

~~Have all the answers~~

Ask good questions

Asking good questions is a vital part of effective listening.

So, what's a "good" question? Good question.

A good question is brief, clear, focused, relevant, and constructive. So far, so good. Those five guidelines apply to any type of communication.

But an effective question can be especially tricky, because it should also be neutral and it may need to be open-ended.

Don't confuse "neutral" with "neutered." A good question may be controversial, perhaps even confrontational. But, a good question doesn't imply the "right" answer. Question: "Do you think we should improve the quality of our publication by hiring a freelance editor?"

"Right" answer: Yes! Who wouldn't be in favor of improving quality?

Same question, different phrasing: “Do you think we should add an extra step in the editorial process by hiring a freelance editor?”

“Right” answer: No! Who wants to add extra steps?

Same question, value-neutral: “Do you think we should hire a freelance editor to work on the publication?”

An effective question may also need to be open-ended. If you need more than a simple “yes” or “no,” avoid asking “yes” or “no” questions.

You may also need to avoid giving closed choices—like this one:

“Do you think we should hire a freelancer or let Frank do it?”

The answer might be “none of the above,” but a subordinate might not feel comfortable turning down both of your alternatives. Try something like this:

“What do you think we ought to do about getting the publication edited?”

Here are three quick keys to asking effective questions:

Give them time to think: As with all forms of effective listening, a little silence can get you a much more thoughtful response. “Why don’t you get back to me on that by the end of the week?” might be an appropriate approach at times.

Tell them what's at stake: Does my job depend on my answer? Will I get in trouble if I don't agree with you? Am I venturing an opinion or making a decision? Does it matter what I think?

Then be quiet and listen: Enough said.

“Be clear about your purpose and honest about your motives. Keep your questions on subject and on target. If an answer strays off the point, tactfully refocus.”