



Capitalize on the motivational power of questions

Most corporate cultures tend to value assertive people who don't dither. The ability to ask questions is hence rarely an explicit part of the toolkit of the "ideal manager." However, the ability to ask questions is invaluable, because managers can use this skill to mobilize efforts more effectively, whether this concerns subordinates, colleagues or hierarchical superiors.

Mastering the questioning process is not easy for managers working under great time pressure in an environment that does not lend itself to asking questions. The following ideas may help you in this arena.

Ask the right questions...

By virtue of the questions he or she asks, a person has the power to direct the discussion and open people up to new perspectives by expanding the scope of their thinking. But more importantly, depending on their content and formulation, **questions can also be stimulating**. In particular, well-formulated questions may incite people to take action, inspire them to make improvements or encourage them to collaborate. Whereas other questions, though aimed at the same

Asking questions rather than making statements is already a good way to engage people.

objective, merely antagonize people and remove their desire to contribute. This is the difference between asking a subordinate, "How can we solve this problem?" vs. "How come this problem is still not solved?"!

At the right time...

To be motivating, questions must be posed in a place and at a time conducive to **provoking people to think and learn**. Asking questions to someone who is overloaded with work or overwhelmed by emotion has every chance of stressing or unsettling him or her. It is preferable to choose a relaxed, if possible informal, moment—during a conversation with no fixed agenda, for example. Face-to-face private

interviews are preferable to group meetings to put people at ease. Finally, your counterpart must not feel obliged to provide immediate answers; it's often by lifting this pressure that the best answers are obtained!

In the right way...

Beyond choosing the right type of questions and the right moment, the art and manner of posing questions are what will make the difference between a counterpart who is happy to answer and excited to contribute and one who is withdrawn and on the defensive. Thus, **being attentive to your tone of voice, attitude and the state of mind in which you ask questions** is no trivial thing. Indeed, to foster productive discussion, it is important to allow for lulls in the conversation, show that you are listening, and pay attention to the other person's body language.

"Asking the right questions at the right time" thus captures the art of asking questions in a nutshell. This is an invaluable skill, whether in finding the right solution to a problem, generating ideas, resolving conflicts, mobilizing efforts, etc.

Four types of questions are likely to inspire efforts effectively:

- 1 Questions focused on "why"
- 2 Future-oriented questions
- 3 Positive questions
- 4 Exploratory questions

1 Questions focused on “why”

Open questions are well-known to be most effective in encouraging people to participate actively in a conversation. Among open questions, those starting with “why” are undoubtedly the most motivating. If they are well-formulated, they help people to look past their pre-conceptions in order to put situations

More than “how,” “why” encourages people to think and is more effective in solving complex problems.

into perspective and find their root causes and effects. This isn’t always easy in action-oriented work environments. In the middle of a working meeting, for instance, it’s hard to stop and ask, “*Actually, why are we doing this?*” Even so, seizing opportunities to gain such perspective can be very productive:

Find new solutions to problems

When confronted with a problem, asking “why” questions helps to get to the root of the problem, and thus to consider new solutions. Asking “*Why does this problem exist?*” rather than “*How can we solve it?*” expands the vision of the problem and pushes people to challenge their initial assumptions. This step has been institutionalized by some companies, like Toyota with the “five whys” method. Managers faced

with a dysfunction ask subordinates the reason, then iteratively ask “why” concerning the identified cause until the root cause of the problem is finally discovered. Indeed, “why” questions, though uncomfortable for those asking as well as those being asked, effectively deepen thinking and stimulate learning.

Take a fresh look at situations

When children are at the “why” stage, they ask many questions—such as “*Why is the sky blue?*”—that challenge things adults take for granted, and confront the latter with their ignorance. By continuously asking “why,” they seek explanations beyond the facts, illustrating their enthusiasm to learn. Asking “why” helps us to see things of which we are not consciously aware and to consider situations from a new angle, thus spawning innovative ideas (Figure A).

So when we are faced with a frustrating situation, we can ask why this situation exists; then why it creates a problem or a latent opportunity (and for whom!), why no one has bothered to fix it, and finally, why we should devote time and effort to the subject. The founders of Airbnb, the vacation rental website, did just that. They wondered why people who visited their city at certain times of the year had so much trouble finding a place to sleep. Going back to the real need of vacationers (finding a place to sleep) drove them to expand thinking beyond the traditional hotel and B&B model and to offer

alternative housing options—a questioning process crowned with success.

2 Future-oriented questions

To mobilize others, there is nothing like questions that drive them to take action and improve (Figure B). However, questions are often posed in a judgmental mindset. Indeed, when faced with a problem, the natural tendency is to try to understand how the

The most motivating questions are those that drive people to learn and develop themselves.

problem arose—what went wrong, who is responsible—, which inevitably leads to finger pointing. Those who are blamed then seek arguments to defend themselves, rather than solutions to move forward.

To circumvent this pitfall, questions can be oriented toward the future, rather than the past, with two advantages:

Encourage people to get involved

To mobilize people effectively, questions must not be judgmental, but aim to identify concrete improvement opportunities. For example, it is preferable to ask: “*What opportunities does this create?*” rather than: “*Did you do the right thing?*” Such questions give

FIGURE A The three stages of asking questions

Asking questions proves to be a powerful tool to identify and solve problems, generate original ideas and explore new opportunities. It is even moreso when structured into three key steps:



Based on *A More Beautiful Question*, Warren Berger, Bloomsbury, 2014.

room to those being questioned by encouraging them to take an active role in moving forward.

