

CHAPTER 1

Questions That Get Results

Have you ever been in a meeting where the participants ramble on, talking over and around the topic(s) on the agenda, and the conversation goes nowhere? Usually in this situation, one of two things will happen. You will either be lucky enough to have an effective manager who will step in early and ask the right questions that lead everyone to the heart of the issue, or you will be cursed with a bad manager who lets the rambling go on and on before he or she eventually says, “Okay, we have to move on now.”

Commonly, people believe that the ability of highly qualified managers to ask the right questions at the right time is an innate skill, something that cannot be taught. In fact, such managers prepare in advance. They spend time learning which questions to ask and when and how to apply them appropriately to each new situation. They craft pertinent, relevant questions long before they have a need to use them. Great managers develop their skill sets so that they can motivate, coach, cut through the fluff, and hold people accountable. Utilizing the right questions at the right time helps them do that.

QUESTIONS THAT GET RESULTS

Patrick once attended a board meeting at which one of the participants had been talking around a problem for 45 long, tedious minutes. Then, another board member arrived late and joined the discussion. He asked two or three pointed questions that immediately uncovered the causes of the problem and offered several possible solutions. Not only did he mercifully end the other board member's monologue, he also successfully steered the discussion from the problem stage to the solution stage. Who knows what would have happened if he had not been able to make it to the meeting? Patrick might still be sitting there, listening to the long-winded board member go on and on.

Throughout this chapter, we will discuss several types of questions that can be used to get better results, whether for the purpose of focusing a discussion, weeding out an unproductive team member, identifying the issue, holding up the implementation of an important plan, or revealing an executive's criteria for success.

USING QUESTIONS TO SOLVE PROBLEMS

There will be occasions and circumstances when what you have to tell others is not in line with what they want to hear. For example, let's say you face the challenge of presenting a new idea to your employees; obviously, you have a lot to lose if you go about it the wrong way, especially if the idea is controversial or apt to cause discontent among the ranks. Sometimes the best way to make sure a new concept is accepted is to ask your employees their opinion on it *before* unveiling the full-blown plan to them. Employees usually know what they need in order to get their jobs done; therefore, they are in a better position than anyone else to know how a new plan or product will help or hinder their work. Your challenge, then, is to ask specific questions that will get them thinking hard about exactly what they need, as opposed to asking generic questions that will surely yield only generic responses.

In our research, we have found that managers tend to ask the same questions of their employees, regardless of the industry.

USING QUESTIONS TO SOLVE PROBLEMS

These questions are often well intentioned, but garner little useful information:

- “How’s it going?”
- “What’s happening?”
- “How are you coming along with _____ (the project, task, job, customer, etc.)?”
- “Do you have any questions?”
- “When can I expect _____?”
- “What do you need?”
- “What do you have for me?”
- “Is there anything I need to know?”
- “How’d you like that _____ (meeting, training, information, person, etc.)?”
- “Why don’t you touch base if anything comes up?”
- “How can I help?”

The problem with most of these questions is that because they’re vague, employees tend to give vague answers, containing little or no substance. Unless an employee is self-motivated to open up to a manager, these questions will not provide insight into an individual’s true state of mind or the very real issues he or she might be facing.

For example, let us look at the last question: “How can I help?” On the surface, it sounds like a good open-ended question. If an employee is having difficulty at work and is asked that question, he or she might respond with genuine feeling, saying something like, “I have two important deadlines to meet this week, and I know I will not be able to get everything done on time.” The trouble is, most of the time a question like “How can I help?” is answered superficially—for example, “Oh, I’m fine, but thanks for the offer.” Many employees are unwilling to admit they need help. They are afraid that doing so will convey the message that they are unable to handle their workload. Or they don’t believe that their manager’s offers to help

QUESTIONS THAT GET RESULTS

are genuine. Either way, a generic question like this too often is going to lead to a generic answer, one of no use to anyone.

DESCRIPTIVE QUESTIONS

One of the best ways to ask questions is to use what we call “descriptive openers.” These are phrases that can initiate dialogue and motivate people to open up. Using these phrases makes it possible to craft questions that elicit as much information as possible. In the sample questions here, the descriptive phrases are in bold:

- “Can you **take me through** each step of the process you have implemented so far?”
- “Will you please **describe for me** how you think we could improve this process?”
- “Can you **clarify for me** how this idea will meet our requirements?”
- “Will you please **share with me** which systems, programs, or people are helpful, and which are a hindrance?”
- “Can you **explain to me** what has transpired so far?”
- “Will you please **help me understand** your thoughts on this project?”
- “Can you **walk me through** your timetable for implementing these changes?”

