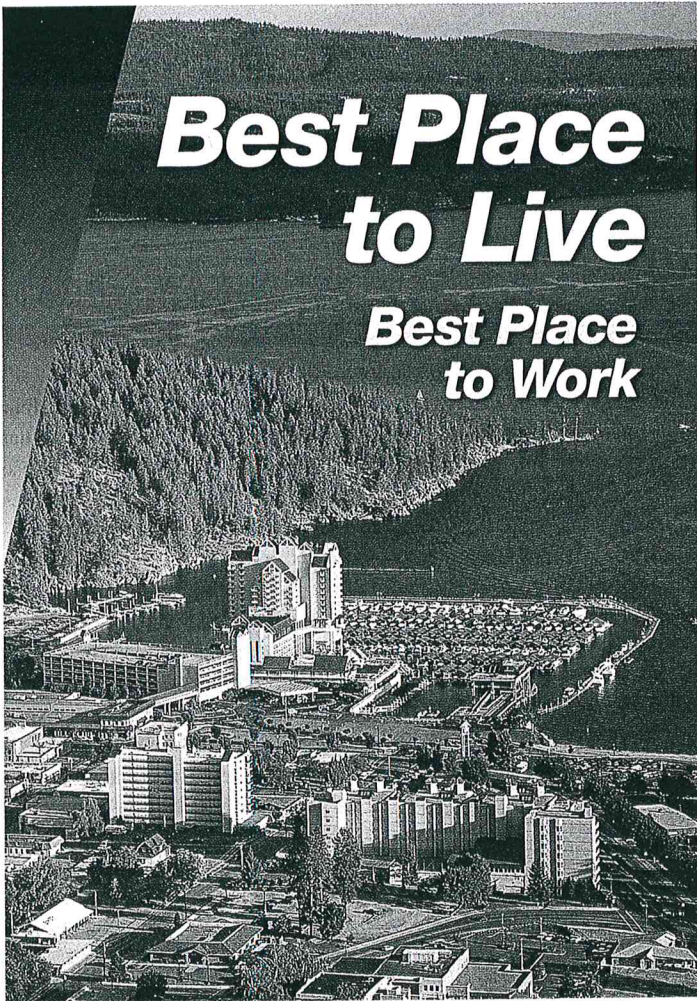
First, know when to ask for help, advised Michael G. Cassatly, DMD, an oral and maxillofacial surgeon and

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"Ask for resources, tools and guidance. Ask for examples of a similar case. Ask what the final outcome should look like. Ask for referral to someone who has worked through a similar situation. Make sure you get what you really need."

— Jodi Glickman

certified executive business coach. "For example, do not ask for help when the individual you are asking is rushed or under stress," Cassatly said.

After all, not only do you want the answers you receive to be well-considered, but you want to avoid contributing to another's error. Ask for permission to ask for help when it is not an emergent situation. Simply saying, "Is this a good time to ask for help?" would be an appropriate request.

TARGET YOUR QUERY

"Clearly frame the questions before asking for help," Cassatly suggested. An ambiguous question takes up more time than necessary in required revisions and results in answers that do not necessarily hit the target of understanding that you require.

"Don't throw out too broad a net," agreed Susan Washburn, executive leadership and career coach with More Associates, Watertown, Mass. "Keep narrowing the question down to your knowledge base."

You may understand everything about a multi-step process with the exception of one step. Make it clear that you that you feel knowledgeable about steps A and B and that you specifically need help with step C. "Know the knowable," Washburn said. "Don't be clueless when you are about to ask for help. You must operate from a base of knowledge to appear competent and credible."

Questions should bubble up from a fount of understanding that includes your own opinion of what you think should happen. "Once you lay out your understanding, your thoughts on how to answer your own question, then you can move forward and test your hypothesis," she added. "Get clarification, affirmation and validation."

GET CONCRETE ADVICE

After you state what you already know about a situation and what you are tasked to do, seek tangible help, Glickman advised. "Ask for resources, tools and guidance. Ask for examples of a similar case. Ask what the final outcome should look like. Ask for referral to someone who has worked through a similar situation. Make sure you get what you really need."

Repeat instructions back to your advisors, and get feedback on your new perspective and growing knowledge base. This insistence on being on-point at every juncture will demonstrate your "intelligence, competence and thoughtfulness," Glickman said.

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