

What is a *GREAT* question?

Let me tell you what I mean by “**GREAT question**”. There are ‘questions’, there are ‘good questions’, and there are even ‘great questions’. When I use the term *GREAT*, I am meaning a question that causes serious engagement between the ‘*asker*’ and their ‘*respondent*’ – a question that stimulates thinking, inspires creativity, and creates enthusiastic discussion. As a rule, the discussion should lead to fresh ideas, leaving both parties feeling motivated and empowered.

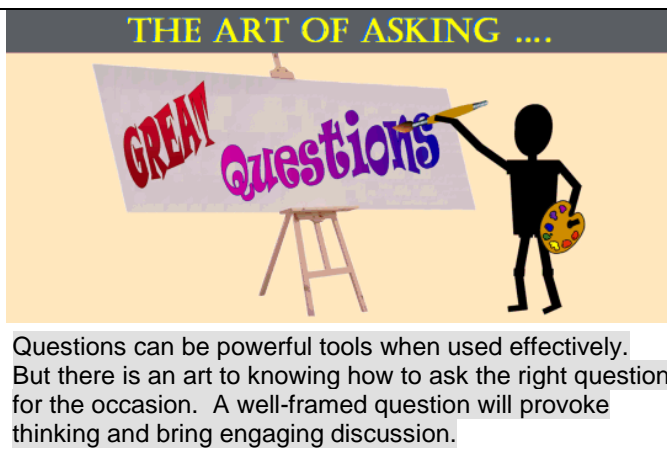
Effective questioning is a skill

Questions are important to our learning and communication abilities. Most of us will ask a number of questions every day to seek and obtain information. Usually this is to support our decision-making, or to increase our personal knowledge and wisdom. Yet, curiously, there is little formal teaching about ‘*how*’ to ask effective questions in our mainstream education institutions (schools, universities, polytechnics). Unfortunately, the same holds for other key communication and learning skills such as: listening, explaining, paying attention.

The real skill in questioning comes from using a range of different types of questions to draw out the information that we are seeking. Skilful questioning also requires us to listen effectively to what people are saying, so we can be sure about what they really mean (For more about listening, see: “[Effective Listening - the secret to successful communication](#)”). But sometimes, what people say (i.e. ‘*speak*’) is not exactly what they mean – aspects of their body language may reveal this (For more about body language, see: “[Body Language – non-verbal communication](#)”).

Effective questioning is about technique

The way that we ask questions will have a huge impact on the quality of answer we get. Compound or multiple questions asked all together will cause confusion. Poorly constructed questions will close off options and limit thinking; they may also cause the respondent to become defensive, which will undermine any opportunities for collaboration. Once a question has been asked, it is important to leave time for our respondent to answer (at least 5 or 6 seconds).



In my previous Post “[Questioning – it’s all about our technique](#)” I outlined various questioning techniques we can use, including:

- **open** and **closed** questions
- **probing** and **clarifying** questions

Knowing how and when to use these questioning techniques does require a little thought and also some practice. Once we are familiar with the fundamentals, we will be well on the way to being able to ask effective questions in all manner of circumstances. This skill, once learned, will serve us well in both our personal and professional lives.

Framing effective questions

The framing of questions is an undervalued and perhaps misunderstood skill. By asking questions that have been well thought through, we can steer the direction of the conversation, while also building rapport with our respondent. Our aim should be to encourage constructive and candid responses. This will allow us to uncover assumptions and identify the real facts. It will also help our respondent to reach their own conclusions, which leads to both learning and ownership.

‘*Socratic Questioning*’ is a time-honoured way of using questioning to help explore ideas and develop thinking skills. Interestingly, the Socratic Method was once a popular teaching approach in US Law Schools, however it would appear that it has fallen from favour in more recent times. Curiously, over a similar period, Socratic Questioning has gained some popularity as a teaching tool in US education circles, where it is used to assist students develop both their thinking skills and their questioning skills.

The essence of Socratic Questioning is about probing the reasoning and knowledge behind an answer. Examples of probing questions are: *Can you give me an example of?, Please explain how this works?, How do you know that?, Why do you say that?, Is this always the case?, What exactly do you mean by?* In this way, assumptions can be scrutinised, facts can be confirmed, and contradictions can be addressed. Socratic questioning supports ‘critical thinking’.

