

Questions as Mediators in Professional Conversations

“Judge a man by his questions rather than by his answers.”

— *Voltaire*

As we all know, working in a team requires good communication skills.

Talking and sharing your ideas with others takes time and dedication.

One of the more problematic things that can happen during this process is when you or someone else doesn't fully grasp, or completely misunderstands, what you're trying to say.

Miscommunication happens often and is a normal part of day-to-day teamwork.

However, in some cases, it can lead to serious problems such as broken relationships, project misalignment, or even sabotage.

I believe that asking questions can prevent some or even most of these issues and stop miscommunication before it grows.

Of course, asking questions can bring minor problems too, like coming across as annoying or challenging someone's authority.

Understanding Miscommunication

Common Examples of Miscommunication in the Corporate World

Confusing Jargon Across Departments

Scenario:

An IT manager tells a sales team, *"We'll roll out the patch during the next sprint."*

Sales assumes the product will be fixed this week. In reality, "next sprint" means a development cycle starting in 10 days.

Result:

Sales over promises to clients based on incorrect assumptions.

Fix Through Questions:

Sales rep could ask: *"Just to clarify, when exactly will the update be live?"*

Silence Misinterpreted as Agreement

Scenario:

In a meeting, no one questions a proposed plan, even though some team members are confused or skeptical. The project moves forward based on false consensus.

Result:

Delays, resistance during implementation, or low morale.

Fix Through Questions:

A leader could ask: *"Is there anything about this plan that's unclear or concerns you?"*

Vague Task Assignment

Scenario:

A manager says to a team member: "Can you handle the client presentation?"

The employee thinks they're expected to present the slides already created. The manager *expects them to create new slides from scratch and lead the meeting.*

Result:

Last-minute panic, incomplete materials, and an underwhelming presentation.

Fix Through Questions:

Employee could ask: *"Do you want me to prepare new content or just deliver what's already made?"*

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As you can see, miscommunication can happen at any stage. Key factors contributing to miscommunication include unclear objectives, lack of details, assumptions, or prejudice. It's often not the fault of a single individual—miscommunication is typically a systemic, unintentional issue.

So, how can we reduce this gap in understanding?

Why Asking Questions Helps

Asking questions allows you not only to obtain more details about the topic but also to clarify any aspects you might not fully understand. It gives you the opportunity to slow things down, providing more time to grasp the topic or better understand what someone expects from you.

Here are some useful questions that might help:

- **Clarifying:** *"What do you mean by...?"*
- **Confirming:** *"Just to be sure, are we saying...?"*
- **Expanding:** *"Can you give an example?"*

While some might think that asking questions slows down project development, it's ultimately better to take a little more time to understand things fully than to move too quickly and end up off track.

The Social Side of Asking Questions

Even though asking questions offers clear benefits, many people hesitate to do so. This is often due to fears of appearing ignorant, annoying, or "stupid," or because of the power dynamics that exist between individuals. There are also times when the person being questioned might perceive it as a challenge to their authority or judgment.

It's unfortunate that such a valuable tool is often hindered by these social stigmas. Despite this, the benefits of asking questions still outweigh the risks.

How to Ask Questions Effectively

To address potential difficulties that might arise when asking questions, it's important to be mindful of them and take steps to mitigate their impact. For instance, use a lighter, more friendly tone to avoid sounding confrontational. Show respect and make it clear that you are not questioning the person, but rather trying to tackle a specific problem. Express genuine curiosity about the topic at hand.

Timing also matters. Ask questions when it's appropriate and when it won't hinder the flow of conversation. Additionally, think about your questions in advance. Avoid asking random questions just to fill the silence or appear active—your questions should be meaningful and purposeful.

Team leaders play a crucial role in breaking social stigmas around asking questions. They should encourage their teams to ask questions and foster an environment where doing so is welcomed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, asking questions is an invaluable tool for overcoming miscommunication in the workplace, especially in team environments where clear and efficient communication is vital. While miscommunication is a common challenge, the act of asking questions allows for clarification, confirmation, and deeper understanding—ultimately preventing misunderstandings and costly mistakes.

Despite some social stigmas or fears, such as the fear of appearing ignorant or challenging authority, the benefits of asking questions far outweigh the risks. By fostering a culture where questioning is encouraged and done effectively, teams can build stronger relationships, improve project alignment, and avoid costly missteps.

Leaders, in particular, play a critical role in breaking down barriers and ensuring that asking questions is seen as a positive and productive action rather than a hindrance.

When done thoughtfully and with respect, asking questions can be the key to smoother, more successful teamwork, ensuring that everyone is on the same page and working towards the same goals.

Afterwords

This article is written by a second-semester student of CTU FEE in Prague. The ideas presented are entirely my own and reflect my personal thoughts on the topic. It does not contain concrete statistics but is based on my understanding of the subject. *This article was supported by AI-driven tools to enhance language clarity and flow.*

Thank you for reading.