

Top Tips

Questioning

Types of question

Many situations involve you seeking information, whether this is from a team member, a customer, or another part of the business. These situations may include a coaching, recruitment or negotiating element, where asking the right questions is essential to making progress. The commonest types of questions are:

- **Open questions** – ‘Why do you find it difficult to get here on time?’ These are designed to get the other person to open up and talk, and get you the maximum information. They usually start with How, Why, What, When, Where, Who, or ‘Tell me about...’
- **Probing questions** – ‘What exactly is the problem with your journey to work?’ These are used to get more detail or specific facts about a topic, particularly if the person is becoming evasive or tries to change the subject.
- **Closed questions** – ‘Will you use the bus from now?’ These usually start with a verb and are intended to gain a direct answer such as Yes or No, and sometimes to gain agreement or commitment to an action.

Other questions that may occasionally be useful include:

- **Comparison questions** – ‘Which job did you prefer?’
- **Summarising questions** – ‘So you had three years with that employer in all?’
- **Reflecting questions** – ‘So you really enjoyed that project?’
- **Summarising questions** are intended to bring together facts, whereas reflecting questions are more about probing feelings.
- **Hypothetical questions** – ‘What would you do if?’
- **Challenging or Exploring questions** – ‘Have you looked at it like this.....?’ These are designed to get the person to think differently, such as when coaching.
- **Mirroring questions** -these are not actual questions, but consist of repeating the last word or few words the other person has said, to indicate you’d like to hear more about the topic; ‘You lost interest in the role?’ Use them sparingly or you risk sounding like a parrot!

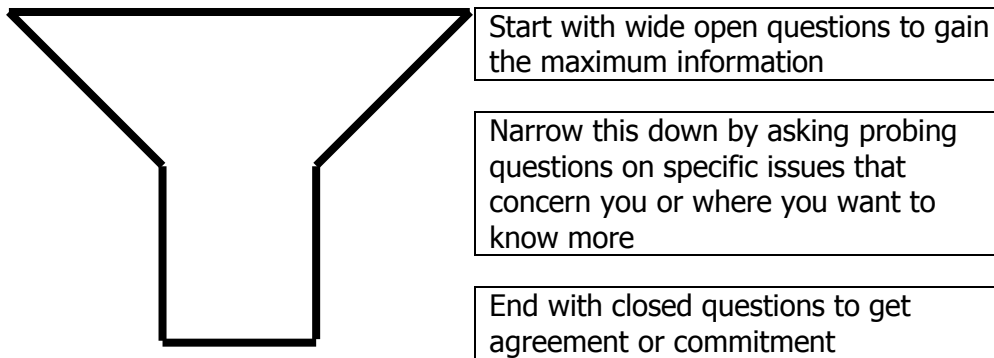
Some questions to avoid include:

- **Leading questions** – ‘Obviously you wouldn’t consider doing it that way?’ Here the answer is implied within the question; you will get the answer you imply.
- **Multiple questions** – ‘Where did you work next and how many staff of what grades did you manage?’ At best you will only get one part answered!

Certain types of question will be of more use in some situations than others. For example, coaching conversations require challenging questions that would be inappropriate in a conversation with a customer about a complaint, whereas a counselling conversation will need reflecting questions that would be less useful in a disciplinary situation.

The questioning process

It will help if you plan the questions you want to ask before starting a conversation, particularly if there is specific information you want, or a particular outcome you have in mind. This could be to help you decide on the best candidate for a job, to deal with a problem involving a team member, or to gain commitment from a supplier who has let you down. It will help to think of the questioning process as a funnel to work through:



You will probably need to do this several times to explore all the aspects of a particular topic. Add in other types of question as necessary.

Depth of questioning

Some discussions take place on a surface level, in others you may need to probe quite deeply. Think of this as questioning on three levels:

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| Level 1 | – facts | – ‘What were your duties in that job?’ |
| Level 2 | – feelings | – ‘Which of those did you enjoy most?’ |
| Level 3 | – values | – ‘Why was that important to you?’ |

When dealing with many issues, for example a customer complaint, facts questions will usually be sufficient. However when you are in a coaching situation, you are likely to need to use feelings questions, and in a counselling conversation it may be appropriate to use values questions. The key is to keep your questioning appropriate for the person, the situation, and the information or result you want. If you question on feelings or particularly values, do so sensitively, and be prepared to cope with the emotions that may be revealed.

Silence

Finally, plan to allow time for silence, to give the other person a chance to think and answer – this is as important as the questions you ask.

For related topics see Top Tips:

- **Assessing**
- **Coaching**