

Questioning Techniques Matter

by Mary M Martin, Community Development Area Extension Educator, University of Wyoming Extension

Questions are a part of everyday life, at work and at home. We've all found ourselves acting on a piece of information only to realize that had we asked a better question we would have had a better outcome. If you ask the wrong question, you'll most likely get the wrong answer, or at least not quite what you are seeking to discover.

Questioning techniques are heavily used as a teaching strategy and research indicates that asking questions is second only to lecturing. Questions are a powerful way of:

- **Learning:** You can stimulate learning, increase motivation, review instructions, assess mastery of goals by asking open and closed questions, and use probing questioning.
- **Relationship building:** People generally respond positively if you ask about what they do or enquire about their opinions. If you do this in an affirmative way "Tell me what you like best about working here", you will help to build and maintain an open dialogue.
- **Avoiding misunderstandings:** Use probing questions to seek clarification, particularly when the consequences are significant.
- **De-fusing a heated situation:** You can calm an angry customer or colleague by using funnel questions to get them to go into more detail about their grievance. This will not only distract them from their emotions, but will often help you to identify a small practical thing that you can do, which is often enough to make them feel that they have been heard or "won" something, and no longer need to be angry.
- **Persuading people:** No one likes to be lectured, but asking a series of open questions will help others to embrace the reasons behind your point of view. "What do you think about bringing the sales force in for half a day to have their laptops upgraded?"
- **Managing and coaching:** Rhetorical and leading questions are useful to help people to reflect and to commit to courses of action that you've suggested: "Wouldn't it be helpful to attend excel software training?"

Asking the right question is at the heart of effective communications and information exchange. By using the right questions in a particular situation, you can improve a whole range of communications skills: for example, you can gather better information and learn more; you can build stronger relationships; manage people more effectively and help others to learn too.

Here are some common questioning techniques, and when (and when not) to use them:

Open and Closed Questions

A closed question is good for testing understanding, concluding a discussion, and making a decision. A closed question usually receives a single word or very short, factual answer. For example, "Are you thirsty?" The answer is "Yes" or "No"; "Where do you live?" The answer is generally the name of a town or an address.

A misplaced closed question can kill the conversation and lead to awkward silences, so it is best to avoid using them when a conversation is in full flow.

Open questions elicit longer answers. They are good for developing a conversation, finding out more detail or discovering another's opinion or issues. They usually begin with what, why, how, tell me or describe. An open question asks the respondent for his or her knowledge, opinion or feelings.

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. It's often used by detectives taking a statement from a witness:

"How many people were involved in the fight?"

"About ten."

"Were they kids or adults?"

"Mostly kids."

"What sort of ages were they?"

"Junior High school age... young teenagers."

"Were any of them wearing anything distinctive?"

"Yes, several of them had red baseball caps on."

"Can you remember if there was a logo on any of the caps?"

"Now you come to mention it, yes, I remember seeing a bear."

Using this technique, the detective has helped the witness re-live the scene and gradually focus on a useful detail. It is unlikely he would have got this information if he's simply asked an open question such as "Are there any details you can give me about what you saw?"

Probing Questions

Asking probing questions is another strategy for finding out more detail, ensuring that you hear the whole story. Sometimes it's as simple as asking your respondent for an example, to help you understand a statement they have made. At other times, you need additional information for clarification, "When do you need this report by, and do you want to see a draft before I give you my final version?", or to investigate whether there is proof for what has been said, "How do you know that the new database can't be used by the sales force?" An effective way of probing is to use the 5 Whys method which can help you quickly get to the root of a problem.

Leading Questions

Leading questions are good for: Getting the answer you want but leaving the other person feeling that they have had a choice. Or for closing a sale: "If that answers all of your questions, shall we agree a price?" Leading questions try to lead the respondent to your way of thinking.

They can do this in several ways:

- With an assumption: "How late do you think that the project will be delivered?" This assumes that the project will certainly not be completed on time.
- By adding a personal appeal to agree at the end: "Lori's very efficient, don't you think?" or "This is a better option, isn't it?"
- Phrasing the question so that the "easiest" response is "yes" (our natural tendency to prefer to say "yes" than "no" plays an important part in the phrasing of referendum questions): "Shall we all approve Option 2?" is more likely to get a positive response than "Do you want to approve option 2 or not?" A good way of doing this is to make it personal. For example, "Would you like me to go ahead with Option 2?" rather than "Shall I choose Option 2?"
- Giving people a choice between two options, both of which you would be happy with, rather than the choice of one option or not doing anything at all. Strictly speaking, the choice of "neither" is still available when you ask "Which would you prefer of A or B", but most people will be caught up in deciding between your two preferences.

