



# **Great Conversations - text**

## Chapter 3

# **Communication skills: Asking questions**

# Asking questions

The right question at the right time has the power to unlock a new way of thinking. This is collaboration at its best - two people listening to each other, asking questions and building on each other's ideas.

But the wrong question can stop creativity in its tracks.

## Question time

The quality of your questions will be dependent on the quality of your listening, so you will need to draw on your listening skills from the previous chapter here.

To investigate your natural question-asking style, do this exercise. Then you will read about different ways to ask questions and how you might improve your approach.

Imagine this situation:

*Sara is one of your colleagues. You are both part of the same project team but you have different specialties. She is facing a challenge with another member of the project team, Sam. She calls you to discuss it.*

*Sara says to you, "I'm really struggling working with Sam on this project. He keeps coming up with ideas for what content to include. We agree on something, I go off and work on it, then the next week he wants the content to be totally different. I can't keep going on this way and I don't know how to address the problem. Can you help me think this through?"*

Considering that situation, what would you ask Sara? Write down your question.

## High quality questions

High quality questions are those that serve as an invitation to explore new territory and new thinking. The vast majority of the time, these are open questions.

If you sometimes feel concerned or uncomfortable about asking open questions, you are not alone. As with all elements of communication your brain sometimes gets in the way, but there are strategies to develop into a masterful asker of questions. One of the most important types of question is an open-ended question.

## Open-ended questions



The quality of your questions will depend on the quality of your listening. If you are able to listen actively, you will be able to ask open-ended questions that get you out of the domain of assumptions and blinkered thinking by inviting in others' ideas and viewpoints.

Perhaps most powerfully, open-ended questions can be thought-provoking for others: some questions will open minds and help the other person tap into new arenas of thought and creativity.

First, we will focus on how to craft open-ended questions. Here is the definition and structure.

### How to craft open-ended questions

Open-ended questions are designed to generate new thoughts and ideas. They generally:

- start with 'How...' or 'What...'
- avoid starting with 'Why...' as it can feel combative
- are short and curious
- cannot be answered with a quick 'Yes' or 'No'

### Here are a few examples:

- What would be an ideal solution to this problem?
- What skills could you draw on to help you resolve this?
- How could this be an opportunity?

## Pitfalls to avoid

As you learned in the previous chapter, humans have a tendency to get distracted when listening to others. Our brains are busy doing things like relating to the other person or trying to solve their problem. This can lead us to ask questions that are not open or that make it challenging for the other person to think and/or contribute. Many of these pitfalls stem back to how you are listening, what you are paying attention to and what your mindset is.

In this section you will see a number of questions with these distinctions:

👎 are questions resulting from one of the pitfalls

👍 are questions that are more likely to lead to a productive conversation.

## Relating

Questions that begin with "Is it...", "Did you...", or "Have you..." are closed ended and limiting. You will ask them when your attention is on your own idea or you are relating to the situation while you are listening. Perhaps, relating to how you have resolved a similar situation in the past. For example:

👎 "Did you talk to Sam about it?"

or

👎 "Have you thought about not responding to him?"

These questions limit the conversation to what is already in your mind and they do not leave room for the other person's contributions, responsibility or new thinking.

More open questions might be:

👍 "What would be a better way of working for you?"

Or

👍 "How could you get what you need?"

Both of which would invite Sara to think through her own approach and start to learn how to manage her working relationships.

## Sneaking in a solution

"Have you thought about doing it this way....?" or "What if you tried....?" are ways to sneak your solution into a question.

For example, in the Sara and Sam situation this might be:

👎 "Have you thought about teaching Sam about time management?"



This type of question will occur to you if you are listening as the problem solver or if you want to "help" by providing answers. If you really want to be a problem solver, you don't really need an open-ended question.

But if you want to get someone to think for themselves, you would need to ask a more open question, that does not contain your own ideas. For example,

👍 "What would be your approach to agreeing on the content?"

or

👍 "What do you see is possible in this situation?"

## Gathering information



Some questions sound like interview questions and only serve to gather information. Why? Because you are listening like an investigator - so that you can solve the problem. Some examples:

👉 "What does Sam say when he changes his mind?"

👉 "How do you react when he changes the plan?"

👉 "What have you tried already?"

These technically open-ended questions are indications that you are controlling the conversation and doing the thinking yourself (and getting the dopamine). If you let go of the responsibility to solve the problem and instead focus on Sara and getting her to think, you might instead ask:

👍 "What does a great working relationship look like for you?"

👍 "What could you do to change it?"

## Asking "Why"

It is also a good idea to avoid 'why' questions because they often create defensiveness or long stories and explanations that are not necessary.

Instead, transform a question like *"why is that important?"* to *"What is important about that?"* The 'what' question is more likely to have the other person stop and consider the question and come up with a thoughtful and useful answer that creates more self-understanding for both of you.

Questions that start with "Why...?" are open, but do not often help move the conversation forward. For example:

👉 "Why do you find Sam's approach challenging?"

This question is likely to elicit one of two responses.

Sara might embark on a long explanation about the impact Sam's approach is having on her. Although she might feel better in the short term for venting about Sam, it is unlikely to lead to a solution.

Alternatively, this question might make Sara feel defensive. "Why" can come across as combative, as if you are demanding a justification, which could cause a limbic reaction from Sara.

A more open question might be:

👍 "What is most challenging for you about Sam's approach?"

An even more productive question, could be:

👍 "How would you like to work with Sam?"