The best way to illustrate the effectiveness of these questions is by example. In the first scenario, Kristin, the manager, uses generic questions to ask an employee about meeting a deadline. In the second, she uses descriptive questions to garner much more information.

Kristin: Sheila, I was wondering how things are going with the Schofield project?

Sheila: Everything is going fine.

Kristin: Can I help you with that at all?

DESCRIPTIVE QUESTIONS

Sheila: Thanks, but I've got it under control.

Kristin: Okay, so I can expect it on my desk on Thursday?

Sheila: Yup, that is not a problem.

Now, coming away from this exchange, Kristin would probably feel as if she were doing a good job, checking in with Sheila and making sure everything is going according to schedule. She might even pat herself on the back for offering to help and confirming the Thursday deadline. The problem with these questions, however, is that Kristin did not obtain any actual information from Sheila as to the status of the project. All she knows is that, according to Sheila, everything is "fine."

Now let's see how this situation might play out when Kristin uses descriptive questions, which are again highlighted in bold.

Kristin: Sheila, I want to talk to you about the Schofield project. I know it is really complex and that there are a lot of pieces to put together. I'm checking in to see how things are going. Can you **take me through** each step of the process you have implemented so far?

Sheila: Well, I have amassed all of the research and now I am waiting for the summaries from my assistants.

Kristin: Okay. Have you written up the five-point plan yet?

Sheila: Well, actually, I have not because, as I said, I am waiting for the summaries.

Kristin: Can you **take me through** your timetable for implementing these changes?

Sheila: As soon as I have the summaries, I can write the five-point plan.

Kristin: Will you **help me understand** how it is you are sure that the project will be ready by the deadline, considering that the Legal Department needs three to five days to review the plan after you have written it?

Sheila: I guess I didn't budget time for Legal into my plan.

Kristin: Can you **explain to me** how that happened?

QUESTIONS THAT GET RESULTS

Sheila: I think two things happened. One, I needed my assistants to summarize the research, but they were busy helping Fran with her project, which was due last week. Even though I gave them the task to complete, I did not specify a time frame for when it had to be done. Two, it has been a while since I worked on a project that needed approval from Legal. I guess I forgot how much lead time I had to give them.

As Sheila's manager, Kristin would obviously feel quite differently about this exchange than the one in the first scenario. Note that the situations are the same; it is only the information gathered by the manager that is different. As a result of using descriptive questions, Kristin discovers the true state of the project and can then offer the assistance Sheila clearly needs to finish the project on time.

Descriptive openers such as these strongly encourage whoever is being asked the questions to give substantive answers. In the past, many of us were taught to ask questions that started with "who," "what," "where," "when," "why," and "how." These interrogatives have their use, of course, but too often they allow the respondent to be evasive, if that is his or her intent. Here are some examples of what appear to be good questions, followed by the unsatisfactory answers they tend to elicit:

Question: Who do you have working on this project?

Answer: Oh, I have the whole team working on it.

Question: What do you need to get this finished?

Answer: I have everything I need. I have it covered.

Question: Where are the specs I need?

Answer: I am almost done with them.

Question: When can I expect that report on my desk?

Answer: Any day now.

Question: Why have you missed your deadline?

Answer: I have been really busy; it won't happen again.

Question: How are things going on this project?

Answer: Things are going great.

COMPARE-AND-CONTRAST QUESTIONS

As you can see, even a well-intentioned manager who is genuinely interested in what is going on with his or her employees might not get worthwhile information by asking these questions. That is why we suggest using descriptive openers when asking many different types of questions (see below for examples). They demand more from the respondent than other types of openers.

COMPARE-AND-CONTRAST QUESTIONS

Asking compare-and-contrast questions is an effective way to learn more about your employees, your counterparts, and the top executives at your company. They also enable you to uncover how preferences and needs change over time and which factors are most important to decision makers.

Compare-and-contrast questions use words and phrases such as the following:

- Differ
- Compare
- Versus
- Evolve
- Rank from most important to least
- Oppose
- Contrast

Throughout this section, we describe several types of situations where compare-and-contrast questions work best. These include: managing internal relationships, implementing change over time, and determining criteria. We'll look first at how compare-and-contrast questions can improve internal relationships.

