

Questioner: Asks his questions, his way, at the pace he wishes, in the order he wishes, on the subjects he wishes, where and when he wishes. Total power.

You: Submit and answer. No power.

We're trained to accept this process from our earliest days. People in power have the right to ask and we meekly answer. People become powerful by asking, and we powerless by answering.

In order to understand how to handle being questioned, we need to learn about our conditioned responses when we are questioned.

Conditioning

I've done many demonstrations in the seminars I teach about how we handle questioning. I walk into the audience, filled with high-level executives, canny lawyers, whomever. Selecting one of these sharp, sophisticated people, I stand over him/her and begin a barrage of questions: "Who are you? What do you do? Do you like it? Are you good at it? Are you married? Are you glad?" or, "You're not married? Why not?" I continue with "Do you have children? Plan to have any more? When?" or, "Why not?"

Sounds rude, aggressive, intrusive? Right. But you know what? They all answer! Always! Every question! Every personal, impertinent question—right there in front of their peers! They never ask why, or what do I need to know for, or ever even say, "Get lost!"

We're conditioned to reply as soon as anyone asks, without even thinking. Searching for the answer, we never think to question the process or the questioner. If a person asks, we automatically endow him with authority and answer. Our anxiety is heightened tenfold if the question is asked publicly, but we do it anyway. How does this whole phenomenon affect the way we answer questions?

How We Answer Questions

Origins

Remember the spotlight on you in a classroom while the teacher waited for an answer? Everyone cringing in his/her seat thinking, "Thank God it isn't me!" The biggest challenge facing you was—what? Will your answer be right or wrong? And that's still the number-one issue that shapes how we answer.