

Questioning & Understanding Techniques

Customise

Everyone likes to be treated as an individual, with individual needs and expectations. Interaction is twice as important as operational factors; therefore, the way you handle others can have a profound and far-reaching effect on growing good relationships.

Ensuring that you give individuals your full attention when you are communicating, is important both with face-to-face and whilst on the telephone. People are aware when you are distracted and this makes them feel that you do not care or you are not bothered.

Use their names as often as is reasonable. This shows them that you know who they are and also that you are constantly aware of them.

Understanding

It is very important that you make an effort to understand requests. There are three main ways of showing that you understand. Listening, questioning and giving them undivided time. Listen and do not assume that you know what they want because you have heard it all before.

At all times be honest. Honesty does not mean that you have to tell them everything nor does it mean that you have to give them unnecessary information. Especially if by giving this information they will get a poor impression of you.

Show respect, do not cut an individual off in mid-sentence, or finish off sentences for them. Give them that extra minute and they will reward you by giving you time to speak and put your case forward.

Just because you are not visible, such as when you are on the telephone, does not mean that you are not sending out signals: you are. But you have some choice as to what those are. Do you want to come across as bright and efficient, or surly and unhelpful? How you act, what you say, and the way you use your voice – all influence the image you are projecting and are therefore worth considering. Give out the appropriate signs and you will feel the benefit over time.

Questioning

The way we use questions is crucial to the impression we give and the information that we gain. By using questions in the right way we can improve

relationships and truly demonstrate our understanding of the other person. The use of questions can be categorised in the following ways.

Information - Getting a good understanding of what the other person wants is vital. Information will enable you to “match” solutions to situations and get it right first time.

Involvement - Asking people questions is the best way of involving them. Ensuring people feel involved generates respect and trust, as it means they’re not being told, they’re being involved.

Interest - Asking questions and holding a good conversation will show that you are interested in them and their situation. You're not treating them as the opposition or numbers, you're trying to get to know them and understand their needs. Asking questions also maintains interest, as the questions will make them think.

Confidence - Demonstrating a sound knowledge and understanding of their situation should help to build their confidence, which will also help in building rapport.

Confirms - At times you may need to confirm your understanding of what you’re being told – something that most people will respect you for, as it demonstrates you want to get things right.

Controls - The person asking the questions is normally the person who controls the direction of the conversation.

Question Techniques

There are three varieties of questions to be used: open, closed and probing. They fit into a technique called The Funnel.

Closed questions only allow a yes or no answer, thus allowing you to control and close down a conversation. Open questions, those beginning with How, Why, What, Who, When and Where, will enable you to gather more information. Probing questions are more in-depth open questions, and literally allow you to probe deeper, before using closed questions to summarise and eventually close.

The ability to question effectively is an excellent tool to use and understand and one which will assist you greatly when dealing with more difficult situations, conflict and complaints.

We will explore this further by identifying the use of the different types of questions.

Closed Questions

Are used to get a one-word answer or a selection from a short list. Alternatively, it can give a yes or no answer, which helps us identify the direction we might want to investigate further. They are also used to close someone down, perhaps they are talking too much. When you need confirmation or to summarise what you already think is right, closed questions are most invaluable.

Technique: they always begin with words such as do, did, can, are, is, have, would etc.

Pros:

- short and to the point
- confirm and clarify
- gain commitment or agreement
- useful for controlling direction and content
- drawing a conversation or subject to a close
- keeping wafflers or side-trackers under control

Cons:

- if badly or over-used they have a robotic or disinterested feel
- turn conversations into interrogations
- do not demonstrate empathy
- do not build rapport

Application:

- Used at the start to set the direction
- At the middle and at the end of a conversation as they “funnel down”. They’re very useful for keeping the conversation directed and on-line
- for controlling wafflers

Open Questions

Open questions open up and build a conversation, as they cannot be responded to with a "yes" or "no" reply. Information has to be given – whether that's in the form of a single word, a sentence, a paragraph or a novel. The length and detail of the response will depend on how specific the question is and the personality of the individual.

Technique; open questions always begin with WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHY and HOW. When talking to adults, try to avoid the use of “why” as it can often imply criticism and as such, generate a defensive response.

Pros:

- people will open up and talk
- encourage people to provide answers
- the more specific the question, the more specific the answer
- have a conversational feel and demonstrate interest in people
- helps to demonstrate empathy and build rapport

Cons:

- can be difficult to answer if too generalised, vague or unspecific
- can encourage verbal diarrhoea in talkative types

Application:

- used in the earlier stages of a conversation to get the other party's view of things
- discover what's really important to them
- get to the heart of the matter

Encouragers

Encouragers are little words and phrases that make our questioning easier. If we keep pummeling the other person with question after question, no matter how important they are to us, the listener will get fed up of the continuous assault. This is when we can use encouragers to soften the blow a little. We can make verbal nods such as "Mmm" "Yes" "I see" and then when we want to know more we can say things like "Go on" "Tell me more about that" which encourages speech without actually asking a new question. It gives the other person a breather.

If you combine these different techniques you begin to achieve full understanding. If we take it a step further and look at how we categorise the use of those questions to explore and get to the right solution.

TED's

TED is a technique that uses a question to get people to respond.

It stands for Tell, Explain or Describe. It is usually used as a prefix to explore further and can be an open or closed question. They tend to get people talking in a broad sense and are excellent for gaining background or context to a situation.

They are useful at the very beginning of a conversation, or when it's important to encourage the other party to really talk and "get it off their chest". They are very useful with complainants or distressed people..., but never use with wafflers.

Alternative Questions

A sentence where more than two questions might be asked. It is important that it is only two questions otherwise both ourselves and the other party will get confused. Alternative questions provide a choice of response and narrow down the options.

The key is getting your alternatives correct. The positive thing about them is that they limit choices and can therefore help to control the conversation and aid decision-making. If you over use them or use several multiples it can either be restrictive or confusing. Use them to get a decision, narrow down options, and encourage ditherers to make decisions

Leading Questions

Assumptive or leading questions suggest the answer in the question itself. They will quickly generate an affirmative or negative reply depending on whether the person agrees or disagrees with you. It can also lead the other person in the direction or solution you require. However you have to ensure that, it is the right place to be, before you do it.

You suggest the answer in the question itself e.g. "so, it's important that....", "am I right in thinking that...". Leading questions are very good for demonstrating or summarising understanding and for clarifying a situation. They can control and steer the conversation in the direction you want it to go.

The key element is that you are confident with your level of understanding or your assumptions, as if you frequently get it wrong, people will feel you haven't been listening or paying attention. If you over-use them they can be very irritating.

So focus on using them to clarify or confirm, to control or steer or offer a solution.

Using all the techniques we have described so far we can then put them together in the funnel technique. This gets us to use open and closed questions to arrive at the right solution or understanding.

