

# Questioning and Listening Skills

## Introduction

Communication is the process of exchanging information. It includes both transmitting and receiving messages. Effective business communication, however, requires taking ownership for any information exchange in which you are involved, and being proactive about both questioning and listening. Your ability to communicate effectively is a major determinant in how successful you'll be in addressing your project issues.

## Questions for Better Questioning

A systematic approach to questioning is the best way to gather and confirm information—two skills that lie at the heart of effective use of rational processes. Unless you learn to ask questions effectively, you are unlikely to get the information you need to resolve a concern.

To be an effective questioner, consider the following issues prior to asking a question:

- Why am I asking this question? Every question has an intent—a reason for asking it. The best questions come from a very clear intent, and knowing your intent helps guide your questioning.
- On what assumptions is this question based? Questions spring from assumptions you have already made. You'll be a more effective questioner if you are aware of your assumptions and keep them consistent with the facts.
- What is the best way to ask this question? You must think about the information you are seeking when formulating your questions. Often, slight changes in language produce very different results. When phrasing a question, choose your words carefully. After all, your words should reflect your intent.
- Where am I likely to find the best answer? Finally, every time you need to gather information, you must consider the best source for the answer. While primary sources of information are always preferable, you may have to balance the need for information against the time available and the effort required.

## Types of Questions

There are several types of questions: open questions, closed questions, fact-finding questions, feeling-finding questions, and questions to the void. Is one form of questioning better than the others? No. It depends on the situation. Additionally, a single question often combines two or more types of questions. For example, you may use an open, fact-finding question or a closed, feeling-finding question.

### ***Open questions***

Open questions invite unrestricted answers. They are used to gather or clarify new information and to stimulate involvement and thinking. The only limit that open questions impose is to confine responses to a defined topic, and they may often lead to multiple answers to the same question. Also known as “free answer,” “free response,” or “unrestricted questions,” open questions usually start with interrogative words such as “What,” “Where,” “When,” “Who,” “Why,” or “How.”

### ***Closed questions***

Closed questions are used to elicit limited information, often in one-word answers. You should ask a closed question to confirm or verify information, clarify something you're unsure about, limit the universe of choices offered, indicate a direction, or demonstrate understanding. Also known as “binary,” “multiple choice,” or “restricted” questions, closed questions usually start with interrogative words such as “Do,” “Have,” “Will,” “Can,” “Are,” or “Is.” Sometimes people will answer a closed question as if you asked an open question. Be ready for a long answer, even though you expect a short one.

### ***Fact-finding questions***

Use fact-finding questions to solicit specific, objective information rather than opinions, assumptions, or insights. Beware: these types of questions may leave people feeling frustrated or uninvolved. They may feel they are being interrogated. Use a mix of fact-finding and feeling-finding questions to reduce the potential for resentment.

## ***Feeling-finding questions***

Contrary to fact-finding questions, feeling-finding questions solicit subjective, sometimes emotional expressions of opinion or judgment. Some people may feel more valued and involved when asked this type of question, while others may feel uncomfortable at the personal nature of the question. You must be prepared to deal with the emotions evoked by these questions.

## ***Questioning to the void***

This is a questioning strategy in which you ask a series of questions to extract as much specific and complete information as possible. The premise is that people often do not have all the information you need or will not volunteer all the information you need without rigorous questioning. After asking a series of such questions, you'll ultimately reach the "void," or the place where there is no further information you can gain from that source. At that point, you need to decide whether you have enough information to resolve your concern or whether to seek another source to fill in the gaps.

There are three types of questions used in this strategy: turnaround questions, "What else...?" questions, and "Why?" questions. You should use all three types of questions to make concerns more specific and easier to work on. As with the other types of questions, be careful of your tone of voice when using this questioning strategy because it can leave people with the impression that they're being interrogated.

- **Turnaround questions** re-ask the question based on the answer. Use turnaround questions when you are searching for the most specific answer. When you stop making progress, you've reached the void. An example: When can you complete the business plan? (Probably next week.) When next week? (Sometime by the end of next week.) When sometime by the end of next week? (By Thursday afternoon.) When on Thursday afternoon? (3:30 p.m.) At this point, you've hit the void. You now know precisely at what time the business plan will be ready.
- **What else... ?** questions re-ask the question in the same form. You would ask a "What else...?" question when you are searching for the most complete information you can get about a concern or when you are seeking to break down a broad concern into more specific concerns. When you stop making progress you've reached the void. An example: What concerns you about the pollution problem? (Fish are dying.) What else concerns you about the pollution problem? (The Department of Environmental Protection may fine us.) What else concerns you about the pollution problem? (We could receive bad press coverage.) What else concerns you about the pollution problem? (Investors may withdraw their investments.) What else concerns you about the pollution problem? (Nothing else.) At this point, there is no further information to be had about the pollution problem. You have completed separating your concern. You can now move on to the next step of Situation Appraisal.
- **Why... ?** questions help you look beyond the problem or potential problem of the moment to ensure that you have identified its root cause. You may have only uncovered one symptom of a larger problem that, if not addressed, will continue creating the same or a similar problem. For example, "Line #6 overheats." Why? (The fan belt came loose.) Why? (Excessive machine vibration.) Why? (Don't know.) In this case, the company will change the fan belt, but will also want to conduct a Problem Analysis on the problem, "Line #6 vibrates excessively."

