



Participant's Guide

Effective Questioning

Albert Einstein said, "If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes." Far too many people focus on having the "right answer" rather than discovering the "right question". In Germany, the job title *Direktor Grundsatzfragen* translates to "Director of Fundamental Questions." These are the people who are always thinking about what the next questions will be. The German understanding and appreciation of *Grundsatzfragen* stems from a culture that highly values philosophy and the ongoing questioning of priorities and the meaning of life. We can all benefit from adopting this approach to thinking, which makes asking effective questions a key skill to develop. A powerful question:

- generates curiosity in the listener
- stimulates reflective conversation
- is thought-provoking
- surfaces underlying assumptions
- invites creativity and new possibilities
- generates energy and forward movement
- channels attention and focuses inquiry
- stays with participants
- touches a deep meaning
- evokes more questions.

It has the capacity to spread beyond the place where it began into larger networks of conversation throughout an organization or a community. Powerful questions that travel well are often the key to large-scale change. But this is not straightforward; whilst asking and answering questions is part of everyday conversation for all of us and we might think that questioning is a natural skill that we all possess; it is not as easy as we assume. Questions need to be designed to help the other person reach a conclusions, or to provide information and insights helpful to the discussion.

There are a range of question types that can be used for different purposes. Some questions provide structure, others direct flow, and some help us to reach closure. Question types include:

- **Open questions**, to gather information and facts, for example "What are your concerns and worries about this situation?"
- **Probing questions**, to gain additional detail, e.g. "Can you explain why that matters?"
- **Hypothetical questions**, to suggest an approach or introduce new ideas. An example might be "If you could get additional funding or resources, how might that help?"
- **Reflective questions**, to check understanding, such as "So would you prioritize the most critical areas for attention first and make sure that everyone knew what was most important?"
- **Leading questions**, to help a person reach a conclusion or have an 'idea' that you feel will be beneficial; a few well planned questions can very often lead the person towards the idea and instead of responding to your request, they have their idea of how to help you be more successful.
- **Deflective questions** to defuse an aggressive or defiant situation by redirecting the force of the other person's attack instead of facing it head-on. 'Attacks' are synonymous with dissatisfaction, insubordination or resistance and prevent you from moving forward. Dealing with a strong objection by responding with similar force creates conflict. Deflective questions help to transform the negative situation into a collaborative problem-solving occasion.



Active Listening

Listening is a conscious activity which requires attention. Rather than waiting to speak, you need to listen attentively to fully understand the other person. Remember, there is no point in asking a question if you do not intend to listen carefully to the answer!

Listening fully—or actively—means putting everything else out of your mind and acknowledging the other person so they have feedback that you are listening properly and valuing what they have to say. Understanding and valuing does not mean agreeing; active listening is particularly valuable in situations of conflict or disagreement where if the other party feels you understand their viewpoint, an atmosphere of cooperation can be created which increases the possibility of resolving the conflict.

Active listening is a structured way of listening and responding to others. Some of the key skills for active listening include:

- Listen with your whole body:
 - Face the other person and use an open posture to establish rapport
 - Use eye contact and facial gestures to demonstrate your attention
 - Be still and resist fidgeting
- Let the other person do the talking:
 - Be quiet and actively encourage the other person to talk; promote their willingness to communicate;
 - Avoid interrupting;
 - Avoid pre-judging what's being said (rather, make sure you focus on understanding precisely what the speaker means);
 - Avoid starting to think about your answer or response (wait until the speaker has finished - active listening is hard work and needs 100% of your concentration);
 - Don't finish their sentences or fill in the blanks – no matter how tempting!
- Notice non-verbal communication, i.e. body language, tone and pitch of the voice – listen for feelings and emotions as much as facts and words.
- Be comfortable with silence. Staying silent gives time and opportunity for the speaker to share extra information. It may feel odd initially, but you will be amazed how often more information emerges after a moment's silence.
- Listen inquisitively and strategically:
 - Inquisitive listening - actively looking for interesting 'bits' of information in what is being said that will help formulate a solution or answer;
 - Strategic listening - going beyond the words to understand the speakers real motivations and driving forces and/or needs. This involves listening 'between the lines' and hearing the things that were 'not said' as well as those that were.
- Use questions effectively.
- Reflect back the information you receive to illustrate your understanding and provide opportunities for clarification. Use paraphrasing, acknowledgment and reflective statements.