This question would encourage new thinking, rather than focusing on what has already happened

## Reflect on these questions

Given all that you learned above, decide if each of the following questions would either enhance or limit a conversation.

- How was that meeting for you?
- Why did you choose those images for the front of the report?
- How did you discover that?
- What if you created a new web page to solve the problem?
- Who is doing which part?
- Did you work with Shanette on it?

There were a few limiting questions there, that could have seemed like open, enhancing questions. Did you spot them?

### Questions that enhance:

- **How was that meeting for you?** This invites sharing and does not start with an assumption.
- **How did you discover that?** This is short, open and curious.

### Questions that limit:

- **Why did you choose that image for the front of the report?** 'Why' questions can often create defensiveness or long explanations that are not very informative. Consider an alternative such as 'What is important about this image?'
- **What if you created a web page to solve that problem?** This is a suggestion sneakily disguised as a question. Consider an open alternative such as 'What would be an ideal solution to this problem?'
- **Who is doing which part?** This is an "information gathering question" that will give you more information about a situation, but will also limit the conversation to the kinds of questions you can think of. Try a broader question such as 'How will you manage the project?'
- **Did you work with Shanette on it?** This is a limiting question that's focused on just one possible solution.

## Strategies to overcome blocks

Understanding what an open question looks like is one thing. Being able to ask them in the moment is another.

There are many reasons we get concerned about asking questions - sometimes they create uncertainty or other threats. For example, empowering someone else on your team to answer their own questions rather than advising them may threaten your sense of status within the team.

To become masterful, you need to be able to overcome these blocks when they arise.

Consider these different blocks and the strategies to overcome them.

### When you find that you are waiting to ask your next question: It's time to be more mindful

It's common to want to ask that burning question. But it stops you from listening and you might actually miss the answer to the question you want to ask, or you might realise your question is irrelevant.

Use ABC or other mindful techniques to set it aside and be here now. Listen fully, then find your question. It's OK to have a moment of silence before you ask your question.



### When you keep refining your questions with other questions: *One question at a time*

Many people have a tendency to clarify a question with another question. Ask one question and then stop - let go of your need to do it right.

Let them ask for clarification if they don't understand.

### When you want to get someone to the 'right' answer: *Don't "lead the witness"*

If you have a specific outcome that you want people to get to, don't try to manipulate them with questions - just tell them what you want them to know.

You can get back into a collaborative conversation by then asking them how your idea sounds to them or what other ideas that inspire them.



## When the conversation seems to go around in circles: *"Try on" someone else's shoes to invite new thinking*



When conversations go over and over the same ground, it's likely that you are stuck in a mindset or fixed way of viewing the world.

To break this pattern, new thinking will be essential. A great way to do that is to try and imagine how someone else would approach this situation. Consider a friend, colleague, mentor, superstar, sibling, etc.

Then ask, "How do you think XX would approach this situation?" Or, "How do you think XX would advise you about this?"

## Strategies to dealing with discomfort

You might be concerned that asking open questions could create uncomfortable situations such as silence or emotional conversations.

The strategies below will support you to work through concerns you may have about uncomfortable situations.



Working through your own discomfort will enable you to have more open, collaborative conversations with your team. You are likely to improve your working relationships as a result.

Consider each of these typical areas of discomfort and the strategy to deal with it.

### When silence makes you uncomfortable: *Stretch your capacity to stay*

Silence is often an indication that you asked a great question, so give them time to answer it before filling the space. People need time to think and they may appreciate the time you give them to do that. This may feel uncomfortable at first, but you will get used to it.

### When you don't know where the conversation is going: *Be willing to be surprised*

When you ask a question that you really do not know the answer to, you may end up with completely new information, new thoughts and ideas.

If you like a lot of certainty, or are used to being in control of a conversation, then this may be uncomfortable. Understand that you probably don't know *everything* there is to know about a situation but the other person might. Their answers may surprise you and this may lead to important, relevant aspects of a situation that you had no idea about.

### When emotions show up and you're not sure what to do: *Remember that emotions are normal*



If you've asked a great question, it might move someone or have them tap into an emotional experience.

This can be quite powerful – and useful - for them. Please don't avoid these questions or run away from the situation.

Stretch yourself and learn to stay present when others experience emotions.

Let those emotions be part of the conversation. It's just the limbic system needing to have a say. They are just emotions, they won't hurt you and you don't have to fix them.

## Which of these blocks or discomforts do you experience?

- I wait for my turn to respond
- I refine my question with more questions
- I guide someone to the right answer
- I am uncomfortable with silence or emotion
- I want to avoid lengthy repetitive conversations
- I am uncomfortable not knowing where the conversation is going
- I try to fill the silence

Make note of what is uncomfortable for you and make a plan to overcome it using the tips above.

## Review your question

Review the question you wrote down earlier in response to Sara about her work with Sam. Ask yourself these questions:

- How open is your question?
- How does it encourage Sara to find a solution that she would own and feel good about?
- What blocks might have been getting in the way?
- What discomfort were you trying to avoid?

Consider Sara's dilemma again and then see if there are other questions you might want to ask.

*Sara says to you, "I'm really struggling working with Sam on this project. He keeps coming up with ideas for what content to include. We agree on something, I go off and work on it, then the next week he wants the content to be totally different. I can't keep going on this way and I don't know how to address the problem. Can you help me think this through?"*

Given everything you learned in this chapter, what are some questions that might be useful for Sara? Write them down for future reference and discussion with others.