In addition, the "Why...?" questioning process (also known as stair stepping) will often surface several concerns that need to be addressed in a Situation Appraisal, besides the problem that needs to be solved using Problem Analysis. For example, "Major customer is angry." Why? (Because we are not shipping their hardware on time.) Why? (Because the hardware has to stay in the factory so we can rework the paint job.) Why? (Because there are paint gaps on their initial pass-through paint inspection.) Why? (Don't know.) In this example, the company must appease the customer, make a decision about the best method to make up back orders, review the paint process rework area to look for process improvements, and find the cause of the paint gaps on the hardware.

## ***Barriers to Effective Questioning***

Your questioning strategy could be brilliant and yet yield disappointing results. Why? Certain factors beyond your control could act as barriers to effective questioning.

## ***Defensiveness***

Sometimes your questioning is less successful because people are on the defensive. This could be caused by fear of reprisal, or because no one wants to be accused of finger-pointing. Allay these fears by clarifying your intent to the person you're questioning and by offering encouragement for him or her to continue answering your questions.

## ***Confidential issues***

People could be afraid to share confidential information or may be hiding information for personal reasons. Explain why you need the information, what you'll do with it, and the importance of receiving it. Offer encouragement for cooperation.

## ***Personal style***

The personal style of the individual may be a deterrent. People who are quiet, shy, or insecure may not want to volunteer information. Encourage involvement, acknowledge their opinions, reward effort, and point out the benefits of participation. Let them know they are giving you helpful information.

## ***Environmental interference***

Environmental interference (such as excessive noise, heat, cold, other distractions in the physical environment) might cause people to be distracted. Hold the conversation in a quiet, private location; choose a convenient moment (from the point of view of the other person) to ask the questions.

## ***Questioning How-to's***

Before you embark on an information-gathering mission, develop a questioning plan. Know the person you are questioning, if possible. Choose an appropriate time and place to ask your questions. During questioning, do the following:

- Ask for permission to question the person before hitting them with a barrage of questions.
- Move from broad, open questions to narrow, closed questions.
- Build on previous responses by using questioning to the void techniques.
- Focus your questions on the topic for which you want more information. Use common language so that you are easily understood.
- Mix different types of questions so you can gather as much information as possible.

## ***Active Listening***

Effective questioning is only part of the communication equation. Active listening-the other component in the communication equation-means understanding and acknowledging the full meaning of what the speaker is saying, both facts and feelings. It allows the listener and the speaker to relate, exchange information, and reach understanding. If you are not an active listener, your questioning strategy will fail because you'll have missed salient points in the conversation or ignored both verbal and nonverbal cues.

One of the critical aspects of active listening is that it's a conscious choice: You make the decision to listen or to do something else. Distractions caused either by noise in the environment, the speaker's use of language, or the speaker's tone of delivery can reduce your listening capability.

By listening actively to others on your team, you show your respect for their thoughts and feelings.

## ***Listening how-to's***

There are four key elements to being an active listener: hear, interpret, evaluate, and respond.

### ***Hear the message***

Active listening means focusing intently on the speaker's message. If you listen selectively, you could miss important information. Your values, interests, experience, emotional "deaf spots," and even the topic's importance influence how you filter information. Hold off interpreting the message until you've heard it completely.

### ***Interpret the message***

Active listening involves understanding the speaker's verbal and nonverbal messages.

- Verbal cues: Words can explain ideas, concepts, and experiences, but it's the listener who ultimately provides the meaning behind the words. Your biases, prejudices, assumptions, preconceived notions, pet peeves, etc., could color your understanding of the message. Try to handle the information objectively.

- **Nonverbal cues:** Gestures, facial expression, eye movement, posture, proximity, body position, breathing, complexion, and energy level are signals to help you interpret a speaker's message. Inflection and tone of voice can convey more meaning than the words used. Be alert to inconsistencies between the speaker's nonverbal and verbal cues.

Verify your interpretation of verbal and nonverbal cues by paraphrasing what the speaker said, asking for clarification, questioning to the void, or providing feedback. There are usually a number of ways that a message could be interpreted. If you don't take the time to confirm your understanding, you run the risk of operating with faulty-sometimes even damaging-information.

#### *Evaluate the message*

Active listening doesn't mean automatically accepting what is being said. It means thinking critically about what you've heard and being sure you've got the whole picture before reaching a conclusion. Here are some do's and don'ts that will help you evaluate the message effectively.

