

The Art of Asking Questions

eREPORT



By **Dr. Tony Alessandra**

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What time is it?

What do you think about this project?

Can you support this decision?

What can I do to help you?

How would you deal with this problem?

What's your objective?

How do you feel about this?

The world is full of questions – good questions, silly questions, important questions, offensive questions. Questions can build rapport and trust or foster suspicion and dislike. Questions can open up a conversation or slam it closed. Questions can generate information or send the conversation shooting off on a tangent. Questions are the heart of communication. They pump fresh life into conversations.

Asking good questions is particularly important in organizations where working well together depends upon everyone understanding each other clearly. Asking questions about how things are done, why they're done, who's responsible for doing them, and when they're due form the basis of organizational effectiveness. Imagine launching a new product, putting together a budget, improving a process, implementing a new policy, or reviewing employee performance without asking questions. The Information Age couldn't exist without questions.

Because questions are so important, our education system takes great pains to teach us the fine art of asking questions. ... No? ... Why not?

Probably because the average three-year old asks 4.2 questions per minute. Everyone assumes we know all we need to know about asking questions by the time we learn what a question mark is. After all, isn't that what a question is? A group of words followed by a question mark? That may be the definition of a question but comparing that to the art of asking questions is like saying if you can spell "car," you're ready for the Indy 500.

This report will help you understand how to use questions to improve your communication, what types of questions to use and when to use them, and the strategies and techniques of artful questioning. Being able to ask the right question at the right time is a critical piece of the communication process.

Why Do We Ask Questions?

The standard response to that question is, "Because we want to know something." But questioning has a much richer payoff than just information transfer. There's an old story about a salesman who was scheduled to appear on the Johnny Carson show. As he was sitting in the green room, the producer came in and started asking him about his approach to sales. The producer, stubbornly skeptical, finally demanded: "Well, then, sell me something!" The salesman looked around the room and spied a large ashtray on the table.

The following conversation occurred:

Salesman: Do you like that ashtray?

Producer: Yeah, sure.

Salesman: What do you like about it?

- Producer:** Well, it's big enough to hold all the ashes of the people who come through here everyday.
- Salesman:** What else do you like about it?
- Producer:** Well, it's a nice color and it matches the decor in here.
- Salesman:** How much do you think an ashtray like this is worth to you?
- Producer:** I don't know... maybe \$20.
- Salesman:** Sold!

With just a few questions, the salesman was able to find out why the producer would buy the ashtray and what price he would be willing to pay for it. While sales aren't always this easy, the story illustrates how powerful questions are a tool for getting information. In fact, questions are the heart of any information gathering process.

(If you are a salesperson and want to improve your selling skills, click here to check out the Collaborative Selling 133-page eBook)

But questions can also be used for many other reasons. Here are just a few of the reasons we ask questions:

To gain information – Information transfer depends on questions. Who, what, where, when, why, how, and how much are all staples of information gathering.

To stimulate conversation – Imagine attending a social function where no one could ask a question! No: "How are you?" "Have you heard...?" "Did you see...?" "Can you believe...?" "What do you think...?" It would be a pretty strange gathering.

To gain the other's views – When you need to know what someone else is thinking, ask. "What do you think about...?" "Can you tell me how you feel about...?"

To check agreement – What does the other person think about what you have discussed? "Do you think we're on the right track?" "Can you support this decision?" "Are we in agreement?" "Do you have any objections?" "How does this sound to you?"

To build rapport and trust – Rapport and trust are built by showing support for the other person's goals and objectives. How can I help you? What can I do to help you meet your objectives? What would you like to accomplish? Tell me about your goals/dreams/objectives.

To verify information – Sometimes what you hear is not what was meant. Asking for feedback is a critical part of the communication process. Did I understand you to mean...? Can I summarize this as...?

The Two Major Types of Questions

There are only two basic types of questions – closed and open. Each type is very important to the communication process.

Closed Questions

Closed questions are generally simple, information gathering questions. Response to a closed question is usually a "yes" or "no" or a very brief answer. Typical closed questions are:

What time is it?
Did you finish the project?
Are you going to the meeting?
Can you work overtime tonight?
When did you first discover the problem?

Closed questions perform the following functions:

They allow specific facts to be gathered.

Which color do you prefer?

They are easy to answer and seldom intimidating.

Will you be finished by 5:00 p.m.?

They are useful in the feedback process, where someone wants to check the accuracy or completeness of the communication.

Have I got the information right?

They are used to gain commitment to a position.

Does this seem right so far?

They can be used to reinforce positive statements.

This seems like a good plan, doesn't it?

They can be used to direct the conversation to a desired topic or concern.

Do you have time to talk about the budget?

