

## **The Power of Questions: A Secret to Effective Communication**

**By Mitchell Goozé**

Have you ever wondered about questions? Do you know anyone who consistently seems to ask all the right questions...in just the right way? Have you noticed that these people are also marvelous conversationalists, even though you do most of the talking? What makes questions such an effective communication tool? How can you learn to use the power of questions to your advantage? In this article we explore how to use questions to help you become a better communicator.

### **Why are questions so powerful?**

Have you noticed that you have to do three things to maximize the power of your questions? First, you must ask a good question. Second, and in many instances more important than the first, you must be very attuned to how you ask. Finally, you must genuinely listen to the response...even if it's silence.

Your listening skills need work, wouldn't you agree? All of us need work on our listening skills and this short article is not adequate to cover the subject. But, did you know that research has been done measuring who burns the most energy in a conversation, the talker or the listener? You're right, the listener.

So, if you want to work on your listening skills, be prepared to invest more energy focusing your ears and your eyes on what is being said (content) and how they are saying it (intent).

### **What's a good question?**

A good question is one that accomplishes what the questioner intended. Do you intend to solicit information, influence them, embarrass them, or change the subject?

Think through what you want to accomplish before you ask, and you'll have a better question. Incidentally, your question can be excellent and not be within the context of the conversation. What better way to change the subject or to encourage out-of-the-box thinking?

### **How do you ask a question?**

Your manner is critical and must fit your intent, or your integrity will be an issue. You can be intimidating, neutral or struggling. Given that you mostly want to solicit straight answers, stick with a neutral or struggling manner.

Have you noticed that most people want to help others, especially if they perceive the need is genuine? This very human behavior is true with questions, so work on asking your questions from a struggling (I need your help) manner. Watch Lt. Columbo on reruns of the TV show *Columbo* to see a great model of this style.

### **Who controls a conversation?**

Does the talker or the listener control the conversation? You're right again, the listener, because they're usually the one who asked the question.

Being in control is powerful. Questions let you direct the subject, the range, the depth, and the amount of time invested. This point alone makes questions one of your most powerful tools.

### **How do you nudge someone from defensiveness toward openness?**

Have you noticed how you can't really tell anyone anything? What happens when you try? They become defensive, at least in their mind, if not openly. They're saying to themselves that you don't understand this aspect of the situation or that you don't have the background to appreciate what's really going on. And since their perception is their reality, they're right.

So give yourself a big break and avoid defensiveness and closed minds. Focus on what to ask, not what to tell. Let the other person educate you with their knowledge and experience while you help *them* discover the potential problem that concerns *you* by asking questions all around the problem until they jump into the center of the circle. They're much more likely to feel like they own the problem and be more inclined to fix it.

### **How do you engage another person's mind?**

What happens when someone asks you a question? It's virtually impossible for your mind not to start searching for an answer. Can you think of a faster or more surefire way to engage another person, especially in a topic that interests them?

### **How do you quickly discover needed information?**

How do you find out what you need to know, fast? Right, find a knowledgeable person and ask a lot of questions. Be a reporter and interview them. Ask the classic open-ended (tough to answer with yes, no or maybe) questions first: Who? What? When? Where? Ask "why" with care. How do you respond when someone asks you *why* you chose to do something or not do something? It's difficult for most of us not to slip into a defensive state. Defensive people are not as forthcoming with information. So slow your rate of speech and lower your voice when you ask why. It also helps if you struggle a lot while you're asking why.

### **How do you answer a question you don't know how to answer?**

What do you say when you don't know how to answer? You ask a question, of course. So, what question do you ask in response and how do you ask it? Here's how: "(Pause) Glad you asked. Could you help me better understand what you mean by...?"

First, pause and look thoughtful so the questioner knows you're taking their question seriously. Second, make a flattering remark to mitigate the inherent intrusiveness of the question you're about to ask, such as "Glad you asked" or "Good question." Third, pick one word or idea out of their question and ask them to expand on it.

They won't think you're dumb; they'll think they didn't explain themselves well enough and will then proceed to give you a lot more information. Now you're in a better position to answer their question or, better yet, to ask them another question. (Hint: Practice at home first, and you'll be amazed at what you discover!)

### **How do you let someone know you care about them and their contribution?**

Why is your mother so special? There are a thousand and one reasons, but one of the biggest is that she, among all others, really listens to you. Asking a good question about the

other person and then totally focusing on them and truly listening to what they say and how they feel is one the greatest gifts you can give.

When was the last time someone gave that gift to you? Could you give it more yourself?  
When will you start?

### **What have we learned?**

May I ask you a final question? Did you find yourself absorbed in reading this paper? And did you notice that 80% of the sentences were questions? Do you think the two are related?

Now you're a lot smarter about questions, don't you think?

Are questions powerful? Yes, incredibly so. How can you use them more often and more effectively? Challenge yourself not to tell anyone anything for the next hour. Turn all your telling into questions. When you can do this for a week, you'll be well along the path to mastering the power of questions.

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