



Are You Asking the Right Questions?

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Everyone knows how to ask questions. But are you asking the *right* questions in an interview, on the job, or in a social situation? Knowing how to question others effectively is both a skill and an art.

How to Begin

Learning the art of asking questions *effectively* requires a little forethought. For example:

- **What** is it you really want/need to know?
- **Why** do you need the information?
- **How much** detail do you require?
- **Who** is/are the right resource(s)?
- **How** do you gain access to these resource(s)?
- **What** do you need to know about a resource in order to get the resource's *best* response?
- **What** form of response do you desire?
- **What** are your criteria for satisfaction?

You may consider these factors unconsciously most of the time. However, make not mistake, asking yourself these questions before you approach a resource saves time and makes all the difference in your success at getting the result or information you desire.

Be Prepared!

No successful interviewer or journalist goes into an interview unprepared — neither should you. Lack of preparation will severely limit your chances for success. It is imperative that you be clear about the exact nature of the information you seek, and *why* you are asking the question in the first place. This keeps you focused, and provides justification for the request.

1. Are you looking for information, a perspective, expert advice, a referral or introduction, directions, reassurance, support, and/or a potential starting point?
2. How much do you need or want to know? What level of detail do you require? What are your criteria for satisfaction?
3. What is the level of security associated with the information you seek?
4. What form of response will suit you best? Answers can take many forms — words, sign language, pictures, schematics or blueprints, mathematics, music, or some other sensory format.
5. What is the relative importance (priority) associated with your query?
6. How urgently do you need a response?

Be Clear About Your Intent

People, especially strangers, are more likely to answer your questions when they understand your reason (s) for asking. Obvious? Yes, but if you are walking away from a conversation feeling cheated or dissatisfied with the exchange, part of the problem may be rooted in whether or not you asked the

question (s) that you *intended* to ask.

Approach the Appropriate Resource(s) in the Right Context

When requesting information or clarification, do you make your questions count by consulting the most knowledgeable resource available, or do you simply start asking questions of whoever is around and hope for the best? Ask around — consult the media, the internet, professional organizations, or a trusted friend or associate. Credentials may give you a clue, but a successful track record is more important. Find out what you can about a targeted resource. Even comments made by enemies or rivals can be revealing.

How do you know whether or not your targeted resource will speak with you or be willing to answer your questions? You don't. However, as the saying goes..."Nothing ventured, nothing gained." If the person snubs you or doesn't return your calls or e-mail, be persistent, but polite. If that doesn't work, try someone else. One more thing — never assume that anyone is the absolute authority on anything — get a second and third opinion where possible.

Are you being sensitive to the best timing, both with regard to *when* a question is appropriate and the duration of your questioning? Approach each targeted resource in a respectful manner and at an appropriate place and time — be creative, but not intrusive or obnoxious. Seek an introduction through a mutual contact. If that's not possible, take a chance and call or e-mail the targeted resource — whether or not they respond is always their choice.

Build Rapport

Once you make contact, try to establish rapport with the resource by making your C.A.S.E.

Common experiences — Start by asking questions about experiences and/or perspectives that you may have in common.

Abilities and knowledge — Share your skills, knowledge, and abilities in a manner that is *helpful* to your resource. A dialogue is a mutually beneficial exchange. A monologue becomes either a soapbox harangue or a self-promotion.

Sincerity — Be sincere. Be yourself! (Who else could you possibly be?) Speak from your heart and with conviction.

Etiquette — Be polite and respectful. This builds rapport more easily than demands and sarcasm.

Don't waste time asking questions of people who can't (or won't) give you a satisfactory or complete answer. There are lots of resources available. Take your best shot and don't allow yourself to become discouraged when your attempts don't always work out as expected.

Speak a Common Language

Proper preparation, clarifying and focusing on your intent, and targeting the appropriate resource in the right context will all contribute to your success as a questioner. However, the way you compose and express a question — the "language" and delivery used — is equally important.

The language of your question needs to be in terms you and your resource both understand. Even when speaking the same ethnic language (English, Spanish, Russian, etc.), your choice of terminology, phrasing, and non-verbal cues make a difference. For example, you may think you are asking one question, while your resource "hears" a different question. In turn, the response you receive may seem

unclear or be misinterpreted by you, simply because you and your resource are not speaking the same "language."

Practice, Practice, Practice

Granted, given the circumstances and time constraints, you may not always have a pre-planned list of questions handy, but the art of asking pertinent and useful questions can become second nature to you. It can be developed and mastered with practice.

Remember: Learning to ask the *right* questions takes both skill and creativity, but *anyone* can become a competent practitioner if willing to put in the effort.

About the Author: Yvonne T. Ryan, *The Techie Leadership Coach* and founder of Leader's Edge CA, provides practical coaching and education to technical professionals seeking to improve their leadership skills and advance their career through innovative programs like "Techies on the RiseTM." Her particular focus is on middle management and team leadership." Visit her Web site at: www.leadersedgeca.com.

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