Open Questions

Open questions are generally more stimulating, with longer, more complex answers. Open questions are used to draw out a wide range of responses on a broad topic. They often ask for opinions, thoughts or feelings. Typical open questions are:

How did you feel about the meeting?
What could we do to make this project better?
How can we meet our objectives?
What's your opinion on the new marketing plan?
How important is it to you?

Open questions have the following characteristics:

They cannot be answered by a simple "yes" or "no."

How do you think we could make this process work better?

Not: Do you think we could do this process better?

They usually begin with "what" or "how."

What do you think about the new benefit policy?

They do not lead the answer.

Where could we make improvements in the new marketing plan?

Not: How much do you like our neat new marketing plan?

They draw out ideas and feelings.

How do you feel about the reorganization of the department?

They encourage elaboration on objectives, needs, wants and problems.

What do you think about the new employee review system?

They promote self-discovery.

How do you think the new process will work for your group?

They stimulate thinking about your ideas.

Where do you think we might run into problems with this idea?

They allow a broad range of responses and styles.

How would you change the policy?

(For more on resolving conflict with others, please click here to see my Resolving Conflict 23-page eReport)

It's important to know which kind of question – open or closed – to use to achieve your goals. Both are useful and can help you achieve several different purposes, including:

Fact-finding – If you are looking for specific information and data, use closed questions that ask for the detail you need. "What did you accomplish on the project?" will generate more detail than "Did you get a lot done?" Take notes and verify that you understood the information correctly.

Feeling-finding – To understand a person's feeling about a subject generally requires an open question. Are you happy about the project? doesn't get the same response as the open-ended question: How do you feel about the project? Used properly, feeling-finding questions generate a lot of information about attitudes, convictions, and motivations. These questions are extremely powerful because they are so seldom asked ... and the answers are listened to carefully less frequently.

Clarifying – Closed questions are used to verify your understanding of a conversation. "Do I understand you correctly...?" "Are you referring to...? Do you mean...?" are examples of questions you can ask to make sure you understand the information being given to you.

Expanding – Open questions are used to draw out further information on a topic. "Can you give me an example?" "Would you tell me more about that point?" "What else might be causing a problem?" are questions that continue to generate information about the subject.

Directing – Directing questions are generally closed and point the conversation toward a particular goal. "What was the other point you wanted to make?" "Can we go back and talk

about your first item?" "Couldn't we postpone the decision for a week?" With these questions, you want to direct the conversation to a different topic or to lead the person to a particular decision.

Questioning Strategies

All forms of communication are improved by planning and understanding the focus of the communication. Questioning is no exception. If you intend to ask someone a question, you should know what you're trying to accomplish by asking the question. If you're trying to find out how someone feels about an upcoming change, slapping them on the back and saying, "Sounds great, doesn't it?" will probably not meet your goals.

Too often we think we're asking a question for one reason when we really want something else. For instance, if you ask someone what he or she thinks about the budget, you may actually want to know if they will support it. A question such as "Is there anything in the budget you couldn't support?" might better accomplish your objectives.

Funnel Technique

One of the most fundamental questioning techniques is to start with broad, open questions and build on the speaker's responses by asking narrower, more specific questions. This is called the funnel technique. It's like painting a picture. You start with a blank canvas and begin filling in the background with broad-brush strokes. Gradually you add more and more detail until you have a complete picture. With questions, you start out at the top of the funnel with a broad question and

then as you move down the funnel, you “paint with a finer brush” – by asking closed questions that demand more exact answers – and fill in the details.

*(For more on learning how to relate with others, please see **The Platinum Rule 50-Page eWorkbook**.)*

With the funnel technique, you actually begin exploring the other person’s needs and expectations, problems and opportunities by using your questioning and listening skills. You start with, “Tell me about your business” or “What are your long-range goals in this position?” or “What’s important to you?” A typical computer salesperson might ask a prospect what kind of computer system he currently has or what his computer needs are. The hotshot salesperson who has learned the funnel technique starts out by asking about the prospect’s business or operation. A manager trying to locate the cause of a recurring problem could say, “Why does this switch keep failing?” An artful questioning manager would start on a broader level saying something like, “Tell me about the overall process that surrounds the switch.” A supervisor trying to deal with a tardy employee could ask why the employee is late again. Or he could sit down with the employee and ask, “How are you feeling about your job?”

Broad brush questions give you a lot of information about the situation, including important clues as to where to direct more specific follow-up questions, and give the other person a chance to relax and tell you what he thinks is important.

Broad, open-ended questions show your interest in the other person’s situation. They often start with “Tell me,” “how,” “who,” “what,” or “why.” They are much more powerful than closed questions that require a simple answer such as “yes” or “no” or a specific piece of information. After the broad question opens the conversation and

begins to build rapport, the artful questioner builds on the responses and adds to his understanding of the information being transferred. Our computer salesperson might have a client who says, “I need more control over our order system.” He then builds on that response by asking a question using the most important words in the answer – control and order system. For instance, he might ask, “What aspects of your order system would you like to have more control over?” or “Could you tell me more about your order system?” When the client responds, he builds his next question around the response to that question and so on.

