

ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS



It's not just what you ask,
It's also who you ask.

WHY DO WE NEED GOOD QUESTIONS?

One of the signs of a facilitative leader is the ability to ask the right questions at the right time. The art of leadership depends on the ability to ask questions that will make a difference.

This ability depends in turn on the ability to listen effectively. It's not hard to see that questioning and listening skills go well together. Really listening to people helps us to ask good questions. And if we ask good questions then we are more likely to get responses that are worth listening to!

As practitioners or leaders, the questioning process begins with us. But the ultimate objective is to help people listen to themselves more deeply and ask their own good questions. This lies at the heart of empowerment.

ENDA MOCLAIR, A DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONER IN CAMBODIA, TELLS THIS STORY...

Before each meeting with partners we would develop different scenarios and questions, select suitable metaphors and common experiences and link to local lore. We would think about all those attending, put ourselves in different shoes and try empathising with their experiences and background: 'Who were they? What was their story? What had their life experiences to date been? How might this colour or influence the way they perceive their situation, how might our own responses influence their responses?' In this light we would re-evaluate our questions and try and mould questions which would encourage conversation.

Effective questions

According to Irene Leonard, asking effective questions is the easiest way to get the right answers. It seems simple but is a point that is often overlooked. Effective questions, she says, are powerful and thought provoking, without being too aggressive. They are questions that ask "what?" or "how?" and not always "why?". "Why" questions, she warns, are good for soliciting information but may make people defensive. Another key trick to asking effective questions is to wait for the answer more patiently, giving people more space to be thoughtful.

"When you are working together with other people to solve a problem," says Leonard, "it is not enough to tell them what the problem is; they need to find out what the problem is themselves. You can help them do this by asking them thought-provoking questions." Rather than making assumptions about what you think the other person may know, you might ask: "What do you think the problem is?"

Effective questioning is useless if you do not have the ability to listen and suspend judgment. This means being intent on understanding what the person who is talking is *really* saying, or what they are *trying* to say. What is the meaning behind their words? Let go of your own opinions so that they do not block your understanding and learning of important information, and pay attention to your gut or instinct for additional information.

“Behind effective questioning lies the ability to listen and suspend judgment.”

EXERCISE

Asking better questions

This exercise contains a very simple but powerful action learning tool. It uses a question-driven approach to change, by helping participants to find a question that matters, and then improve that question. Participants are encouraged to reflect on the experience that gave rise to their question, and then to improve, deepen or rethink their question. They are then encouraged to say what they will do next towards finding an answer to the question. The exercise does not push participants to find quick or simple answers to their questions, but helps them take the next step in their own questioning process.

The exercise can be adapted to many situations and can be conducted with individuals or collectively. In this version, participants work in pairs.

1. COLLECTING YOUR QUESTIONS – CHOOSING ONE THAT MATTERS

Spend a few minutes thinking of and writing down a few burning questions you are facing in your practice or in your life. Make sure that you are in the question – like “How can we gain deeper trust of the community?” It should not be a question that somebody else should be asking— like “Why doesn’t the government provide better support to small farmers?”

Choose one of your questions and think about how you have worded it. Write down the feelings that you have that accompany this question.

2. SURFACING THE EXPERIENCE BEHIND THE QUESTION

Where does this question actually come from? Try to recall an experience (or two) which led you to this question... take yourself back into the experience. Write down any important memories or observations. What feelings accompany this story?

3. SHARE WITH A PARTNER

Tell your question and story to your partner (who is listening with curiosity!). After this the partner should say what struck them about the story and question, and then suggest what they think was really happening – the real story behind the story. What advice do they have for your question?

4. RETHINK YOUR ORIGINAL QUESTION

Now try to improve your question. Perhaps a better question comes to mind.

Write it down. Also write down the feelings that accompany this new or improved question.

5. WHAT WILL YOU DO NEXT?

Write down your next step towards answering your question.

6. SHARE WITH THE GROUP

If working in a larger group, it may help to share all the questions and accompanying feelings. Sharing deep questions can promote healthy conversations.