



Asking Good Questions

Regular readers will have noticed that I have an interest (some say obsession) in how questions are framed and so today I would like to explore: what makes a question a good question?

I would like to propose the following criteria:

1. It encourages, if not forces, the other person to think
2. It reveals information, if not insights
3. It demonstrates genuine interest, if not care

If you were to accept these criteria then we can consider the appropriate construction of questions to meet these criteria. What do you think of these tests for framing good questions?

Open not Closed

If we are to meet the first two criteria then the question must be framed as “open” not “closed”. Closed questions are those that produce one word answers. Closed questions kill conversations. Consider the difference between asking “did you enjoy the movie?” with “what did you enjoy about the movie?” The former is a closed question whilst the latter is more likely to encourage the other person to think. It may provide more information about the film, and perhaps some insights into the other person’s like and dislikes.

[This may look easy but I am astonished how many people find it difficult to convert closed questions to open questions when I conduct this exercise in my Questions workshop. In past columns I have provided some challenging examples such as “do you need any help?” or “do you have any questions?” or “are you OK with that?” You might like to monitor your personal frequency of using closed v open questions if you think that you currently ask good questions.]



Non-Judgmental

Framing the question to avoid any perception of judgment is important if we are to achieve the 2nd criteria and not put the 3rd criteria at risk. Using adjectives and opinion in your question is a sure sign of judgment. (eg “What did you do that silly thing for?”). This should be easy to spot but sometimes the judgment is more subtle – and not even deliberate. Consider how you would respond if you were asked “why do you believe that?” compared with “what is behind your belief about that?” In my experience the former is more likely to generate a defensive response which is not conducive to insights. It also does not position the “asker” as being genuinely interested in the person.

Using Pronouns

Achieving the 3rd criteria is a little more tricky when it comes to framing as the degree of interest and/or care is often conveyed through the appropriate use of tone. However, the use of the appropriate pronoun when wording the question is also likely to be valuable. An enquiry about someone’s business may be illustrative. Consider the difference between these two questions: “how’s business?” and “how’s your business?” Similarly, for an employee, note the difference between “how’s work?” and “how’s your work?” It seems to me that if you used the latter wording you would be implying greater interest than the former wording.

If you would like to ask good questions I suggest that the first step is to become more aware of the structure, wording and impact of your questions. With some self-awareness you can practice some key success factors: use open questions; avoid judgment and deploy the right pronouns.

I hope you enjoy the outcomes.....