A closer look at *GREAT* questions

Effective questioning, such as described in my Post “[Questioning – it’s all about our technique](#)”, should be our minimum target. In truth, my **GREAT questions** are not the norm – rather, they are special tools for special occasions. We should use

GREAT questions to motivate and empower people; **GREAT questions** can also help us to make a connection with someone, allowing us to build trust and develop relationships.

My 'formula' for what makes a **GREAT question**:

Characteristics of GREAT Questions

- Genuine – as opposed to contrived or condescending
- Releasing – there is freedom to explore fresh ideas
- Empowering – opinions are valued, discussion is encouraged
- Agenda-free – there is not any underlying or ulterior motive
- Targeted – questions have a clear and definite purpose

GREAT questions are not the norm – rather, they are special tools for special occasions. We should use **GREAT** questions to motivate and empower people; they can also help us to make a connection with someone, allowing us to build trust and develop relationships.

When we ask questions that are intended to provoke thought, precipitate creativity and promote discussion, we do give our respondent the right to talk about whatever is important to them. While this may appear to transfer an element of 'power' from the asker to the respondent, it is more likely our respondent will consider us to be a wise and thoughtful person. A key point in all of this is the answer will be 'owned' by our respondent.

More about GREAT questions

Here are some examples of questions I would rate as **GREAT**:

- if you were me, what would you do?*
- can you tell me more about ?*
- how can we improve our ?*
- can you tell me what you think about ?*

- why do you think would be a good idea ?*
- what do you think the benefits of would be ?*
- is there anything else we can do to improve ?*

Note: Apart from the first example, **GREAT questions** are seldom about YOU!

Depending on the context behind the original question, each of these gives our respondent the right to express their ideas and should lead to discussion. As the asker of the question, how we react to the response will set the tone for that discussion. If we take a Socratic approach, we may well follow up with further questions, leading to more discussion. In this way, we should be able to scrutinise any assumptions, confirm the facts, and address any contradictions.

The impact of questions – a story

Here is a story about the reflections of a woman who had dinner with two rival British Prime Ministers of the 19th Century. "After dining with Mr Gladstone, I thought he was the cleverest person in the world. After dining with Mr Disraeli, I felt as though I was the cleverest woman in all of England." In different versions, the lady is variously identified as Queen Victoria, Winston Churchill's mother (Jennie Jerome), and an unnamed 'young woman'.

Clearly the dinner conversation with Mr Gladstone was all about him, whereas Mr Disraeli chose to make the lady the topic of conversation. Presumably it was his skilful use of questions to draw out the information that made her feel like the 'cleverest woman in all of England'. This is an example of how questions can help us to make a connection with someone. Author Andrew Sobel, in his book "[Power Questions](#)", links it to the use of the question 'Can you tell me more?'

What if our questions 'go wrong'?

Many of us are not well-practiced at framing questions designed to probe someone's thought

processes (colleague, subordinate, manager, etc.). If we don't explore their thoughts, we may end up making our own assumptions, and ultimately make a poor decision. In this era of new technologies and innovations that disrupt our workplaces and our personal lives, effective leaders and managers must always be asking themselves and others whether there is a better way to do something.

While we generally use questions to seek and obtain information, questions are also often used as a means of testing another person's knowledge or skill. Going beyond that a little, it is not uncommon for questions to be used to 'score points', i.e. to prove one's superiority, or even to belittle someone. When we ask our questions, we need to be seen as being genuine and constructive, otherwise we will quickly cause our respondent to become defensive. At that point the opportunity for enthusiastic discussion (and all the other 'good stuff') will be lost, unless we act to retrieve the situation..

To recover from a 'faux pas', author Andrew Sobel suggests the question 'Do you mind if we start over?' (asked after a brief pause as we take stock of the situation) can be a winner. Of course, if we have caused offence, an apology may also be appropriate. He advises that people are forgiving, and an approach such as this can restore things for us.

Worth a look:

"[What is Socratic Teaching?](#)" – this short 2013 video [2min:07sec] from Black Pine Circle School (Berkeley, California) offers an explanation of Socratic Teaching

"[How to Ask Better Questions](#)" – this 2009 article [approx 4-5 min read] from Judith Ross at HBR offers some great insights into how questions can be used to empower people

Coming next:

Don't let subconscious behaviour damage your brand
<http://freezapnuggets.com/wordpress/?p=1350>