



How to Effectively Question Others

There's been an explosion of interest in skills in questioning. Reasons include that we're learning the importance of critical thinking – a skills that comes from thinking about questions to pose to oneself and others. The field of personal and professional coaching also puts primary emphasis on the skill of asking good questions. Here are some basic guidelines for effective questioning.

First, Know Traits of Destructive Questions

- ❑ Avoid asking questions that can be answered simply with “yes” or “no.”

You gain little understanding or direction from such pointed questions that have such short answers. Instead, consider questions that start with “What,” “How,” “When” and “Where.”

- ❑ Avoid leading questions.

Leading questions are questions that are asked to lead another to a certain pre-determined conclusion or insight. Others can perceive those questions as manipulative and dishonest. Leading questions often can be answered with “yes” or “no,” for example, “You did what I suggested, right?”

- ❑ Avoid frequently asking questions that begin with “Why.”

Those types of questions can leave others feeling defensive, as if they are to be accountable to you to justify their actions. That feeling of defensiveness can damage feelings of trust and openness between you and your employees.

Traits of Useful Questions

- ❑ Where possible, use open-ended questions. Open-ended questions generate thinking and reflection on the part of the person you are coaching
- ❑ Ask questions to clarify what the other is saying. Clarifying questions help you and the person to understand the key point or “bottom line” of what he/she is saying.
- ❑ Ask questions about the person's perspectives, assumptions and actions. Adults can learn a great deal by closely examining their own thinking. (Use the “Ladder of Inference.”)
- ❑ Includes questions to move forward, to identify relevant and realistic actions to take about the situation. Adults tend to learn from experience – help them create experiences by taking actions.
- ❑ Ask questions to cultivate learning. Ask “What new knowledge, skills and abilities have you gleaned – or are you gleaning?”

Ladder of Inference

to Validate Our Perceptions, Decisions and Actions -- and How We Can Help to Change Ourselves and Others

Research indicates that, when people experience a recurring problem, they're usually stuck because of their own ongoing misperceptions and ineffective actions. The solution to their problem is rarely solved with a simple procedure, rather they have to change how they perceive the situation and what they're doing about it.

Experts in learning and adult education (particularly Chris Argyris) suggest that there is a chain, or ladder, of inferences that we make when we form an opinion or decide to take some action. The ladder can be used to examine how certain conclusions and actions were decided.

The ladder can be useful to help us understand our thinking and the thinking of other people. That understanding can be used to change ourselves and to change others by revealing misperceptions and ineffective actions.

Inquiry, or thoughtful questioning, is a powerful means to conduct this examination. We use inquiry to examine ourselves or others in each step of the ladder.

Note that, in most cases, the ladder is used to work backwards from a conclusion or action to understanding the process that derived that conclusion or action in the first place.

Step 1. I observe "data" from experiences (much as a videotape might capture data).

What information am I aware of, or did I see?

Step 2. I select "data" from what I observe (our beliefs affect what data we select).

What information was most important? Did I miss seeing something?

Step 3. I add meanings (cultural and personal).

How did I decide what's most important? What values or beliefs drove my decision?

Step 4. I make assumptions based on the meanings I added.

What does that important information suggest to me? How might I use it?

Step 5. I draw conclusion(s).

What am I going to believe and do with that important information?

Step 6. I adopt beliefs about the world.

What would others believe and do with that information? What values or beliefs drove their decisions?

Step 7. I take actions based on my beliefs.

What am I doing in the world because of my values and beliefs? What are others doing because of their values and beliefs ...

...values and beliefs based on what we choose to see (or not to see), what assumptions we make (or mistakenly make), and what we're going to rightfully do (or mistakenly do)?