Benefits, Concerns, & Suggestions™

The Benefits, Concerns, & Suggestions framework is an easy to use discussion process that will shift the way your team thinks and works.

Leaders have the greatest success if, when they're making decisions, they engage the people most impacted by those decisions. The Benefits, Concerns, & Suggestions approach can be used before a decision has been made to get input for making the decision, or *after* a decision has been made to ensure nothing has been missed and to get a sense of how implementing the decision will likely unfold.

Remember, people are more likely to support what they've helped to shape and influence.

Unfortunately, asking people "What do you think?" or "How's it going?" doesn't create engagement. Despite the best of intentions, this is where many leaders we've worked with go wrong. They understand, theoretically, that they'll have greater success if they have an engaged staff, but most don't know how to make that happen.

You'll start to see a difference in engagement when you can teach people how to provide input that you can actually use and can take action on. These 3 simple questions will help you to create a culture where people know they can influence decisions—because you're them teaching how they can *genuinely* make an impact.

These questions, when asked in this order, are very powerful.

1. What are the **benefits** of this idea (*proposal, plan, strategy, initiative, approach*)?
2. What are your **concerns** about this idea (*proposal, plan, strategy, initiative, approach*)?
3. What **suggestions** do you have about this idea (*proposal, plan, strategy, initiative, approach*)?

It is critical that you ask them in this order.

When you start by asking for the **benefits** first, you change the focus from one of poking holes in a new proposal or plan, to having the team members sit back and think in new ways about how the plan *can* work for them, for the team, for the organization, etc. This question changes the conversation - considering the benefits actually shifts how they conceptualize their concerns and helps them align with you to create success when they offer their suggestions.

The next question asks for their **concerns** about the idea and not a judgment of it. "That will never work!" is not helpful data—it's a baseless judgment. "I'm concerned that we don't have the resources to make this happen" is helpful data that could influence how you move forward. When you ask for concerns, you're asking people to be thinking about what they are worried about and why.

Finally, by asking for **suggestions**, or asking "What did we miss?" you can get a lot of input that you simply didn't have access to before this moment.

Put the 3 questions together and this is where the magic happens! You'll have input that will help you make a decision that's fueled by the thinking of the people who will likely have to implement it or live with the consequences of it.

Use this format to foster engagement and communication. Always treat the input with respect and interest. Before you know it, your meetings will provide you the wisdom of all the participants and the format will become a way of ensuring success.

To use the framework, take the following steps:

- Identify a decision, issue, project, or topic that you need your team's input on to create success.

- When it is time to talk about the decision or project, give a brief overview of the approach, the solution you're leaning toward, or a decision you've made. It's helpful to provide context and when possible, remind the team of previous discussions about this issue.

- Ask each of the participants (yourself included) to write down in this order:
    o The **Benefits** they see as they review your proposal or plan
    o The **Concerns** they have when they consider your proposal or plan
    o Any **Suggestions** they have to enhance or refine your proposal or plan

    NOTE: It's often helpful to have participants write down their thoughts on post-it notes, one idea per post-it note. If you have a larger team or group, they can write their ideas on index cards then in small groups of 3 - 5, they can work together to identify the top answers as a group and write those on post-it notes, one idea per note.

    Then you can have either each person or a representative of each group post their answers on easel paper and, as they do, they can cluster those answers that are similar.

    Using the post-it notes approach isn't required but is helpful so that all members of the group literally see their input added to the discussion.

- Start the conversation by going around the room and asking each individual or group reporter to report out and post the **Benefits** they see to your proposal or plan – listen deeply to each person's perspective. Add your thoughts about the Benefits when it is your turn, just like other members, but don't lecture or preach, just add what you believe to be the Benefits.
    o As you go around the room, do not comment on the validity of their input, do not reward or frown . . . listen, be curious, and make notes if that helps you stay curious.
    o Once you have heard or posted all the Benefits – comment on the themes and ask if anyone had other thoughts as they listened to the group. If they do, add that to the list.

- Go around the room a second time and ask each individual or small group to report out on the **Concerns** they have when they consider your proposal or plan. Include your concerns when it's your turn.
    o And, again do not comment on the validity of their input - listen closely.
    o Once you have heard or posted all of the Concerns – note the themes and ask if anyone had other thoughts as they listened to the group. If they do, add them to the list.

- Go around the room and ask each individual or small group to report out on any **Suggestions** that they have for moving forward effectively. Include anything that has come to mind for you, when it's your turn.
    o Listen and be curious!
    o Once you have heard or posted all of the Suggestions – note the themes and ask if anyone had other thoughts as they listened to the group. If they do, add them to the list.

- Finally, take a look at the input and, if there's an obvious way you can immediately use their input, go for it – there's nothing more rewarding than for them to see and experience the impact of their thinking. If there's nothing obvious, then with excitement and appreciation, tell them how much you appreciate their input and participation and that you'll take their input back to your office to review and to consider how to integrate it into your thinking. Then actually do so!