<b>Evaluating the message Do's</b>	<b>Evaluating the message Don'ts</b>
Get key information	Jump to conclusions
Gain commitment	Be compliant
Think analytically	Think mechanically
Listen actively	Hear passively
Consider both facts and feelings	Consider only the facts
Be objective	Make a value judgment

#### *Respond to the message*

An active listener provides both verbal and nonverbal feedback when responding to a speaker. Good listeners let the speaker know the message was heard, understood, evaluated correctly, and they are prepared to follow up. When responding to a message, avoid being defensive, using the blank stare approach, or sending a mixed message (i.e., inconsistency between verbal and nonverbal cues).

#### **Handling answers**

How you handle answers is another key to gathering and confirming useful information. Handling answers means receiving and assessing information given to you by others. There are five components to handling answers: listening, acknowledging, confirming, recording, and providing feedback.

##### *Listening*

Gestures and facial expressions such as making eye contact, leaning forward, and nodding your head show the speaker that you're interested in what he or she has to say. They create a nonjudgmental atmosphere which encourages the speaker to keep speaking.

##### *Acknowledging*

Use nonjudgmental words and a neutral tone of voice to fill in the gaps when the speaker pauses. This shows that you are paying attention and encourages the speaker to continue speaking. To acknowledge, use words or phrases such as "ah-hah," "uh-huh," "yeah," "I see," "I got it," "I understand," and "That's right."

##### *Confirming*

Paraphrase what the speaker said, but in your own words, to confirm the answers to your questions. This shows the speaker you understand what he or she has said and enables you to check for mutual understanding of the facts. Phrases that will help you practice this technique are: "What I hear you saying is..." and "If I understand you, you think that..."

##### *Recording*

Document the speaker's message by writing the information on an easel or screen or entering it into the appropriate worksheets.

## *Providing feedback*

Give the speaker feedback about the usefulness of his or her message. This helps the speaker to understand what changes may be necessary to the message, if any. Phrases to use when you provide feedback are: "What you gave me was useful because it..." and "The way you organized the information was useful because..."

## **Handling unsatisfactory answers**

- Sometimes an answer may be confusing or won't match the question asked. This could be because the person you asked interpreted the question incorrectly or because your intent was not clear. For example, you ask, "Have you spoken to Robert?" The person, guessing at what you want to know, answers, "He hasn't submitted his report today." To get the information you need, clarify the intent of your question, then ask it again.
- At other times, an answer may raise doubts about how the person you asked got his or her facts. For example, you ask, "When did this problem start?" The person answers, "They said it started last Tuesday." To be confident that this information is factual, and to identify the credibility of the information, you should ask, "Who said that?"
- Incomplete answers may also cause problems. For example, you ask, "What are your objectives in choosing the computer?" and the person answers, "Processing speed." If you suspect there could be other objectives, use questioning to the void techniques to ask, "What other objectives do you have?"
- Finally, the answer you receive may be too general. For example, you ask, "What has the problem?" The information source answers, "It's the system." You know that "system" could mean a lot of things, so you ask a turnaround question-"What do you mean by system?"-to get a more specific and useful answer.

## **Handling Emotional Situations**

Sometimes when you ask feeling-finding questions, the person responding may become emotional. Allow the person to express the emotion without interruption. This does not imply you are agreeing with the emotion, but merely letting the person speak. Show empathy and indicate an understanding or appreciation of the other person's dilemma by summarizing the emotion you think the person is expressing. Use a phrase like "It seems to me you are feeling angry (or disappointed or upset, etc.)." Once you have reflected the emotion, summarize the content of the message. Only after demonstrating a willingness to "put yourself in the other person's shoes," state your own views and opinions. Then, if the situation requires it, discuss any follow-up that might be needed.

## **Barriers to Listening**

Listening is an acquired skill, not an innate one. Certain behaviors act as barriers to active listening. Indulging in any of these behaviors when listening to someone speak will prevent you from being an effective listener. Here's a list of behaviors that are barriers to active listening:

- Avoiding-not taking the time to listen
- Daydreaming-letting your mind wander while listening
- Interrupting-not letting the speaker finish, so you can argue or advise
- Judging-evaluating, rather than understanding, the speaker's words
- Biasing-hearing what you want to hear, rather than what is said
- Preparing-rehearsing your response, rather than listening
- Pretending-going through the motions of listening, but not hearing the message
- Comparing-trying to assess whether you are smarter, more competent, more successful, funnier than the speaker
- Identifying-connecting everything said to your own experience
- Filtering-listening to some things and not to others

Environmental distractions, such as equipment, noise, rapid activity, or glaring lights can also impede active listening. Remember, active listening is a conscious choice. You make the decision to listen or not.

## **Summary**

Your success in using the rational processes is directly connected to your ability to communicate effectively. The processes rely on questions to gather, organize, and confirm information. Your ability to ask the right kind of questions to the right sources in the right way will determine the quality and quantity of information you receive. And just as important, your ability to truly hear the answers and respond accordingly will also impact your ability to gather and make use of information. Along the way, watch out for barriers like high emotions or personal style that could hinder your efforts.