

Tool: The Human Side of Questioning

This tool helps questioners think about the human side of questioning — how to show respect for responders and consider how their questions affect responders. The column on the left shows some common questioning mistakes that can have negative effects on responders. The column on the right includes questioning approaches that strengthen the relationship between questioner and responder.

Common Questioning Mistakes

Productive Questioning Approaches

Questioner Leads Response

Example

“Would you say that staff is not committed to the new initiative?”

Reaction

Responders could feel “boxed into a corner” and could resent the questioner providing only one option.

Questioner Provides Options

Example

“Would you say that the staff is not committed to the new initiative, or they are overwhelmed with other priorities?”

Reaction

Responders appreciate having choices and different ways of thinking about the situation.

Questioner Provides Interpretation

Example

“Are you saying that you don’t want to work with the math department chair?”

Reaction

Responders could be upset if they think they have been misinterpreted or they might feel that the questioner is forcing an interpretation on them.

Questioner Encourages Responder Interpretation

Example

“What specifically do you find challenging in working with the math department chair?”

Reaction

Responders feel respected; they interpret what has happened in their own words and can think about issues and solutions from a new perspective.

Questioner Elicits Defensive Response

Example

“Why did you make that decision?”

Reaction

Responders could feel challenged, defensive, or threatened because they have to defend their thinking or what they did.

Questioner Expands Responder’s Thinking

Example

“What factors influenced your decision?”

Reaction

Responders feel respected and empowered. They feel that questioners recognize their ability to analyze and interpret their own actions. The “what” question encourages the responder to think differently about the situation.

Common Questioning Mistakes

Productive Questioning Approaches

Questioner Fails to Redirect

Example

The responder strays from the topic being discussed or the question posed and goes on at length. The questioner doesn't interrupt the responder with a question that will bring the focus back to what the responder wanted to discuss or accomplish.

Reaction

Responders might feel frustrated if they realize that they have gone off on a tangent and haven't addressed their goal for the conversation. They might feel that the questioner wasn't committed to helping them achieve their goals.

Questioner Redirects When Necessary

Example

"When we started our conversation today, you said you'd like to talk about ____."

Can we go back to that?"

Reaction

Responders feel that the questioner is committed to helping them stay focused. Responders might have an increased sense of efficacy because the questioner demonstrates a belief that if the responders stay on task, they can accomplish their goals.

Questioner Interrupts the Responder

Example

The questioner interrupts and asks another question while the responder is answering the first question.

Reaction

Responders feel disrespected or lose their train of thought and don't complete their thought. They might feel frustrated or confused.

Questioner Provides Silence After the Responder Finishes Speaking

Example

The questioner lets the responder finish speaking and waits for longer than it might feel comfortable (20-30 seconds) before asking the next question.

Reaction

Responders feel respected and might believe that the questioner has their best interests in mind. Responders might feel empowered because the silence lets them process what they said and think about the deeper meaning or implications.

References

Aguilar, E. (2013). *The art of coaching: Effective strategies for school transformation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Stoltzfus, T. (2008). *Coaching questions: A coach's guide to powerful asking skills*. Virginia Beach, VA: Pegasus Creative Arts.