*(To improve your persuasiveness when speaking with clients, please read **Becoming More Persuasive 13-page eReport**)*

The broad, open questions at the top of the funnel are easy for the speaker to answer. They give the speaker the freedom to tell you whatever he wants. By the time you get to the more specific questions, he can see where you’re heading with your questions and he’ll be willing to share more information with you. Not only that, most people’s level of trust and willingness to share information is related directly to how much information they have previously shared.

Here’s another example of building on previous responses.

Imagine two people meeting on an airplane:

“Hello, my name is Ellen. What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a writer.”

“A writer … what kind of writing do you do?”

“Mostly humor. Occasionally I write something serious or philosophical but people seem to laugh at that too.”

“Humor – I’ve always thought that must be the

hardest kind of writing to do. Tell me how you do it."

"Well, for me, it's one part sarcasm, two parts irreverence, and a dash of creativity. I shake the whole thing up and hope it doesn't explode in my face!"

Notice how the intelligent use of the funnel technique has guided the conversation from a simple, non-meaningful declaration, "I'm a writer," to a fairly detailed, very personal expression!

Question Formation

Here are some general strategies to help you formulate your questions:

1. Have a plan – Know what you want to accomplish and what type of questions you will need to use. You don't have to have the questions written out in advance but you should be clear about your objectives.

2. Keep the question simple – It's best to ask for one answer at a time. A question like: "What do you think about the marketing plan and will the new ad campaign confuse customers and would that confusion actually be beneficial to the long-term product growth?" will not produce a meaningful answer. If you ask a two-part question, people tend to either answer the second part only or only the part they were interested in or felt safe with. One question at a time!

3. Stay focused – Keep the questions on track and follow a topic to its conclusion. Any question that starts with By the way ... is probably going off on a tangent. Hold the question for later.

4. Stay non-threatening – Trust is essential in communication. The wrong question can quickly destroy trust and the relationship. Why didn't you...? How could you...? Aren't you...? are all questions that generally make people defensive. Once someone throws up a wall of defense, the opportunity for exchanging information and building a relationship goes away.

5. Ask permission – If the area of questioning is sensitive, explain the need for the questions and ask permission before proceeding. The application requires some detail about your financial condition. Would you mind answering...?

6. Avoid ambiguity – Ambiguous questions generate ambiguous answers. "Could you support the budget?" does not tell you whether the person would support it.

7. Avoid manipulation – Keep the relationship as a primary focus. Tricking someone into giving you an answer you want destroys trust and rapport. "Would you prefer to work overtime tonight or tomorrow night?" does not give a person the chance to say that he doesn't want to work overtime at all. Explaining the need for the overtime and asking if he's available has a totally different feel. Manipulation is an attempt to take away a person's control.

Mastering the art of asking questions will help you gain the information you need, build trust, stimulate the views and opinions of others, and verify information.



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Building Customers, Relationships, and the Bottom Line

Dr. Tony Alessandra helps companies build customers, relationships, and the bottom line. Companies learn how to achieve market dominance through specific strategies designed to out market, outsell, and out service the competition.

Dr. Alessandra has a street-wise, college-smart perspective on business, having fought his way out of NYC to eventually realize success as a graduate professor of marketing, an entrepreneur, a business author, and a keynote speaker. He earned his MBA from the University of Connecticut and his PhD in marketing from Georgia State University.

Dr. Alessandra is president of **Online Assessments** (www.OnlineAC.com), a company that offers online assessments and tests; co-founder of **MentorU.com**, an online e-Learning company; and Chairman of the Board of **BrainX**, a company that offers online digital accelerated learning programs.

Dr. Alessandra is a widely published author with 14 books translated into 17 foreign languages, including **Charisma** (Warner Books, 1998); **The Platinum Rule** (Warner Books, 1996); **Collaborative Selling** (John Wiley & Sons, 1993); and **Communicating at Work** (Fireside/Simon & Schuster, 1993). He is featured in over 50 audio/video programs and films, including **Relationship Strategies** (American Media); **The Dynamics of Effective Listening** (Nightingale-Conant); and **Non-Manipulative Selling** (Walt Disney). He is also the originator of the internationally-recognized behavioral style assessment tool **The Platinum Rule™** (www.PlatinumRule.com).

Recognized by *Meetings & Conventions Magazine* as "one of America's most electrifying speakers," Dr. Alessandra was inducted into the Speakers Hall of Fame in 1985. He is also a member of the Speakers Roundtable, a group of 20 of the world's top professional speakers. Tony's polished style, powerful message, and proven ability as a consummate business strategist consistently earns rave reviews.

To learn more about Dr. Alessandra and his services, visit www.Alessandra.com.

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