In the same way, asking *“What can we do to make up for the delays on this project?”* is much more motivating than *“How did you get so behind on this project?”* Indeed, the first sort of question encourages people to think actively about potential solutions and available options, rather than feeling driven into a corner, and hence leads to a much more constructive, energy-boosting and motivating discussion!

Stimulate learning

In a context where innovation and ability to change are decisive, it is a good idea to regularly ask questions aimed at learning and development. This attitude is often contagious and so has a positive impact beyond the immediate discussion. To accomplish this, it is recommended to clearly state that the conversation is an exploratory process so that people feel reassured and are more open to dialogue, e.g., *“My questions are not intended to judge the quality of the work or to make an immediate decision, but to deepen our understanding of the situation.”*

This approach was institutionalized by several Japanese manufacturing

firms, through a practice known as the *“manager’s walk.”* Far from being a tour of inspection, this approach involves going into the field to ask people questions, such as *“What problems are you encountering?”*; *“How can we improve the system?”*; etc. Through these regular Q&A sessions, people are encouraged to think about problems and share their ideas or solutions. They are more engaged and motivated in their work—which is also due to the fact that managers follow up on the collected ideas by involving employees in their implementation.

3 Positively formulated questions

Among the key objectives of questions (Figure C) is simply to inspire others and give them the desire to take action. The manner in which

Asking positive questions in a positive manner fosters creativity and stimulates the desire to take action.

questions are posed can stimulate positive thinking—for instance, by giving people fresh motivation or helping them glimpse solutions to problems

that seemed insoluble. As a result, such questions tend to involve others in the thinking process and thus stimulate their engagement.

Formulate questions in an encouraging manner

The first step in asking positive questions is to formulate them in an encouraging manner. For instance, when faced with a challenge or thorny situation, start with a question like *“How could we...?”* rather than *“What do you propose...?”* to provoke less anxiety and release more creative energy. Put at ease, people will be in a better position to think of potential solutions more freely, rather than feeling stressed by the need to find the right answer. Using *“we”* is also reassuring, and encourages people to build on the ideas of others. The suggested ideas and solutions are thus often superior.

Focus on the positive

Asking questions that are supported by positive elements makes it possible to stimulate the desire to improve—an observation at the heart of the method known as *appreciative inquiry*. For example, when facilitating work groups stricken with conflict

FIGURE B Questions that help to put situations into perspective

Some questions are particularly good to keep in mind to encourage people to challenge their assumptions and imagine how to make progress. For example:

- Why are things this way / why do we do things this way?
- Why is this important?
- What should we stop doing?
- What would happen if we did nothing?
- How can we be sure this is true / false?
- What if our initial assumptions were false?
- What if we adopted another point of view?
- Is a known pattern being repeated?
- What are the arguments against this idea?
- What are our other options?
- What has already been tested / implemented?
- What can we learn from this situation?
- What opportunities does this create?

and tension, devoting time to think about the question, *“What are your best actual experiences of cooperation?”* can turn out to be an excellent platform to recreate positive momentum. In the same way, during individual assessment interviews, it is preferable to ask people about their strengths or successes, rather than focusing on their weaknesses or failures—*“What went well? What strengths were decisive?”*—, because this helps them to build on their strengths while giving them impetus to progress.

It is also important to be careful about the tone in which questions are asked, in addition to how they are formulated. *“What obstacles kept you from delivering on time?”* is certainly formulated more positively than *“Why didn’t you meet the deadline?”*, but can nevertheless sound just as accusatory, depending on the tone employed.

4 Exploratory questions

Asking questions without seeking immediate utility helps to avoid stress linked to the obligation to perform, which drives people to rely heavily on what they already know well. Asking exploratory questions, unconstrained

by the imperative to produce results, thus supports innovation and creativity.

Questions with no performance constraints

People who are relaxed and don’t feel under particular pressure often give better answers and generate more original ideas. With this in mind, it is recommended not to require questions to be systematically followed by actions or results. This is why asking people at the right time, in an informal context, *“What are your concerns about this project?”* or *“What improvement ideas do you have?”* often helps to collect more relevant ideas than if the questions were posed during an official presentation or a performance review meeting.

Questions with no obligation of relevance

Asking many questions with no particular concern for their relevance is an effective way to generate innovative ideas, precisely because the goal is not explicitly to generate something original. For example, instead of classic brainstorming sessions, one can launch “questioning sessions” in which people are encouraged to ask any question they

can think of about the concerned topic. Only in a second phase will emphasis be put on how to formulate questions and their relevance. This method liber-

People think more freely when asked questions without an obligation to find the “right” answer.

ates and stimulates thinking, because it opens new areas of exploration rather than focusing on finding the right answers.

• • • •

People who are good at asking questions know both what kind of questions to ask and how to ask them, whether it’s a matter of open-ended, future-oriented, positive, or exploratory questions. This skill helps them engage people, develop them and achieve tangible results.

FIGURE C Why ask questions?

Management by questions can contribute to several objectives:

