



Ask questions to help people make progress

The challenge

For most managers, questions are primarily a way to gather information in order to direct and allocate efforts more effectively. How much? At what price? By when? Etc. Rarer are those who perceive the potential of questions as a management tool. However, through questions, managers can make people aware of development opportunities and stimulate their desire to progress. Moreover, simply asking people questions energizes them by underlining their ability to influence situations. Well-formulated questions can hence catalyze behavioral change.

Four key attitudes to ask successful questions

A badly posed question can easily put people on the defensive. Four essential attitudes make it possible to instill a constructive, favorable climate that encourages people to put things in perspective and want to improve.

1 Cultivate trust

People may feel uneasy or wary when questioned. It is important to set them at ease so that they will want to answer your questions freely, without worrying about a hidden agenda.

- **Clarify objectives** to reassure people about your intentions. Also clarify what you don't want, to remove all ambiguity. E.g.: When speaking to a subordinate who is late on a project: "I don't want to create problems for you, but simply want to understand where the problems are in order to help you surmount them."
- **Show empathy.** Demonstrate that you are listening to the other person and adopt a reassuring attitude. To do this, be careful of your nonverbal language. E.g.: Friendly posture, regular signs of approval, calm tone of voice, moderate pace, attentive and benevolent facial expression, etc.
- Ensure **shared understanding** by regularly reformulating the other person's answers. E.g.: "If I understand you correctly, what you are saying is that..."

2 Carefully formulate your questions

Depending on how a particular question is posed, it may incite people to make changes or, conversely, antagonize them.

- Start by asking yourself **what you are trying to achieve** with your questions: What reaction do you want to elicit? To what do you want to attract attention? E.g.: Learn from failure? Incite the desire to change?
- Formulate your questions **while keeping this objective in mind.** E.g.: To encourage creative thinking, choose questions like: "How are sales going?", rather than: "Have you reached your sales objectives?"
- Use **open questions** (e.g.: "What do you think of...?"), focused on the positive and on the future rather than on the past (e.g.: "What are the next steps?").

3 Instill real dialogue

The discussion must be balanced to hold peoples' interest and encourage their cooperation. Be careful not to hijack the conversation!

- **Don't put your own ideas at the center of the discussion.** Otherwise, the other person is likely to feel manipulated or influenced. E.g.: "Personally, I find that... Don't you agree?"
- **Avoid interrogating people,** which gives an inquisitorial turn to the conversation and doesn't leave any leeway to respondents. E.g.: Take pauses, converse between two questions.
- **Don't plan** your questions, but leave room for spontaneous discussion. Try to bounce off the other person's answers.
- Encourage the person to **ask questions in return.** He or she can then embrace the discussion and will be more inclined to answer your questions.

4 Stimulate thinking

A well-conducted questioning process should be enlightening and point people to unexpected conclusions.

- Direct your questions to help the person **challenge** what he or she takes for granted, and hence to encourage him or her to consider different ways of seeing the situation. E.g.: "We have always done it that way—but are we right to do so?"
- Try to **surprise** the person with unexpected questions. E.g.: "Do you think our customers might be interested by a lower-quality offer?" rather than: "How could we make our offer more attractive?". Reversing the perspective or imagining the impossible helps you to think of stimulating or unusual questions. E.g.: "If we were all laid off, what would the new CEO do?"
- **Encourage** the person to **think more deeply.** E.g.: Thoroughly explore every answer, by asking "why" each time.