Managing Internal Relationships

Among the most delicate issues that managers have to address are those involving internal company politics. Whether the issue at hand is as complicated as a merger or layoffs, or as simple as planning a

QUESTIONS THAT GET RESULTS

company picnic, unintentionally “stepping on toes” at the office will get you into trouble every time. To avoid this, we recommend that you begin by asking questions of those colleagues with whom you already have a relationship, in order to understand the possible objections or concerns of those with whom you do not. We have found that asking compare-and-contrast questions is a great way of doing this. These questions allow you to poll a number of people to get a feel for a situation *before* you present an idea or plan to a bigger group or the company at large.

Here are some examples. Notice that in many of the samples, we use descriptive openers to help focus the question:

- “Can you clarify for me how your opinion might differ from those of your team members?”
- “As you take me through the decision-making process for this project, can you explain what is most important, versus what is least important?”
- “Can you share with me your thoughts on how Bill’s reaction to this might differ from Terry’s?”
- “As you think about the members of the committee, can you tell me your opinion as to who would be the most receptive to this idea and who might be the least receptive?”
- “In your experience, what has been the top concern for Sue, as compared to Jan?”

As you can see, these questions can help you identify attitudes, possible pitfalls, and preferences before you introduce a new plan or suggestion. In our experience as training consultants, we have found that the more we know about our clients, their employees, and their organizations, the better the results will be for them—and for us. We have also learned that when leadership tries to implement change within an organization, the biggest objection from employees usually is: “You don’t understand my situation.” What this statement really means is: “You do not know my job. You do not realize what I have to deal with on a regular basis, and now you are instituting yet

COMPARE-AND-CONTRAST QUESTIONS

another initiative that will make things more difficult for me on a daily basis.”

When employees do not feel understood, they resist change more fiercely. But when they are included in the decision-making process and treated as valued resources, they can be the staunchest champions of new initiatives. As a manager, how do you go about doing this? The best way is to gather input from your employees before you introduce any new plan or initiative. All it takes is the investment of time at the beginning of the process—time to ask the staff specific, targeted questions about problems and potential solutions. Compare-and-contrast questions can help you do this.

Implementing Change over Time

The second problem area compare-and-contrast questions can help you tackle is change over time. As a manager, it is important to keep track of how your team and your company respond to and adapt to change. Chances are, the issues and problems that plagued them this month will be long forgotten by next quarter; likewise, the potential opportunities and areas for growth that present themselves now will be obsolete in six months. That is why you need to be able to ask the questions that can flesh out how change manifests within your organization. Here are some questions that can help you do this:

- “Can you share with me your strategy for addressing this issue? How does that compare with what you did in the past?”
- “Will you tell me how your needs have evolved over the past 12 months?”
- “Can you help me understand the potential opportunities you anticipate arising in the next year? How do they compare with opportunities you have had in the past?”
- “Will you describe for me what you believe differentiates this approach from tactics you have used in the past?”

QUESTIONS THAT GET RESULTS

- “Can you tell me your ideal outcome, and describe how it differs from your current situation?”
- “Will you share with me your goals for this year, versus those from last year?”

Determining Criteria

The last area where you can use compare-and-contrast questions to great advantage is in determining the objectives and criteria of others. It is easy to get into trouble when we assume that whatever is important to us is also important to other people.

For example, consider Tom, a manager who works in sales and is very focused on quotas and revenue, whereas for his colleague, Joan, a manager working in research and development, those items are at the bottom of the priority list. Therefore, when Tom has a new plan, and intends to approach Joan about it, he should not assume that they share the same priorities or goals. Instead, he should ask Joan compare-and-contrast questions to help him discover what's important to Joan. Only after hearing what she has to say should he craft his proposal to address both sets of criteria.

Here are some questions Tom might ask Joan:

- “Can you walk me through the factors that are most important to you when creating a new project, as well as those that are least important?”
- “Will you share with me your top priorities when evaluating a new project?”
- “Can you rank the following criteria in order of importance, from most important to least important: safety, power, quality, and price?”

As you can see, compare-and-contrast questions can be used in a variety of different circumstances. Sometimes, however, the people involved do not appreciate the need for change, in which case you may need to turn to impact questions as a way to get to the core issue.

IMPACT QUESTIONS

IMPACT QUESTIONS

Impact questions are crucial because they address motivations, and determine whether or not someone has a sense of urgency about an issue. They can help you figure out if an individual at your company is receptive to change, or sees a problem in the same light as you. If employees are not treating an urgent problem appropriately, impact questions can also be used to help them put things into perspective. This way they can recognize the severity of a situation—and, best of all, they will arrive at this conclusion through their own words by answering your questions.

