Asking the wrong questions will inevitably get you the wrong answer or a response that you may not have anticipated.

Asking the **right** question is at the heart of effective communication.

The right question will

- Gather better information
- Aid your learning and that of others
- Build stronger relationships
- Help you work more effectively
- Avoid misunderstanding
- Diffuse difficult situations
- Persuade & Influence people

What is the right question?

There are a variety of common questioning techniques to suit different situations

**Closed Questions**

Usually require a single word or factual answer:

- Can you use a computer?
- What time is the meeting?

**Open Questions**

Encourage a longer answer. They normally start with why, who, what, how, where.

Open questions encourage the respondent to talk about their knowledge, opinion, feelings or behaviour.

- How did your presentation go this morning?
- What was the meeting about?
• Tell me about the different computer packages you use?
• What made you respond in that way?

Open questions can help you gather more information. Once you have started with an open question you can continue developing the conversation.

How did the presentation go?
It all went wrong!

What specific parts went wrong?
The start!

How did it go wrong?
I forgot to introduce myself?

Did the first slide have your name on it?
Yes!

Well, that’s ok. How will you remember next time?
I’ll practice my introduction beforehand!!

Funnelling Questions
Funnelling starts with asking a general question which then develops or hones in on a particular point each time a question is asked, with each question becoming more specific as you progress through the conversation).

Funnelling can help to relive the experience for the respondent and provide a useful insight into the important parts of a situation.

Probing Questions
Probing questions is another technique to find out more detail from a respondent. They can be useful when looking for clarification on something
• What do you mean when you say....
• What happened when you....
• Just to clarify, you said that.....
• Did you mean........

A useful probing technique is the ‘5 whys method’. This technique can be really useful when problem solving to help people get to the root of the problem quickly. It involves looking at a problem and asking ‘why’. The first why
will then normally prompt a second 'why' which in turn will prompt a third 'why' and so on, hence the '5 whys method'.

Woke Up Late

- Why? The alarm clock did not go off.
- Why? The time reset to 12:00am.
- Why? The alarm clock lost power.
- Why? Backup battery not installed.
- Why? We did not have one.

All these questioning techniques should not be unfamiliar to you and you no doubt use them regularly on an unconscious level during your work and daily life. By consciously applying the right question at the right time you can gain information, responses or outcomes a lot more effectively.

'Super' questions (SQ’s)

Super questions can unravel the meaning of another person’s viewpoint and help to reconnect the words they use with their own experience.

You can uncover the detail behind a statement or opinion and can review, focus and expand an individual’s thinking by gathering more detailed or specific information.

Examples

'She needs to improve her communications skills'

- SQ - 'In what ways does she need to improve’?

'I’m never allowed to make decisions'

- SQ - 'What kind of decisions are you not allowed to make’?

'She really annoyed me'

- SQ - 'In what way did she annoy you’?
Limiting language
Unwritten rules and generalisations can be misleading and often prevent or block solutions:
We can only do it this way...
'I can’t…'
'I always…'
'It’s the way we do things.....'

Super questions can challenge this language and offer the respondent an alternative way forward

'We can’t do it like that..'
SQ - ‘What would happen if we did it differently’?

'You need to keep a copy'
SQ - ‘What would happen if we didn’t’?

'I can’t do it now'
SQ - ‘I understand your difficulty, but what exactly is preventing you from not being able to do it?

'That’s not possible'
SQ - ‘What would need to happen to make it possible’?

'I don’t know'
SQ - ‘If you don’t know, take a guess at what it could be’

'We never recognise the work people do'
SQ - ‘Has there ever been an occasion when you did recognise someone for their hard work?’

Be mindful
Super questions can be very powerful and need to be used in appropriate situations with the right tone, pitch and body language. Before asking a super question, ask yourself:
Will it help to clarify meaning?
Will I still maintain rapport?
Am I over using super questions?
Super questions can be ‘softened’.

At times super questions can appear quite harsh, however there are ways in which you can soften the language by starting the question with
'I can see your point of view and.....'
'I think I know what you mean can you.....'
'Yes, I've often thought that and.....'

Be careful of:

'With all due respect..'
'I'm not being funny but....'
'Don’t take it personally but....'
'I'm not having a go at you but...'

Remember
Skilful questioning needs to be matched to effective listening. It is also useful to be aware of body language, posture, and tone of voice to really understand the meaning behind the words.

Reference and additional information
www.mindtools.com
www.skillsyouneed.com