

How to Ask Effective Questions

by Katie Anderson and Isao Yoshino

The original version of this handout was developed by Isao Yoshino with contributions from Katie Anderson for the European Lean Healthcare Transformation Summit – October 2018 – for their session: “Asking Effective Questions: The Fundamental Skill to Develop a Problem-Solving Culture.” The comments are written in the first person from Mr. Yoshino’s perspective of coaching others. For more information about this session and other tips about asking questions visit: kbjanderson.com/how-to-ask-effective-questions/

I. Build a relationship of trust with your people.

Ask questions to learn more about your people.

- Learn about the character and personality of your people (are they positive? shy?). Adjust your style to match their personality. This helps to establish rapport and trust.

Make them feel a sense of security and reliability about you.

- Be patient and listen. Take deep interest in your people and show your commitment to listen to them to help them solve their problems. Listen to them carefully and refrain from giving them your comment in the middle of their talk. Your patience and attitude to listen to them hard will help them to feel comfortable in opening up their mind.
- Reassure them that not having the answer is okay. Let them know that you have something in common, which will make them feel more comfortable to talk to you about their problems. Share with them that you yourself have gone through experiences of failure and frustration in the past. Also share with them that the more you encounter difficulties, the stronger you grow from the struggle.
- Help reframe situations from a positive mindset. When your people express things negatively, try to replace it with a positive thought. When they say something negatively like, “I can’t make a decision right away. It usually takes more time”, you would replace it like, “I usually need to sleep on that decision. If I still need it next morning, then I will get it.” It is a “cool-headed” decision vs. “hot-headed” decision.
- Help your people form a habit to think things deeper and judge things from a much broader perspective. Ask them questions to help them do this.
- Build trust. Let your people recognize how important it is to talk to somebody they truly trust when they have issues to solve and cannot find the solution by themselves. Two is better than one.


II. Support your people to solve their problem(s).

Listen to them attentively and emphasize with their feelings.

- Let them talk freely without interruption by you and listen to them with patience (70% them vs. 30% you talking).
- Listen with an open mind. Accept their comments as it is, without getting surprised or denying what they say, particularly when it comes to “problems.”
- When you react excessively at the when they begin to talk about their problems, they might be discouraged to speak up further. People will become unwilling to disclose their problems when they sense that their boss might start criticizing them.
- Give them room to think. When I am listening to them particularly on “problems,” I always try to put a pause in my comment (meaning not rushing on) and give them as much room so that they have enough time to think and feel calm.
- Give praise in acknowledging their efforts to solve the problems. This can help provide motivation and support as they continue to work through their problem.
- Offer encouragement. When they feel depressed with their problems or mistakes and feel negative, I try to be a contrast to it and, to encourage them, I would say, “Don’t worry so much. I have gone through that myself too. There will be a solution. It’s always darkest before the dawn.”

Ask concrete and essential questions based on where they are in the problem-solving process.

- Start asking questions that will draw out their “yes” at first, particularly to the people who have trouble speaking up or expressing themselves well. If you start asking questions that might induce a negative (e.g. “No”) answer from them, they would feel uncomfortable and reluctant to continue the conversation. Asking questions that will induce “Yes” would help people open their mind to an active conversation.
- Ask open-ended questions based on “5W1H” (what, who, when, where, why & how). It will make the conversation deeper and keep the thinking process with the person. It will help them to organize their thoughts and start expressing them with the right wording.

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- Ask questions about topics they want to talk about. Generally speaking, people expect others to listen to the topics that they want to talk about or feel happy to talk about. It would help you to start the conversation smoothly and step up to the next stage of your conversation.
 - Ask more specific questions based on what the person has described to help them go deeper into the problem solving process.
 - If their comments are hard to understand, ask them to repeat or restate what they have said. By reiterating their point, they may gain more clarity on what they intended, and will help you and your people have a common view of their thought process.
 - Focus on the process, not just the outcome. Ask questions about not only “what kind of target” they have accomplished, but also “how and why” they have accomplished the target. Many people want focus on reporting “a good result” that they have accomplished. There should be a right process in order to reach a right target. It is important for you to ask the process on how your people had applied to reach the goal, as well as the result itself. Placing a focus on the process will greatly help other people to consider applying that process in their own problem-solving activities.
 - Refrain from giving your own opinion first on the solution to the issue. Let your people make a commitment to solve the issue in order to have a sense of ownership.
 - Make sure to praise the efforts by your people if they take an initiative to solve the issue. Taking their first step toward the problem solving is valuable.
 - When your people ask you, “what do we need to do to solve the problem?” don’t give them your opinion/idea right away. Ask them, “what do you think we need to do?”

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