



## Questioning Techniques

Garbage in, garbage out, is a popular truth, often said in relation to computer systems: If you put the wrong information in, you'll get the wrong information out. The same principle applies to communications in general: If you ask the wrong question, you'll probably get the wrong answer, or at least not quite what you're hoping for. Asking the right question is at the heart of effective communication and coaching. So here are some common questioning techniques.

You have probably used all of these questioning techniques, at work and at home. But by consciously applying the appropriate kind of questioning, you can gain the information, responses and outcome that you want even more effectively.

It is important you give the person you're questioning enough time to respond. This will undoubtedly include thinking time before they answer, so don't assume a pause as a 'no comment' and plow on. Leave space. Skilful questioning needs to be matched by careful listening so that you understand what people really mean with their answers.

## Open and Closed Questions

A closed question usually receives a single word or very short, factual answer. The answer is Yes or No, or otherwise narrow and specific. However, a misplaced closed question can kill the conversation and lead to awkward silences, so are best avoided when a conversation is in full flow.

Open questions elicit longer answers. They usually begin with what, why, how. An open question asks the respondent for his or her knowledge, opinion or feelings. "Tell me about..." and "Describe..." can also be used in the same way as open questions. Open ended questions form the basis of a dialogical approach to conversations.

## Appreciative Questions

These allow the recipient to focus on strengths and positives.

1. *What positives can you take from this?*
2. *What would you like to achieve in this time?*
3. *What have you noticed about how you are dealing with this?*
4. *When are you most energised?*
5. *How will you know you've done good work?*
6. *What opportunities are there for you right now?*
7. *Where do you feel you can make a difference?*
8. *What do you value right now (about ...)?*
9. *What do you think is your potential right now?*

## Probing questions

Incisive questioning comes through probing for understanding. When seeking more detail, there are a number of probing approaches you can use, depending on what the other person is saying and what you want to discover.

Clarification - When the other person uses vague or unclear language, or when you just need more detail, seek to further understand them by asking for clarification.

- *Could you tell me more about...?*
- *What exactly did you mean by...?*
- *And what happened after that?*
- *What, specifically, will you do next week?*



Purpose - Sometimes the other person may say something where the purpose of why they said it is not clear. Ask them to justify their statement or dig for underlying causes.

- *Why did you say that?*
- *What were you thinking about when you said...?*

Completeness and accuracy - You can check that the other person is giving you a full and accurate account by probing for more detail and checking against other information you have. Sometimes people make genuine errors (and sometimes deliberate), which you may want to check.

- *Is that all? Is there anything you have missed out?*
- *How do you know that is true?*
- *How does that compare with what you said before?*

Evaluation - To discover both the other persons judgements and how they evaluate, use question that seek evaluation:

- *How good would you say it is?*
- *How do you know it is worthless?*
- *What are the pros and cons of this situation?*

### **The 5 whys**

An effective way of probing is to use the 5 whys method, which can help you quickly get to the root of a problem. Because it's simple, you can adapt it quickly and apply it to almost any situation.

Example:

1. *Why are your learners unhappy?*  
Because we didn't cover work when we said we would.
2. *Why were we unable to meet the agreed-upon schedule?*  
The previous sessions took much longer than we thought they would.
3. *Why did it take so much longer?*  
Because I underestimated the complexity of the learning.
4. *Why did you underestimate the complexity of the learning?*  
Because I made a general estimate of the time needed for the group, and didn't take into account individual differences and needs.
5. *Why didn't you do this?*  
Because I had too many conflicting demands and didn't take sufficient time to consider and plan properly. I clearly need to review this based on individual learner needs.

### **Funnel Questions**

This technique involves starting with general questions, and then homing in on a point in each answer, and asking more and more detail at each level. Funnel questions are good for gaining the interest or increasing the confidence of the person you're speaking with, and finding out more detail about a specific point, moving progressively from closed to open questioning:

- *Have you used ...? (Closed)*
- *Did this solve your problem? (Closed)*
- *What was the attitude of ...? (Open)*
- *Tell me more about... (Open)*



- *What happened...? (Open)*
- *Why might...? (Open)*