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Mastering The Art Of Asking Questions

Getting the answers you need

by Beverly Y. Langford, author of "The Etiquette Edge" and president of LMA Communication. Dr. Langford teaches management communication in the Robinson College of Business, Georgia State University.

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Leaders have two valuable tools at their disposal in order to find out what's really going on in their organizations and identify solutions to solve problems facing the company. Whether you are a senior manager, a department head, or a team leader, if you know how to ask good questions and then listen carefully to the answers, you will be ahead of the game in leveraging the good judgment and expertise of the people in your organization.

Asking the right questions in the right way takes considerable skill and interpersonal savvy. If you think about it, we aren't predisposed to like questions. The first inquisitors were our parents. "Where have you been?" "Why are you late?" "Have you cleaned your room?" Then we went to school, and not only did the questions become more frequent but the stakes also got higher. We had to produce our answers in front of other people, and we often suffered the consequences of the wrong response.

In our society, we talk about someone being questioned by the police. "Grilled," "interrogated," and "cross-examined" all carry negative connotations. Even the word "interview" can fill produce apprehension. So it's no wonder that when the boss starts asking questions, many workers either literally or figuratively run for cover. If you want to get the straight story, ward off disasters, and preserve morale, these guidelines can give you the edge.

State The Point Of Your Question

If you are in a position of authority and you ask a colleague or a direct report a question, that person's defense mechanisms go into overdrive. Why are you asking the question? What are you really trying to discover? Is this question a kind of trap? Immediately the person becomes wary and self-protective, and the answer may be less than candid. Let the person know why you are asking the question and why you need an answer. For example, say something like "I am trying to find ways to cut some operating costs, so that's why I need to know about what we spent on that last project." When others understand your motives, they may be less inclined to adjust their answer.

Describe What's At Stake

Is your question related to an urgent matter, or are you simply gathering general information that you may use later? Will the person's answer adversely affect anyone else? Is the answer going to contribute significantly to solving a problem? People like to know how their actions and knowledge impact the bigger picture. One way organizations build commitment is by making people feel that their actions are meaningful and essential.

Ask Open-ended Questions For Information And Closed-Ended Questions For Agreement

Do you want a simple yes or no, or do you want to launch a more substantial conversation with your question. Learn to ask open-ended questions that start with words like "how," "what," "where," or "when." "Where can we cut costs in this process?" "When did you first notice that this customer seemed dissatisfied?" "What made you realize that we weren't getting the best deal on those parts?" Closed-ended questions seal the deal or help you understand that you need to have further conversation. "So, do you feel comfortable moving ahead on the project?" Whether the answer is yes or no, you'll know what your next step should be.

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Ask "Why" Questions With Care

If the situation is not stressful and the topic is void of controversy, why-questions won't pose a problem. However, if the opposite is true, a question that starts with "why" can immediately put people on the defensive and shut down effective dialogue. In reality, all too many questions that start with "why" aren't legitimate requests for information. They are, in fact, challenges or accusations. "Why did you delete the program without reading the manual?" "Why didn't you tell me that we were about to lose that customer to the competition?"

Begin those difficult conversations with a question that doesn't instantly escalate into an adversarial situation, such as "Can you bring me up to date on the meeting that you had with representatives from this company client?"

Make Sure That Your Body Language Encourages An Answer

No matter how well you frame your questions, your nonverbal communication can undermine your message. Your tone, as well as your body language, can establish a threatening undercurrent to even the most carefully crafted questions and send your coworkers or direct reports scurrying to the safety of an innocuous and useless response.

Create a safe environment by asking your questions in a manner that encourages others to answer, and be careful to maintain receptive body language when they respond.

Open communication takes intention and diligence. And, learning to ask questions well can make a major difference both in increasing effectiveness and improving relationships.

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