



## Do You Understand?

I recently attended a presentation to a Board. It was a complex matter and the speaker was professional and used good quality slides. At the end he wrapped up with “OK, any questions?” I could sense that there were plenty of unspoken questions but no-one was comfortable enough to actually speak up. If the communication is to be successful, how might they more effectively confirm the understanding of the other party?

It seems to me that the solution lies in framing open questions to test comprehension rather than adopt traditional closed questions. In the above situation a closed question like “any questions?” or “does everyone understand?” is unlikely to elicit a valuable response from most audiences. It is human nature to avoid appearing ignorant. A more effective question might be: “What aspect would you like me to elaborate on?” If the open question was well-positioned it would put the audience at ease, for example: “This is a rather technical matter. How can I help clarify the key points?” I believe this is a more genuine method of inviting queries.

Similarly, picture a scenario where a presenter is providing a series of recommendations. It is tempting for him/her to jump straight to: “Do you agree with these recommendations?” This doesn’t leave much room for the other party and doesn’t truly test the support for the recommendations. An alternative open question may be: “What concerns do you have about these recommendations?” This allows the presenter to clearly identify the issues and enable him/her to address them.

What would be the benefits of adopting this style? The open question lets the other party know that the presenter actually expects some concerns. Rather than risk appearing threatened by them the presenter is welcoming them. Ultimately the presenter should be more confident that the recommendations are accepted on merit. Better still, the presenter may well be respected for this more open approach.

This is not easy! In these two scenarios the speaker is accepting responsibility and, even more scarily, accountability for the success of the communication. This means putting some ego aside and recognising that there may be some imperfections in our explanation or some unsatisfied concerns. However, if the other party is going to genuinely understand and genuinely agree then we will need to use good questions to test how successful we have been.