THE 5 WHYS

Problem: Your client is refusing to pay for the sales flyers you printed for them.

1. Why? The delivery was late, so the flyers couldn't be used.
2. Why? The job took longer than we anticipated.
3. Why? We ran out of printer ink.
4. Why? The ink was all used up on a big, last-minute order.
5. Why? We didn't have enough back up cartridges and we couldn't get an order here quickly enough.

This tool was developed in the 1930;s as a technique of Sakicki Toyoda, one of the fathers of the Japanese industrial revolution. Decision making is based upon an in-depth understanding of the processes in the organization rather than on what someone in administration thinks.

It is remarkable simple: when a problem occurs ask "why" no fewer than five times.

Note that leading questions tend to be closed. They need to be used with care. If you use them in a self-serving way or in a manner that harms the interests of the other person, then they can be seen as manipulative and dishonest.

Rhetorical Questions

Rhetorical questions aren't really questions at all, in that they don't expect an answer. They are questions used to engage the listener. They're really just statements phrased in question form: "Isn't Janet's design work so creative?" "You know what I mean?"

Rhetorical questions are even more powerful if you use a string of them. "Isn't that a great display? Don't you love the way the text picks up the colors in the photographs? Doesn't it use space really well? Wouldn't you love to have a display like that for our products?"

Allow the person you're questioning enough time to respond. This may need to include thinking time before they answer, so don't just interpret a pause as a "No comment" and plow on.

The motivation behind using questions needs to be understood. Are we asking a question to understand or to refute? Our motive, our body language and the tone of our voice can play a part in the answer we get to the questions we ask. To understand what people really mean with their answers, our skillful questioning needs to be matched by careful listening.

TIPS TO STRESS ~~FREE~~ LESS DURING THE HOLIDAY SEASON

by Tara Kuipers, Community Development Area Extension Educator, University of Wyoming Extension

(adapted from Inc.com's "Time Management Strategies" – www.inc.com)

Welcome to December! 'Tis the season we are expected to socialize more, spend more, eat more, drink more ... and even smile more! And all this while we have less available time...

Protect your most precious resources – your time, energy and sanity – by saying YES to the things that really matter so you can enjoy. Here are some ideas:

- 1. Changing seasons, changing expectations.** Winter weather may delay travels, stores will be busier and lines will be longer, budgets will be tighter... those are simply the realities of the holiday season! Expect those things and plan your time (and attitude!) accordingly, and you might find ourselves less anxious or frustrated. Don't be surprised if a quick errand takes you a few minutes longer, or your drive across town is slower than usual. Plan your day accordingly so that those adjustments don't throw off your day (or your mood!)
- 2. Be realistic.** Your coworker will duck out early a few times this month for his child's Christmas programs and recitals. Your daycare provider may need a few extra days off for holiday travel. Your boss is preoccupied because she's tending to year-end reports. While you might hope to maintain "business as usual" it might be better to consider December "business UN-usual" and be flexible. Don't take it personally, and be realistic with what can be accomplished in the waning, hectic weeks of the year's end.
- 3. Stick to the basics.** Everything we needed to know about holiday stress management, we learned in Kindergarten:
 - Get enough rest. *Yes, you can sneak out early from the office holiday party.*
 - Stay hydrated. *Sure, have a couple of cocktails, but alternate with water.*
 - Keep your food choices in check. *Of course, you should have Grandma's Famous Gingerbread Cookies. Just not all of them.*
 - Don't skimp on exercise. *No, you can't take the month off because it's cold and you're busy. You need to move your body NOW more than EVER! Bundle up, go indoors, or get up earlier ...whatever it takes to keep you moving.*

This time of year creates more expectations and pressures on our minds and bodies. That's just the reality of the season. So, do what you can to feel prepared, stay healthy and be realistic, and do whatever you can to find joy in this crazy-beautiful season. Happy Holidays!