

Quickly Gaining Rapport: Asking Questions

Questions are your most powerful tool in gaining rapport. Questions give you control of the conversation and help steer the direction of the conversation. As a presenter, questions can help you improve your presentation. As a boss, they can let you know when you may not be fully engaged with your team members. As one of the team members, questions can ensure everyone has the same understanding. As a coach, they can help uncover hidden meanings and underlying reasons. As a mentor, they can help your mentee figure out options and alternatives for themselves.

Questions can also help you clarify your understanding before you put your foot in your mouth.

Remember, messages have two parts: actual content and implied communication. The actual content is the “what” ... it is the words that you use. For example, “What do you mean?” The implied communication in a message is body language, tone of voice, underlying feelings. Using the same example, “What do you mean?” said in an angry tone could indicate defensiveness. Said in a softer tone could indicate compassion and empathy. Think of how you try to communicate with someone who does not speak English. For “yes,” you may smile and nod up and down. What would your listener “hear” if you said “yes” with a scowl while nodding side to side?

If the person is upset, angry, depressed, bothered or exhibiting any other negative emotions, it may be necessary to cycle through these questions twice: once for the root cause of the problem to clear up the non-verbal expressed feelings, and the other to handle the symptoms and resolve the situation or the challenge. As long as there are negative feelings on either side, the focus will be, and needs to be, on mitigating those feelings until the real issues, the real problems, can be addressed and resolved to everyone’s satisfaction.

Once you have asked a question, it is important to be quiet and wait for the response. This pause is just as important as the question itself. Silence indicates you respect your listeners and are truly interested in what they have to say. This silence can possibly be uncomfortable for both of you. Getting past this uncomfortable pause with implied communication gestures on your part (e.g., smiling, direct eye contact, expressing interest through facial expressions) can make or break the rest of your conversation.

Let's explore the different types of questions and when they can be used:

1. **Probing.** Probing questions are best used when you need additional information, need to dig deeper [items a, b below] or explore additional options or ideas [items a, b, c], work through issues [a, b, c] and/or to just keep the other person(s) talking [b, c]. Situations to keep the other persons talking are when they have told you something that takes you completely by surprise, when you are caught off guard, or when you are not sure what to say. For instance, you thought you handled a situation well, only to be told you did not. Your first question is probably "What???" Your initial thoughts and emotions could be defensiveness or anger. Asking a series of follow-up questions [What specifically did not go well? I don't understand, can you explain?], along with the ones below, will help you regain your emotional footing and handle the situation professionally and with a high degree of EQ. Any time you think "What can I say to that statement?!" means it's time to ask questions.
 - a. How do you feel about this? If you were me how would you explain? How would others feel about this?
 - b. How so? Go on Tell me more
 - c. Repeat one key word that was said ... a word said with emotion, or said several times. Simply saying the word, nodding your head and remaining interested will allow the other person to continue talking.

2. **Paraphrasing.** Ask for a check on your ability to communicate and show complete understanding. You can paraphrase the "thinking" portion of what is said and also the "feeling" portion, seeing the world from the other's point of view. Different factors will influence which, or both, you will need to use.
 - a. Mirrored thinking: Restate in your own words what you think is said. Encourages the other person to add more detail and/or continue talking. Example: "If I understand you correctly ..." or "So what I'm hearing is ..."
 - b. Reflecting feelings: Communicate back to the other person the feeling part of the message. Example: "It seems like you felt ..."

- c. Clarifying: Resolve any misunderstandings or incorrect perceptions; i.e.:
 - i. Direct questions dealing with specific information you have been given or you have given: listen, understanding
 - ii. Example: “Are you saying ?” or “What did you mean by?”

3. **Summarizing.** Recap major points and accomplishments:

- a. Synthesizing: putting common points together
- b. Example: “Can you tell me what you are going to do so I can be sure I’ve explained myself clearly?”
- c. Closing example: “So if I do, that will be beneficial for everyone.”

Let’s take the previously mentioned example where you thought you handled a situation well, only to be told you did not.

You: What specifically did not go well?

Other person responds...

You paraphrasing: So it sounds like it appeared and when I did that, they felt

Other person responds...

You summarizing: If I had done, that would have made them feel, right?

Remember, in asking questions, you can get to the source of a dilemma by asking “Why?” You can brainstorm ways to resolve it by asking “How?”