As an example, imagine you want to implement a change in the way your organization deals with production delays. You're fed up with this situation, and now you've come up with a plan to solve it. This solution, however, will require a great deal of effort on the part of your employees and others in the organization, and all of them are resisting the change. In order to get them to buy into your plan, you need to have your employees and counterparts understand the severity of this problem. Here are several questions you might ask in order to accomplish your goal:

- “If this problem does not get addressed, what kind of impact will it have on our department?”
- “How might this issue affect your department in the long run if it is not solved?”
- “We are losing *X* amount of money each quarter because of this situation. How can we afford *not* to take action?”
- “Let us assume nothing changes: What is it going to cost us in terms of resources, clients, personnel, and output?”
- “What do you think the consequence will be if we continue doing exactly what we're doing now?”

If you can get your employees and counterparts to articulate the gravity of the problem in their own words, the implementation of your plan to fix it will proceed much more smoothly.

QUESTIONS THAT GET RESULTS

LOCK-ON QUESTIONS

As managers, we would like to think we have all the answers. In reality, though, we are sometimes at a loss as to how we should proceed. You might, for example, feel like you are not getting the whole truth from one of your employees; or you might not be sure what is going on with your team. In either case, we recommend using lock-on questions to gain more information and uncover the next step you need to take.

A lock-on question is a very simple tool you can use to learn a lot more when you do not have all the answers, or you think there is something you might be missing. Here is an example when to use the lock-on question:

Your team has not been producing as well as it should. You have followed all of the steps itemized previously but still do not know what is going wrong. You decide to approach the senior member of the team, Alice, to uncover the problem. She tells you, “Things have just been crazy around here.” You want to find out more—what “crazy” really means—but Alice seems unwilling or unable to share the details with you. Instead of getting frustrated or feeling at a loss as to where to go next, ask a lock-on question to get to the heart of the issue.

You might say to Alice, “I understand that this month has been very hectic. You usually do such a great job handling the crises in our office, and we really appreciate how hard you work. I noticed you said that things have been ‘crazy’; could you elaborate on that?” This compliment combined with a question would serve to make Alice feel more at ease and ready to open up. She might then tell you, “To be honest, Brad and Terry have left the rest of us holding down the fort while they spend 90 percent of their time working on the proposal for our new government contract. I know that proposal is really important, so I didn’t want to say anything; but the rest of our team is getting hammered with other work.”

Once you know the true nature of the problem, you and Alice and the rest of the team can sit down together and figure out how to solve it.

CONCLUSION

Team members can be reluctant to bring us problems like these because so many managers respond by saying things like, “Just make it work.” In these instances, when our team needs our guidance, it is extremely helpful to have the lock-on question as a tool in our kit.

There are two key parts to the lock-on question:

Part 1, Acknowledge: This part of the lock-on question is very important because you are acknowledging the other person’s problem and empathizing with his or her situation. For example, if an employee tells you, “I am just too busy to tackle that right now,” you would respond by saying: “I understand how busy you are. I know that you always put in 110 percent and there are never enough hours in the day. It is amazing how much work you can get done.”

Part 2, Question: Once you have acknowledged where someone is coming from, you need to follow up with a question that focuses—“locks on”—to a particular part of his or her statement. For example, if a team member tells you, “We have been trying to get that project off of the ground for months,” you might lock on to the word “trying” and then phrase a question around it. You might ask, “I noticed you said you have been trying to get it off the ground for months. What has worked for you so far, and what has been holding you back from completing the project?”

CONCLUSION

As a manager, you want to have the answers; you do not want to look stupid—no one does. But you have to empower your people to come up with their own answers. You cannot spend all your time solving everyone else’s problems. The beauty of the lock-on question is that it lets you probe the other person’s mind for ideas. You are asking him or her to figure out the real issue and why something has not been done about it.

QUESTIONS THAT GET RESULTS

We believe that asking great questions is at the heart of great management. It is not always about knowing all the answers; rather, it is about having the ability and desire to find out the answers. They might come from your counterparts in other departments, the top executives at your company, or your reports. You will only be able to uncover these answers, however, if you know the right questions to ask. Using the guidelines and suggestions we give you throughout this book, we are confident that you, too, will find great value in asking the right questions for every situation.

For more information on topics discussed in this chapter, visit our website at www.questionsthatgetresults.com/results.